

Into the Forest

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Third prize, Fiction: 2024 Marysville BookNest writing competition

The tyres skidded slightly on the damp gravel road as the Land Rover pulled up sharply. The dark green doors opened together, synchronised as if on a spring. Three burly figures squeezed out and stood, taking in their surroundings. The moon was a mere sliver and gave little light. It danced back and forth between the rolling clouds. The men paid no heed, moving confidently towards the open tailgate. Each one picked up his bag and slung it across his broad shoulders. The packs were not heavy and caused no slowing of their movements. They moved as a team.

‘We’re late,’ muttered the youngest of the three, a mere lad of 20. It was his first such outing and his tension was raw. His voice cracked slightly, and he hurriedly cleared his throat.

‘Don’t fuss lad. They won’t start without us.’ The eldest of the three headed towards the path. His close-cropped grey hair stood out against the darkness, his stride confident and measured. The path was barely visible in between the great oaks and chestnuts surrounding them. As they stepped into the forest, the trees seemed to draw around them, urging them on towards its darkest depths. Their boots made little sound on the mossy path.

A rustling to their right caused their heads to snap up. The three froze then dropped to a crouch. Their eyes scanned the leafy vista surrounding them. The mournful hoot of an owl echoed across the night. A gentle flap of wings passed directly above their heads. Silence followed. Rising carefully, they continue with a steady stride, their breath making small fog clouds in the chilly night air.

The path began to rise slightly, and the trees slipped backwards as if giving them room to climb. The moon found a gap and shed its feeble light before them.

‘Are we nearly there?’ The lad's voice sounded higher than he would have liked. He cleared his throat and asked again. It came out deeper and firmer. Much more manly he thought to himself.

Before anyone could answer, they turned a sharp corner and the hut stood before them. Its wood clad walls blended into the trees like a camouflage overcoat. Thin strips of light escaped from the edges of the shutters and a murmur of deep voices could be heard.

‘Are you ready lad?’ the older man said, as he paused before the door. He placed a leathery hand on the lad’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. It was returned with a small head bob, then a more confident double nod. As the door swung open, the voices stilled, and all eyes swivelled towards the threesome. They stepped into the brightly lit room, their eyes taking a moment to adjust. The silence was palpable, broken only by the lad nervously clearing his throat. A figure detached itself from the huddle and moved forward in greeting. The lad could not believe his eyes.

‘Close your mouth,’ whispered the older man. The lad snapped his jaw shut. The figure held out a beautifully manicured hand encrusted with sparkling rings and encircled with several heavy gold bracelets. They made a gentle tinkling sound audible only to the three.

The two older men each took the hand gently and dropped a delicate kiss on the back taking care not to snare themselves on the rings. The hand was offered to the lad and he followed suit. A wave of Dior wafted over him as he leaned forward. It took all his self-control to keep his jaw closed.

‘Welcome friends, please follow me,’ said the figure. The three followed quickly through a purple velvet curtain. Chairs lined the walls, each holding a pile of clothing neatly folded and stacked. A pair of regulation black leather army boots sat facing forward beneath most of them.

The three chose an empty chair each and placed their packs on the floor. Without speaking, they began to undress. Each item of clothing was neatly folded and stacked on the chair, their boots placed carefully facing forward underneath. As they donned the contents of their packs, the lad could feel his nerves increasing. It was vitally important that he made a good impression tonight. His future attendance was dependent on it. He dressed himself carefully, checking his appearance frequently in the strategically placed mirror. At last, he felt ready to face the crowd. He turned around and gazed at his friends, seeking their opinion. The two pairs of eyes gave him the once-over starting at the top and working down. Every detail was noticed. They nodded their approval. A look of pride was quickly smothered as the lad waited for his instructions.

‘Stay here, till we introduce you. Make a bold entrance, then let ‘em have it.’ The two older men slipped through the velvet curtain, leaving the lad alone. The doubts came flooding in like water into a toilet bowl. Was he up to it? Did he belong in this esteemed group? Oh God what if he stuffed it up completely? It was then that he heard his name being announced. Taking a deep breath, he threw back the purple curtain and strode to the middle of the room. A polite round of applause greeted him. The music started and he let them have it. His cerise sequinned skirt sparkled in the light as he spun and twirled. The beads on his silver bodice jiggled as he shimmied back and forth. His flaming red wig mercifully stayed put as he pouted and posed, flirting with the group, teasing them with his hip thrusts and salacious smile. With his arms whirling and

weaving, he sashayed across the wooden floor on his Jimmy Choo knock-offs. Fingers brushed lightly against shoulders and bare arms as he got up close and personal with his audience. Spin, kick, thrust twirl, he was like a man possessed. As the music came towards its climax he spread his arms wide, threw back his head and neatly dropped into the splits. The crowd went wild. Cheers and whistles were released like a flock of excited birds. Silk flowers were thrown into the air and showered around him. He had given his all and they loved him for it.

The greeter came forward and reached down their bejewelled hand. He took it gratefully and allowed himself to be helped up, being careful not to wobble on his six-inch heels.

‘Magnifique! Exquisite! Superb!’ they exclaimed, leaning forward and planting a huge kiss on each of his cheeks. A slight smear of scarlet lipstick was left behind in another cloud of Dior.

‘Welcome to the Queens Brigade.’ The lad noticed there was glitter in their beard. The greeter held his arm in the air like a prize fighter as the crowd swarmed around him.

‘Please welcome our newest member,’ they announced as the group clapped and cheered.

The rest of the evening was a blur. He was introduced to each of the members in person. Outfits were compared and compliments given. Tips were shared on where to buy stockings to fit people over six foot three and 150 kilos. A recipe to make your own face cream that was guaranteed to reduce shaving rash, was shared and discussed. Platters of sausage rolls and party pies were consumed with gusto. Great care was taken to avoid dripping tomato sauce on

the silks and satins of the glamorous gowns. Trays of fairy cakes with pink icing and sprinkles on, were passed around.

As the clock struck midnight, like Cinderella, the members began to slip behind the purple velvet curtain to change. The lad and his friends were the last to leave. Theirs was the task of sweeping up the glitter, sprinkles and lost sequins from the wooden floorboards.

As they hurried down the mossy path, bursts of singing and giggles echoed through the forest's silent branches. The Land Rover was where they had left it on the side of the road, cold and dark. The lad slipped in beside the driver. His face was locked in a permanent grin. The ride home that had been interminable on the way there, disappeared in a flash. Before he knew it they were back outside the barracks. The large square building was in darkness except for a porch light over the entrance way.

The dome light came on as he opened the Land Rover's door. He turned to his friends still grinning.

'You did well tonight, lad. Very well. But remember not a word to anyone! I'll see you on parade at 0600. Make sure all the glitter is gone.'

'Thanks, Sarge,' said the lad as he climbed out of the Land Rover. He shut the door quietly and the light went out. Without a backward glance he headed towards the barracks. After a brief pause, he opened the unlocked door and slipped inside, back to his other reality.