No Echo

By Suzi Walters

I don't know what possessed me to go into the woods that day.

I'm not an outdoorsy person. Never have been. I like concrete and traffic and the glow of convenience stores at 2 in the morning. I find comfort in the chaos of the city – knowing that somewhere nearby, someone is always awake.

The woods are the opposite.

Too quiet. Too empty.

But that morning, I woke up thinking about them.

Not any particular woods. Just the woods in general.

By noon, I was driving out of the city.

By one, I was standing at the edge of a trail I'd never seen before, staring into the trees and trying to remember when I'd decided to come.

I almost left.

I probably should have.

Then, I took a deep breath and stepped into the foliage.

The woods were quiet…and when I say quiet, I mean devoid of noise. No birds. No animals. No insects. Not even the rustling of wind through the trees. The only sounds were the rhythm of my breathing and the crunch of my sneakers as I walked through the detritus littering the trail. I guess it was more of a game trail than a walking trail, even though there seemed to be no "game" to be found.

I walked for what seemed like hours, arguing with myself over what I was doing. Why did I come here? I didn't even know where "here" was. How did I know where this place was? I stamped my foot in frustration. This was stupid. Beyond stupid, actually. I had no business wandering about the woods by myself. I got lost in my apartment building, for God's sake.

Suddenly, movement out of the corner of my eye startled me from my internal tirade. I spun to the left, facing the direction it came from, and…nothing. No swaying ferns indicating something had been there or showing where it went. Was I imagining things? It certainly wouldn't be the

first time I'd scared myself to death because I "saw" something. I strained my ears, listening for any hint that something had been there, that I hadn't been imagining things, but nothing.

I let out a heavy sigh, my breath blowing my bangs out of my eyes. "Okay, pull yourself together. You will NOT go crazy out in the middle of the woods," I said aloud.

I took another step. There it was again. Off to my right this time. I swear I saw movement. Once again, when I turned to look, no movement was detected.

This is stupid. But I took another step further into the woods. Further away from the safety of my car and further away from my beloved city.

My stomach rumbled as I walked. God, I am such an idiot. I hadn't even brought any food or water. Why was I in such a tizzy to get here?

Three feet up ahead at a bend in the trail, I spied some berries. My mouth began to water at the thought of fresh berries. I was so hungry, I didn't care if they were poisonous or not. At least my belly would be full when I croaked. As I rushed toward the berries, I heard a faint scraping sound coming from the path behind me. I froze, desperately wanting to look, but also not wanting to know. I held my breath as I slowly turned toward the sound. Nothing. "Okay! This isn't funny anymore!" I hollered to…well…no one; the woods just swallowed my words. No echo; no nothing.

I stood there for a beat, looking in every direction. What the hell was going on? The berries forgotten, I continued my journey down the trail as it wound its way through the trees. The longer I walked, the more unsettled I began to feel. Like one of these times I was going to round a corner, and Sasquatch was going to be standing in the middle of the path, waiting to rip my arms off.

Okay…maybe that's a Wookie thing, but still.

With each step, my heart began to beat harder, like the lizard part of my brain knew I was in imminent danger and the rest of me just hadn't gotten the memo yet. Once again, the urge to run came over me. I stopped, standing there breathing hard, my breath deafening in the silence. Then, from somewhere off in the distance, came a screech. The kind that makes your legs weak and your bladder threaten to let go. "Nope," I said aloud and took off down the trail back the way I came. I only made it a few steps when I noticed something on the trail that hadn't been there before. It was small, maybe only an inch in length. I stopped dead in my tracks. Every hair on my body stood on end. I nudged the object with the tip of my sneaker, flipping it over. Against my better judgment, I knelt and wiped the dirt from it.

Neon green.

Black and white polka dots.

My stomach dropped.

It was a fingernail. An inch-long, stiletto-shaped fingernail.

Just. Like. Mine.

I suddenly felt sick. From my crouch, I lowered myself onto my butt into the dirt. I lifted my shaking hands to my face. All ten nails were still intact. How? How could that be? This solitary nail looked like it had been sitting on this trail for days, maybe even weeks. It was impossible. My nails were done at the most prestigious salon in the city, and they never did the same design twice. It even had the same smudge as the nail on my right index finger.

As I sat in the dirt staring at the nail, it became painfully clear the sun was setting. The shadows under the canopy became longer and longer, morphing into things that only my nightmares could concoct. I stood, absently shoving the discarded nail into my pocket. I had to get out of this place. I didn't know what was going on, but I knew it sure as hell wasn't good. I started to take a step back the way I came, but something stopped me. An intense sense of dread emanated from that direction. Everything inside me screamed at me not to go back the way I'd come. I had no choice but to move deeper into the woods.

The sense of dread never left. It followed me as I bumbled down a trail I could barely see. I knew I couldn't go on much longer. Why did I come here? And why didn't I bring a flashlight? I was the worst outdoors person ever. Honestly, all I wanted to do was sit on the trail and cry, but I knew that wouldn't do me any good. No one knew I was here, and I lived alone, so no one would come looking for me if I didn't come home. God, I was an idiot.

After another twenty minutes, a large structure loomed in front of me - a large, two-story, creepy AF house. I felt an overwhelming urge to go inside, but who in their right mind would build a house in the middle of the woods like this and, even more importantly, who would think it's a good idea to go inside? Look, I'm a smart person (okay, maybe this instance is a bad example). Even as the stairs creaked and the porch threatened to buckle under my weight, I knew opening the door was a bad idea, but I couldn't help myself.

"Hello," I squeaked as I opened the door and took a tentative step inside. In the time it took me to get here, the sun had set, and I couldn't see a thing. Once again, I chastised myself for not bringing a flashlight. Now what? I couldn't just go roaming around an old, creepy house in the dark. That was asking for a trip to the hospital…provided someone found me. Oh! Did I not mention that I left my cellphone in the car? Yep. Sure did. When (if) I made it back to civilization,

I was definitely going to lock myself in my apartment and never leave again. For the hundredth time since I started on this little journey, I cursed myself for having zero survival skills.

I sensed the room I was in was more of a hallway than an actual room. The oppressiveness was tangible. And still the pull was there to move farther into the house. I slid my foot forward to prevent accidentally stepping on something. My toe bumped into something heavy. I reached forward hesitantly. A table of some sort was resting against the wall. I let out a shaky breath and shook my head at my stupidity. I ran my hand along the smooth surface as I walked. It was cool to the touch and…clean. I had expected it to be covered in dust, but from what I could tell, the table didn't have a speck. Odd.

As I came to what I could feel was the end of the table, my fingers brushed something cold and metal. I wrapped my fingers around the cylindrical object.

"You have got to be kidding me," I said under my breath. In my hand: a flashlight. If this thing works, I'm outta here. No way was I going to wander around a creepy, old house when I could hoof it back to my car and sleep in my bed tonight.

I fumbled with the flashlight, trying to turn it on. I was about to give up and chuck the flashlight across the room when my pinky slid over a small switch at the bottom. Wait. Do I even want to see where I am? And there it was again. That little worm of a thought at the back of my mind, urging me forward.

A deep breath and then I flipped the switch. And I about lost my ever-loving mind. Me. I was staring back at myself, dirt smeared across my face, leaves sticking up out of my hair, in the biggest mirror I've ever seen. My pulse was deafening in the stillness of the house. I stuck my tongue out at the mirror and moved away from it.

A noise sounded off to my right. I spun around just in time to see – well, I wasn't sure what I saw – *something* move further into the darkness. I tried to swallow but all the saliva had evaporated out of my mouth.

"Hello," I croaked into the darkness. No response.

I moved farther into what appeared to be a sitting room. There were couches along one wall, with an enormous stone fireplace at the end of the room. Why isn't there dust on anything? The house was spotless, but there was no sign of life anywhere. Nothing on any of the end tables. No one lived this tidy. It was impossible.

Maybe the house truly was abandoned, but there was a caretaker who came and kept it clean. Yeah. That's what happens. I'm going to go with that.

I snooped around the room, but could find no signs that anything had been through here. I must have imagined it.

The next room was another sitting room. Nothing special in here either. I felt a strong pull to go upstairs, and I couldn't shake the feeling that something was watching me from the shadows. I stood at the bottom of the steps, looking up into the void. A crash came from somewhere deep in the house. "No, no, no, no, no, no, no," I chanted as I ran up the stairs, trying not to fall on my face.

I paused at the top of the steps, trying to catch my breath. At the edge of the flashlight's beam was a giant stained-glass window. I strained my ears, but no further noises sounded from downstairs. Probably just a rat. A giant, man-eating rat. I shook my head, clearing the thought. That was absolutely ridiculous. I had probably bumped something and didn't realize it, and it just now fell.

At the base of the window was a window seat, and something was sitting on it. I crept forward toward the window. A doll. I picked it up and looked at it. Why was its hair wet…and sticky? I don't know why I did it, but I put the baby doll's hair closer to my face and sniffed. I jerked my head back. What the…Pepsi? The doll's hair smelled like Pepsi. Instantly, a memory flashed through my mind. I couldn't have been more than three, playing with my dolly in my play kitchen.

"You need a bath," young me said to the doll. "You're stinky. Pee-yew." Three-year-old me stuck the doll's head in the play kitchen sink and poured Pepsi into her…hair.

The memory vanished as quickly as it'd come. I hadn't thought about that in at least 20 years. Wait. I looked at the doll as closely as I could in the weakening light of the flashlight. This was my doll. The doll I lost over 20 years ago. Look…there was the tiny tear under her arm where I'd shut her in the car door. Why was it here, and more importantly, how was it soaked in Pepsi? I looked around at the darkness. I wasn't sure what I was looking for. Anything to explain the fact that my doll was sitting in a house I'd never been in soaked in Pepsi. I dropped the doll, its plastic head making a dull thud as it hit the floor. This cannot be happening.

Movement at the end of the hall pulled me from my trance. It wasn't loud, just a whisper of a noise, but noise nonetheless.

"Is someone there?" I said, trying to hide the quiver in my voice. I crept down the hall. At each doorway, I cracked the door so I could peer in. Each room was immaculate. Beds made. Floors tidy. No dirty clothes strewn all over like my bedroom at home. Each room was the same. I came to a small door between two bedrooms. Probably a linen closet, I thought. I walked past the closet. I had no desire to stare at moth-eaten bath towels. I made it two doors away when I felt compelled to stop. What if there was something cool in the closet? I turned and headed back

the way I came, just knowing I was being ridiculous and there wasn't going to be anything fun in there. I swung the door open, and my blood ran cold. Instead of musty old towels and bedsheets, a hundred pictures of me stared back.

I stood there staring into the closet, mouth hanging open. I had to hold on to the doorframe to keep my legs from giving out. What was I even looking at? Had someone been following me? I stepped into the closet and grabbed a framed 8x10 off the shelf. It was a picture of me with mountains in the background. I had the exact same picture at home. In the same frame. Same frame...how? I put the photo back and grabbed another. This one was of me in my prom dress, my date and me standing together, his arm around my waist in my yellow dress. Hang on. Yellow dress? I never wore a yellow prom dress. Did I? No, no, I most definitely did not. I obsessed over that stupid dress for months. It was ridiculously expensive, and I had to watch the bratty little neighbor kids for weeks to pay for it. That dress was gold – not yellow. Could it just be a trick of the lighting that made the gold look yellow? Yes, that must be it. But that still didn't explain how the picture made it into this closet in the first place. I grabbed another. Me as a child wearing a "Big Sister" T-shirt, holding my baby brother in the hospital. The only problem was I don't have a brother. I'm an only child. I stared harder at the picture. Maybe it wasn't me. But it had to be me. I could see the stitches I'd gotten after I rode my bike into the back of my mom's car peeking out from my hairline.

I put my head between my knees, trying not to puke. There on the floor, at my feet, was another photo. I must have knocked it off the shelf as I rifled through the other photos. My hands were shaking so badly I could barely hold the picture. I was standing arm in arm with girls I'd never met, at a bar I'd never been in, rocking neon green, black-and-white polka-dot stiletto nails.

I backed out of the closet, picture still in my hand, staring at those nails. The same nails that were still on my very own fingers. I shoved my hand into my pocket and pulled out the nail I'd found on the trail. I held the nail up to the light, comparing it to the picture.

I gasped, the picture slipping from my fingers. I snatched it back up and looked closer. Sure enough, the me in the picture was missing the nail from her right index finger.

I just stood there staring at the picture. How could this be happening? What is *this*? How can there be pictures of a life I never lived? I DON'T HAVE A BROTHER! I had to get out of here. I didn't care how dark it was or how creepy those silent woods were. I'd had enough.

I didn't care if the pictures were strewn all over the place and I didn't bother shutting the closet door. I just ran down the hall and down the stairs. As I raced past the mirror, I noticed something stuck to my sleeve. I stopped short of the front door and went back to look at my reflection in the glass. There on my left sleeve was a sticky note. Where the hell did a sticky note

come from? I snatched it off my sleeve and looked at it. Written on the note was a single word: “Hi.” I looked at my reflection in the mirror. I looked as terrified as I felt. I tipped my head to the left and then to the right, my reflection mimicking me. I lifted my left hand and waved at the mirror. My reflection did the same. I started to turn away, but my reflection did not. I turned back toward the mirror just as the me in the mirror stuck her tongue out at me and waved…with a hand missing the right index fingernail.

I shrieked, and out of pure instinct, I swung the flashlight at the mirror, shattering it - and reflection me - into a thousand little pieces. And I ran. I ran faster than I’ve ever run before. The woods seemed to swallow the light from my flashlight, but I just continued running, never looking back.

The sun was starting to rise by the time I made it out of the woods and back to the safety of my car. I threw myself into the car, grabbed my phone from where I’d left it in the cupholder, and peeled out as I made a U-turn. I was not about to stay there any longer than I had to.

I drove at least 90 mph all the way back to the city. Once in my apartment, I locked all three locks on the door and turned around, pressing my back to the door. I slid down the door to the floor, trying to catch my breath. I didn’t know how to even begin to process the last 24 hours. I just knew that no matter what, I was never going into the woods again. I might not even leave my apartment. Thank God for DoorDash.

I pulled my phone out, noticing that I had a missed call. I looked at the number - it didn’t look familiar, but they’d left a voicemail. Probably someone trying to sell me a car warranty or something stupid like that. I placed the phone on the kitchen counter, opened the voicemail, and put it on speaker while I rummaged through the fridge. I felt like I hadn’t eaten in days.

“Hey, dude. Mom wanted me to check with you about dinner on Sunday. She said she couldn’t wait to meet Scott. Who the hell is Scott? I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you’re dating someone. Anyway, call me back when you get this so I can get Mom off my back. Love ya, sis.”