

Short Story : Junior

Highly Commended— Julia Church, Yr 9, Akaroa Area School



“The Forest”

It is cold and dark in the forest. A gust of cold wind whistles through the trees, and the clouds above me are an ominous shade of grey, promising rain, but I keep on walking. I have to.

The forest is completely silent. The only sounds come from the crunch of twigs under my boots, and my own ragged breath. The whole place is eerily symmetrical, each side of the forest a perfect mirror image of the other. This is one of the many ways to tell that it was not created naturally.

I walk into the mist, searching for any sign of life. Game is scarce in the forest, but in winter, most of the little life the forest harbours goes into hibernation, or stays hidden, underground, up trees, in bushes. Even now, years after the forest was replanted, animals are still wary of the forest.

I set a few snares in the hope that something might get caught in them before I come back on my way home. I keep walking, stopping only to fill my water skin at a small spring. Once I have drunk, I search around the spring for edible plants, but to no avail. Icy droplets of water start to fall, trickling down my face, down my back, soaking through my thin jacket, but still, I cannot go back. Not yet.

Half an hour passes before I reach the valley. I have been here before so many times, but the place still seems unreal to me. The valley marks the end of the perfect, orderly, man made forest, and marks the beginning of what can only be described as pure chaos. Even in the eery silence, the whole valley screams destruction, from the massive craters and cracks, to the uprooted, emaciated trees littering the muddy ground. The trees have rocks and dirt lodged in them, and some of the

trees have been thrown into the ground like spears, as if nature was at war with itself. There is not a single trace left of the beautiful woodlands that once stood in this valley.

I shiver. It's now bitterly cold, and it will be completely dark within hour at the rate it's getting dark now. My shoulders slump forward in defeat as I realise I will have to return home empty handed. Nearly two hours of hiking through the forest in the cold, the wind, and the rain, all for nothing.

I start on my way back home, feeling completely and utterly defeated. I am exhausted and starving, and having not caught anything in my time in the forest, there will be no meal to look forward to at home. As I walk back, I check the snares I set earlier. All that I have managed to catch is a very small, very angry looking bird, not nearly big enough for eating. I set it free, receiving some pretty nasty scratch marks for my efforts.

I lean against the the rough trunk of a massive oak tree, sliding silently to the ground, and just sit in the muddy ground, stock still. I am more tired and hungry than ever. I need to rest, just for a few minutes, I tell myself, then I will go home to Mum, and Jess. In my mind, I can already see their disappointed faces when I turn up empty handed. I try to push this thought to the back of my mind, but I can't, because I know that, sooner or later, I'll be seeing those faces; sad glassy eyes, cheeks hollowed out from starvation...

I wake up to the sound of something rustling through the leaves. It is almost pitch black, and it is freezing cold, though it is no longer raining. I try to remember what happened, how I ended up here. I must have fallen asleep when I sat down to rest. Another rustling sound, this time from a small bush. A rustling sound. I am suddenly fully awake and alert. I reach for my bow, trying to be as quiet as possible. I wait, on edge, listening out for another sound, any sign of life, and after a minute or so, I am rewarded with a small glimpse of animal the size of a small dog. A rabbit, maybe? I move silently in the direction of the animal, whatever it is, with my bow at the ready, an arrow notched, the bowstring drawn back.

I step on a twig, and I cringe as the loud crack of the twig snapping resonates through the silence. The animal darts out from the bush it was hiding in, and I release the arrow. The animal stops moving. I take a closer look at the animal. The arrow has pierced it straight through the heart.

The animal is a hare, with a soft, light brown pelt, which I should be able to get a good price for at the markets. There must be enough meat on it for at least two meals. I think again of Mum and Jess, but this time, I see happy smiles and delighted expressions on their faces.

Mum and Jess, I realise, and a sudden feeling of cold dread passes over me. How long have I been gone? They must be worried sick. I grab the hare and start walking back home again, walking as fast as my feet will take me. I must have been asleep for a long time; as I walk, the sky grows lighter and lighter. By the time I reach our home, the sky is filled with a light orange sunrise, bathing everything in the village in a orange glow.

I walk up to the front door and knock gently. It is mum, looking worried, and exhausted, with dark circles under her eyes. That look disappears as soon as she sees me.

"Bayley!" she exclaims, "Where on earth have you been all night? Jess and I have been worried sick!"

She tries to sound cross, but she mostly comes across as relieved. Jess peeks her head out from behind mum's skirt and points at my left hand.

“What’s that?” she asks me. I turn to face both of them. “I’m alright mum.” I say, and hold up the hare. The delighted expressions on their faces make up for the horrible night in the forest, and then some. I smile. My family will not be going hungry today.