



THE FOREST  
IN THE  
HALLWAY

BEATRIZ SAT ON A WINDOW SEAT overlooking the rainy New York City streets, stroking her uncle's cat and wondering if she ought to brush its hair off her sweat-shirt. Again. Raindrops made their way hesitantly down the cool glass panes, and the trees in the park across the street waved wildly in the wind, frozen in position occasionally by flashes of lightning.

She was bored. The air conditioning was too cold. And she was filled with an overwhelming sense of dread. It was a weight in her stomach, heavy as a stone.

Two weeks ago she had been home in Des Moines, Iowa. And two weeks ago, on a hot July afternoon, her mother and father had mysteriously disappeared—just vanished—on the day before her fourteenth birthday.

She had tried calling her mother's cell phone. It rang in her purse, in the hall closet. Her mother never went anywhere without her purse. She waited until nine thirty before calling Holly, her best friend. Twenty minutes later, Holly and her parents arrived and reassured Beatriz that everything was fine, there must have been a mix-up, and had her folks said anything about going out tonight?

An hour later, after Holly's dad had looked through every room in the house and her mom had made half a dozen phone calls, the grownups had a quiet talk and

told Beatriz they were going to call the police, “just as a precaution.”

From the half of it she could hear, the conversation with the police seemed to Beatriz extremely brief and casual. When it was over, Holly’s mom told Beatriz that the police had asked them to leave a note and take her home with them for the night. “They said to call in the morning if your mom and dad still haven’t come back.”

Haven’t come back? How could they not come back?

She lay in bed the next morning, having not slept much, and stared at the ceiling. Where were they? They’d never done anything even remotely like this before.

“Beatriz?” Holly’s mother knocked softly. “Can you get up now? They want us to go down to the police station.”

She was interviewed by a patient and sympathetic policewoman in a gray, windowless room, and shown photographs in big loose-leaf binders—photographs of scary-looking men with lifeless eyes. She’d never seen any of them. Did the police think one of these men had done something to her parents?

After driving home for a rather somber lunch, Holly’s mother took Beatriz back to her house to get fresh clothes, explaining in the car that they’d be meeting the policewoman there. Beatriz felt a little as if she had been tricked into this. She didn’t want to talk to the

police again. Why did they have to be at her house? Why weren't they looking for her mom and dad?

The policewoman and Holly's mom walked her through the house to see if anything seemed odd or out of place. Only one thing seemed strange: There was a wide gap in the top shelf of her father's books—strange, because he always put his books back or moved the bookend down to keep the row neat. She had no idea what was missing.

The policewoman asked for a picture of her parents, and Beatriz broke into tears when she couldn't find one. Where was the big box of photographs? Why hadn't her parents ever organized them into albums?

There were three messages on the answering machine. Two from yesterday (the dentist and someone from her mother's book group) and one from today: her uncle M—her father's brother—calling to wish her a happy birthday. The officer said the messages didn't seem particularly helpful, but could she take the tape with her to the station anyway? She also asked for Uncle M's phone number, which Beatriz was able to find.

Riding back in the car to Holly's house, Beatriz stared straight ahead, silent. Holly's mother glanced over at her every so often but didn't speak, either.

Beatriz stayed at Holly's house for a week, waiting, but none of the phone calls from the police had anything positive to report, and her parents didn't come back.

On the eighth day, Holly's mother, while braiding Holly's long brown hair, gently announced to Beatriz that her uncle had offered to let her stay with him in New York City until her parents were located. She'd rather Beatriz stay with them, of course, but it would be too complicated, what with Holly's grandparents coming to visit for three weeks. There just wasn't enough room.

Beatriz stared at her hands and said nothing.

Four days later she found herself in an unfamiliar apartment with a man she knew mainly from his annual birthday phone call and his Christmas cards. Despite the fact that he and Beatriz's father were twin brothers—or perhaps because of it—they weren't all that close. Her family had only once gone to see him in New York—when she was six—and she couldn't remember him ever visiting Des Moines. She had seen him a second time at a relative's funeral, a few years ago. He gave her a cheese sandwich and a conspiratorial look that seemed to say he couldn't stand being there, either.

Now he paced back and forth in the living room like a bewildered Sherlock Holmes. There hadn't been any news since her arrival. "Honestly, my dear, if there was anything, good or bad, I'd tell you."

Bad news? She bit her lip. He wasn't very good at being comforting. *Maybe it's because he never had children of his own.* There had been a divorce, her mother said, when Beatriz was a baby.



This was so much worse than waiting for her parents at Holly's house. Why couldn't she have stayed there? They could have put up a tent in the backyard.

She kept out of her uncle's way, spending much of her time sitting on the bed in the guest room, knees pulled up close to her chest, running through what was by now a fixed set of scenarios of what might have happened. All of them were dreadful.

When her uncle went out, which he did frequently but at odd times (*Doesn't he have a job?*), she wandered around the apartment, looking at his things. There were lots of souvenirs from Asia, where he'd apparently spent a good deal of time. He had statues and drawings and books in Chinese, Korean, and Russian; beautiful Indian carpets; and prints of snow scenes in rural Japan.

On his mantelpiece he kept a framed photograph of a beautiful young woman: his grandmother, for whom Beatriz had been named, who had emigrated from Portugal in the 1800s.

He also had a large collection of leather-bound books on witchcraft. They were locked in a glass-fronted bookcase, and he said he would bring some of them out for her to look at one of these days. But after being put off several times, Beatriz realized he didn't really want to show them to her, so she stopped asking.

The apartment was pleasant during the day, but the nights were awful. Beatriz hated going to bed. Her

room was dark and scary. Light from the street filtered up through the sycamore trees in front of the building and made scratchy, branchy shadows on the ceiling. There was a blue neon HOTEL sign on top of another building a few blocks away that flashed faintly on one of her walls. You would hardly notice it unless you looked for it, but of course she always did.

She missed the warm light from the kitchen at home that trickled around the hall corner into her room, and the sound of her parents talking and doing the dishes after she went to bed. She especially missed them looking in on her on their way upstairs.

So she was bored, in addition to being miserable, sitting in the living-room window seat and gazing out at the late-afternoon storm, when she noticed a face in the grain of the wood of the window sash. This is nothing unusual; an idle mind looking for distraction can see faces in clouds or bathroom tiles or ceiling cracks or in any number of places. But this face moved. It winked. Beatriz stared at the two little knots that were its eyes and tried not to blink. When, after a few seconds, nothing happened, she began to doubt she had seen anything at all. Then it winked again, and a hoarse whisper came from a small crack below the knots. "Nineteenth floor! Everybody out! Home Furnishings, Lost and Found—going down!"

Beatriz frowned.

She watched it for several minutes more before it

hissed, “Nineteenth floor, stupid! Numero Nineteen-o!  
One-Niner, Houston, do you copy? Helloooo, Mama!”  
After that the eyes flipped shut and did not reopen.

Hello, Mama?

## THE FOREST

HER UNCLE'S APARTMENT BUILDING was in an older section of Manhattan. Made of rough gray granite blocks, it rose nineteen stories above the tree-lined sidewalk. The lobby was very clean and very quiet, furnished with tall, wilting plants and a doorman who reminded Beatriz of a waiter in one of those enormous Italian restaurants in the suburbs that her parents refused to go to: stained maroon jacket, black pants, dingy white shirt. He had a military-style hat he was always taking off, to run his hand through slick black hair flecked with dandruff. He never spoke to Beatriz when she and her uncle went out for an occasional walk or to rent a video, but he always said hello to her uncle in an obsequious way.

The upper floors of the building were all the same: long, dim halls, door after door fitted with brass numbers set above glass knobs, fan-shaped sconces lighting cream-colored walls. She rarely saw any of the other tenants, and most of the ones she did see were elderly. On the few occasions when she heard young, lively voices in the hall and she ran to the peephole to look, there was never anyone there.

It was an eerie place in general, but the oddest thing of all—until the face appeared in the wood, that is—was the carpeting in the halls. It, too, was cream-colored, with a pale green ivy pattern along the edges.



Little green katydids with piercing black eyes stared up at her, partly hidden in the foliage, sometimes looking as if they were moving in that jittery way crickets and related species have. At first Beatriz thought it was a trick of the light—often they didn't seem to move at all, and at other times they appeared quite agitated. Unlike the face in the wood, they were always perfectly still when she stared at them directly, even if she had just seen them wiggling out of the corner of her eye. She pointed this out to her uncle and asked if he had ever noticed them. No he hadn't, he said, but what a keen eye you have, my dear.

“Nineteenth floor? Please don't,” he said at dinner that night. “Theseus Formica lives up there, and he's a pill. He hates children—throws sticks at them in the park and then pretends he didn't do it. He's complained about you several times, though you're quiet as a mouse.”

Well. Now that it was off-limits, she was determined to go, the next time her uncle went out.

She awoke the following morning with a sense of anticipation. She finally had something to do besides sit and worry. After the usual strained conversation at breakfast (“Cereal, please,” . . . “Thanks . . .”), she dressed for exploration: brown corduroy pants, plain white button-down-collar shirt, hair in a ponytail tucked through the back of a Yankees baseball cap. She pretended to read until her uncle, sighing, went out. She went to the window and watched him cross the street,

made sure the hall was clear (which it always was anyway), and then, heart pounding, pushed the UP button for the elevator.

She felt self-conscious taking the elevator. In the otherwise tomblike atmosphere of the apartment building, it was embarrassingly loud. And it looked funny: It had a door like the door to a regular room, one that you pulled open on hinges.

It rattled up to their floor, and the brass grating inside the door clattered back. With a nervous look behind her, she went in and pressed the top button, the one for the nineteenth floor. The light behind the button didn't come on, but the grating clanked shut, and she felt the momentary heaviness as the machinery started up. Sixteen. Seventeen. Eighteen. The elevator slowed and jerked to a stop at nineteen.

The grating slid back in complete silence. Standing on tiptoe, she tried to peer through the window of the outer door. Too high. She cautiously pushed the door open.

The hall was not quite the same as the others. There were the familiar wooden doors with their glass knobs and brass numerals, the light fixtures, and the ivy pattern in the carpeting. But the walls were wall-papered, in a pattern of alternating stripes about an inch wide. Half the stripes were cream-colored, and half were dark red, just a little redder than the brown wood of the doors. It gave this hall a different feeling: older, richer, more official.

*No sign of nasty old whatshisname.* She jumped as the elevator grating closed and the cage began its noisy descent—someone must have pressed the call button on a lower floor. A tiny insect face stared up at her from the carpet, still except for its mouth parts, which worked as if it was chewing something. She shuddered. Here the insects were moving even when she looked right at them.

“And no sign of Home Furnishings.” Her voice sounded awfully loud.

She couldn't see anything to the left or right except doors and wall fixtures, the pale carpet, and the striped walls disappearing in the distance. She imagined it as a funeral home, behind each door a casket on display in subdued light, with large flower arrangements and quietly weeping relatives. *Ugh. Don't think about that.*

After hesitating briefly over the decision about which way to turn, she went left—because she had to go in one direction or the other, and that was just what she decided.

Once or twice she thought she heard people talking in low voices behind the doors she passed, but when she stood still to listen, there was only silence. Before long she realized she had walked farther than she could have on her uncle's floor without coming to the end of the hallway. *It must be bigger on the upper floors,* she thought, not considering how unusual that would be.

The katydid in the carpeting were moving quite

vigorously now. She could see them hopping away as she passed, looking almost like popcorn popping.

And here was another odd thing: The stripes in the wallpaper seemed to be waving about ever so slightly, as though they were rustling in a breeze. But, like the katydids downstairs, when she looked hard at them, they were still. Something was wrong with the doors, too. They weren't straight, they were warped, door and frame together—as they might appear through old-fashioned, rippled window glass.

The dim light from the wall lamps cast grotesque shadows—as if spiders, trapped in the shades, had died, their bodies and legs throwing branchy patterns on the floor and ceiling. Bending down, she touched a real ivy leaf stuck into the carpeting.

She straightened up and went on, trying to make sense of what was happening. The light was now so faint, she couldn't see clearly. Was that a pattern on the ceiling? Was it the stripes on the walls? Thin, twisting shapes rose from either side to meet overhead, like branches over a path in a forest. *Well, that's what it looks like, anyway*, she thought. *Like I'm on a nature hike*. She stopped for a moment. *But it wouldn't be this dark at ten in the morning*.

She could no longer tell the doors from the wallpaper. She couldn't see the knobs and numbers, and the wood split from the bottom up into thick, ribbon-like shapes—like the curvy wallpaper stripes. It was as if she was walking through a forest of thin, wavy trees grow-

ing out of the floor. She shook her head, and just as she began to think she'd better turn back, she realized that those *were* trees growing up out of the floor. The lamps had become points of light, small and far away; stars winking as they were more or less obscured by the dark red and brown saplings lining the path of the young forest in which she was walking.

She looked back. A few yards behind her the hall shimmered. Ahead was a darkening forest. She took a deep breath and kept going.

## A BRUSH WITH DEATH

THE PATH WOUND THROUGH BIRCH AND MADRONE, live oak and bay trees. Moss and ferns covered the forest floor—what she could see of it, since the daylight was fading. Birds twittered softly, putting one another to bed, and an occasional soft crunch in the underbrush signaled a small animal making its way out into the night.

She had always liked walking alone in the woods in Iowa, and although she had no idea how she'd come to be here—wherever *here* was—in some ways she felt more at home in this forest than she did in New York's Central Park, where there were always so many people. She was as social as the next person, but there was something basic and comforting about being away from everybody, about being by yourself in the woods. Your problems were somewhere else, and here it was just you and the birds and the trees and the ferns. Unless, of course, you got stung by a bee.

In the fading light, she had to concentrate on following the path to avoid the roots and stones poking up out of the hard brown dirt, so she didn't notice right away that someone or something was walking behind her. And when she did, she tried to convince herself it was just the echo of her own footsteps—until she heard a twig crack.

She turned to face the sound, ready to yell at whatever it was—or run.

You have no doubt seen pictures of the famous

black figure of Death. He carries a scythe, his face is hidden by a hood, and he's a skeleton beneath his robes. Imagine how you'd feel if you actually met him, walking alone in a strange forest at nightfall. Beatriz was too terrified to move—and too terrified to speak.

"Why, hello there." The voice was friendly. Not what she expected. "Please don't be alarmed at my appearance. It's a costume. I've learned that people expect a certain dramatic touch." He sighed. "But yes, I am Death. The Grim Reaper. Your Eternal Reward. Whatever." There was a rotting smell in the air, like bad breath or very strong cheese. It made Beatriz feel faint.

"Have I . . . that is . . ."

"No, no! Goodness, no! You haven't 'passed on.' It's not yet 'your time.' This is a purely casual encounter."

"But where am I?" she asked.

"Hmm. You know, I really couldn't say. We're just coming out of a forest here and into some hills. . . . I used to be a real whiz at places, but I've forgotten so much since I got this satellite positioning gizmo. When it's working correctly, it's supposed to tell you your exact latitude and longitude, right down to the meter." He held up a device that looked like a cell phone, clicked it, then brought it up under his hood for a closer look. "But these cheap batteries . . ."

An unsettling thought came to Beatriz. "We *are* still on Earth, though, right?"

"Oh, yes." He looked around hesitantly. "At least, I *think* so."

It was now almost dark, and the robed figure took a flashlight out of his sleeve and shone it ahead of them, indicating that they should keep walking. They went on side by side, Beatriz wondering what he would do if she tried to excuse herself so she could find the hallway and go back to Uncle M's. But after a few nervous glances at the black robe and the silvery blade of the scythe, she decided to keep quiet for the time being.

The birds had settled down, but chirping insects, joined by dozens of peeping frogs, made the warm night air feel happy and friendly. A moon (it *looked* like Earth's moon) peered over the edge of the forest and soon rose high enough to make the flashlight unnecessary. Thousands of stars twinkled above them in a big black sky. Beatriz tried to make out the Big Dipper, or Orion, but there were so many stars, and the ones she was looking for either were not there or were lost in the bright ocean of light that spread across the sky.

Now the path took them through low, grassy hills dotted with live oaks and their velvety brown shadows. Behind them, the forest was a thick, dark blanket.

"Well," said her companion meaningfully, "I have a confession to make."

Beatriz stopped, somewhat alarmed.

"Nothing to get worked up about. I exaggerated a little bit in saying this was a casual encounter. True, it's unofficial, but I did ask that wood imp in your uncle's apartment to mention that the top floor might be worth exploring."

“Is this about my parents?” Although frightened, Beatriz was hopeful that he might know something about their disappearance.

“Well . . . yes and no.” He paused.

“What do you mean?” She wished she could see his face underneath that hood. Or maybe not.

“Let me give you a little background—how things function in my line of work. First of all, it’s very bureaucratic. It wasn’t that way ‘in the Beginning,’ when they set things up, but rules have a way of breeding more rules—they’re worse than rabbits. For every person I take in, there are a dozen forms to fill out. Names to be entered in registries, notifications of final destination made—the regulations book is as thick as a Bible.

“So when someone throws a wrench into the works, there’s a lot of explaining to do. A lot of extra paperwork for yours truly.”

“What do you mean, ‘throws a wrench’? Did my parents . . .”

He ignored her question and began walking again. “Unfortunately, there are also very strict confidentiality rules.”

She stood looking at him for a moment, then ran to catch up.

“I can’t tell you much,” he continued. “The Big Guy doesn’t like the general public to know about the inner workings. Shrouds things in mystery. Claims it keeps people on their toes.”

“But what about my mom and dad? What did you mean by it’s ‘yes and no’ about them? You *have* to tell me if they’re—if they’re . . .”

“Well, the ‘no’ part means I can’t really tell you much.”

“And the ‘yes’?”

“The ‘yes’?” He sounded pained. “The ‘yes’ . . .” His voice trailed off.

“Are they alive?” She touched his sleeve but immediately pulled her hand back. His robe was freezing cold, quite a shock on a warm summer’s evening. “Are they *here*?”

“Lovely night, isn’t it?” said her companion. Then, after a pause, “Let me just say I know that your parents—and you, for that matter—are not the sort of people who go around throwing wrenches into things. But there are others who do. And if I don’t want to spend the better part of Eternity filling out wrongful death certificates and illegal otherworldly transfer filings, some of those others—one very clever one, in particular, who has managed to turn the regulations to her advantage—need to be dealt with. I could nab her in a minute,” he glanced at his scythe, “if she weren’t such a slippery character. She’s made it bloody complicated, pardon the expression. Your typical death row appeal is like a stroll in the park in comparison.”

“I see.” Beatriz didn’t.

“So—I’m asking for a little unofficial help.”

“From me?”

“Yes,” he said.

“It *is* about my parents—right?”

“Just look at that lovely moon.”

Beatriz let her frustration get the better of her fear. “How can I help if you won’t tell me what’s going on? What am I supposed to do? Where am I supposed to go?”

“First off, you can’t hang around *me* much longer. You’ll start to grow moss on your face, and your toes’ll turn gray. (You don’t want to know what happens after that.) You’re going to have to figure a lot of it out on your own, because I *cannot* be perceived as being involved. I’m bending the rules just by talking to you.”

“Rules? What rules?”

“I’ll try to keep an eye on you, though my schedule’s awfully hectic, what with the Middle East and all. But if you can manage to help me, you may possibly help yourself, too. No guarantees. Not even I know . . .”

“What?”

“Hush. I’ve said too much.” As he said this, a faint flash of sheet lightning lit the sky behind the distant hills, and a low roll of thunder followed a few seconds later. “He’s omnipresent. When He’s paying attention.”

They walked on in silence.

“Look, there’s light up there, just around the bend,” said Death. “Let’s see if we can’t get you a room for the night.”

The path curved around the base of one last hill, and Beatriz paused for a moment on the other side to

admire a dramatically changed view. Below them, a quarter mile or so down a gentle grassy slope dotted with fireflies, a great river spread out across the landscape, black except where a bright blade of moonlight fell across it. And just ahead, the path joined a one-lane dirt road that wound its way down to a little village at the water's edge. The lights of a city twinkled on the far side of the river near the horizon.

"How beautiful!" Beatriz said. A gentle breeze cooled her face as she watched water flow through the slice of moonlight.

"Yes . . . lovely," said Death. "And so fraught with metaphor."

Following the road, which eventually turned into a paved street, they soon found themselves flanked by darkened houses, widely spaced, with neatly trimmed lawns and hedges between. They passed a hardware store and a bank, and stopped in front of a small hotel: brown-shingled, two stories high, with four windows across the front on each floor. A white sign hung over a door in the middle of the ground floor. THE LIBRARY—RESTAURANT & LODGINGS was painted in elegant black script. There was just one light on, in a window next to the door, and the place seemed deserted.

She turned to the robed figure to say, "It doesn't look like anyone's still up," but he was gone. A nasty smell lingered in the air.

She wrinkled her nose and knocked softly. Holding her breath, she could hear nothing but the steady drip

of water from a garden faucet nearby. She knocked again.

The porch light came on, and after a few seconds the door swung inward. A distinguished-looking older man with a large nose, thinning gray hair, and beautiful white eyebrows asked, “Who’s there?” He stared over her shoulder, and she realized he was blind.

“I wonder if I could use your phone. I need to call my uncle.”

The man smiled mysteriously and said, “You must be quite lost, my dear, to be wandering around here at this time of night. But come in, come in. The night air is rank with the smell of death.”

“Yes . . . I know.”