

Green Man

No one believed in him. He was the stuff of fairy tales and old Abenaki lore. A fable most likely invented by our parents, to keep us out of the Hollow and away from the Loring.

We called him the Green Man, after the legend of an emerald giant who roamed the woods of Orleans County eating chickens and stealing fire wood. The Green man ate everything, we were told, including small children. And although he mainly subsisted on a diet of rabbits and squirrels, it wasn't a bad idea to keep your cats in at night, as he was known to have a weakness for family pets when the weather turned for the worst in late November.

He was responsible for strange noises, unexplained lights in the woods, missing lawn furniture and lost car keys. He was even believed to be the reason why the sky took on an eerie green hue over the Hollow on certain nights, which it did. I'd seen it myself. The Green Man was why we locked our doors, did not venture into the woods after dark, and were to be home by the time the six o'clock Angelus rang from the bell tower of Our Lady of Assumption church.

There were always plenty of rumors to keep the Green Man alive in our imagination. My cousin, Mosley, was perhaps the most ardent in propagating stories of the Green Man. He was even successful in persuading "The Dew Drops," the small gang we ran with in those days, that the Green Man was part werewolf and that if any of us divulged the Dew Drop's secret password, we would be sent into the Hollow on the next full moon to meet our fate.

Back then, I was not particularly afraid of the Green Man. I was not even afraid of the Loring, as I knew how to negotiate fens and bogs and an occasional swamp, but I had an extreme and irrational fear of the dark- the dark at the bottom of the stairs, at the end of the hall, under the bed. I feared above all else that one day I would

be swallowed up by darkness. This was far more terrifying to me than any man who ate squirrels. Mosley knew my fear, but that didn't change his mind when I shared the password with Ellen Parsons one day on the playground because I thought Purple People Eater was just too funny to keep to myself. It mattered not that I was his cousin.

Mosley decided that the first full moon in November was to be the evening of my demise. All the Dew Drops gathered at sunset in the clearing at the edge of the Hollow to see me off: Johnny Russo and his sister Frenchie, Ezra LaFalle and Ben Foster. Even little Darwin Foster, who was not yet an official Dew Drop, stood, head bowed, to bid me farewell.

"Twig," Frenchie said, stepping forward and tying a purple ribbon around my wrist.

"You're the bravest person I have ever known."

"Thank you," I told her. "That means a lot."

"If you don't come back," she whispered in my ear.

"Can I have your yellow sweater?"

"Sure," I said. "Why not."

Mosley stood on a tree stump and cleared his throat.

"Rules!" he declared, glaring down at me.

"Rule number one: you are to go into the Hollow alone."

"Obviously," I said, looking around the circle at the petrified Dew Drops - not one of them capable of standing by me in my hour of need.

"Silence!" Mosley snapped.

"Rule number two: you must go all the way to the Loring and fill this jar with swamp water."

He held out a Mason jar to me and I took it.

"Rule number three: you must be out of the woods by the time the Angelus rings."

"Any questions?"

I shook my head.

"Good. Body search."

"What?"

"The charter demands a search of all traitors."

"What charter?"

"Silence!" he demanded.

Mosley proceeded to check my pockets and socks, extracting my only means of defense against the dark; a book of matches and a small candle stub I found in the pantry and tucked inside my shoe.

"If you're going..." he said, giving me one last chance to back out.

"You have to go with nothing but your courage."

"She won't do it," Darwin whispered to Frenchie.

"Twig's afraid of the dark."

He was right, of course. But I was not afraid of Mosley. I'd conquered my fear of him long ago.

"So...." Mosley said with a smirk. "Are you going in or aren't you?"

I would not give my cousin the satisfaction of retreat. At that moment, more than my fear of the dark, I wanted Mosley to worry. I wanted him to regret every unfair and unkind thing he had ever done to me, like christening me with the unfortunate nickname of Twig because of my unusually skinny forearms. And then this, of course, sending me to my death.

"I'm going," I said.

"Really?"

"Really!" I shouted, heading for the trees.

Though we were forbidden to go anywhere near the dreaded Loring swamp, we had nevertheless hiked to it several times in the daylight and I knew the way. There was no path, but if you walked west from the clearing straight to the giant Oak and down the ravine to the other side, you could reach it half an hour.

I walked quickly through the woods, sometimes stumbling, sometimes sliding my way until I landed on the spongy moss at the bottom of the ravine. From there, I pushed my way through thickets of willow until I reached the edge of the Loring, where I knelt down and pressed the open mouth of the jar into half frozen water, extracting the slimy substance Mosley required as proof that I had been there.

With evidence in hand, I headed back up to the oak, but there was no sign of it. I tried every direction, but it wasn't there. As the shadows of the trees grew long around me and darkness descended over the Hollow, I searched for the giant tree, getting more and more lost. Far in the distance, I could hear the Angelus.

I sank down to the ground and curled up in ball. I was too afraid even to cry, though I did manage to squeak out the words of a prayer I'd once learned about being cast into the outermost parts of

the sea. That's exactly what it felt like, like being adrift in a sea of darkness.

I'm not sure how long I remained there on the ground, but gradually I became aware that the wind had died down and the moon had risen. The night was still and there was a fragrance in the air -like wet earth and cherry blossoms, a strong musky sweetness. And then, there was something near me. Behind me. It was so close I could feel its breath on my neck.

Suddenly, I was gripped tight by the back of my sweatshirt, lifted high off the ground and carried through the dense stand of trees where no path existed.

Whatever it was that bore me on was in a terrific hurry. As I swung from its grip like a tiny weightless bundle, I felt no fear, only its terrible concern for me.

Then, it was over and I was once again on the ground not far from the clearing. I could hear the panicked voices of the Dew Drops calling my name.

"What took you so long?" Mosley demanded, pulling me to my feet, his face white in the glow of Ezra's flashlight.

"I don't know," I said.

"You don't know?"

"I got lost. I guess."

"You guess?"

Mosley looked in my eyes.

"You saw him, didn't you?"

I shook my head.

"You saw him. I know you did."

"No," I said, which was true.

I hadn't seen anything. I'd only felt it -it's gentle and urgent quest to return me to my world. If it hadn't been for Mosley and the Dew Drops waiting for me, I would have happily followed it back into the hollow.

"Why? Did *you* see something, Mosely"

"No."

He paused.

"I don't know. I don't know what I saw. Never mind. We gotta get out of here before the parents come looking."

Mosley and I never talked about it again. He left the Dew Drops shortly after for a new and more exciting gang and I was put in charge. As their new fearless leader, I did away with passwords and punishments and I never sent anyone into the Hollow, no matter what they'd done. And though the Dew Drops did venture in on occasion to pick blackberries in August, I never went with them.

In fact, I never went into the Hollow after that night. Not because of the dark, which I no longer feared, but because of the scent of wet earth and cherry blossoms.