



Don't Whistle in the Woods

By Norman Thomas Hood

I've heard it said since I was able to walk. "Don't whistle in the woods". The warning was given with the same fervor as "don't touch the stove", or "don't run with scissors." The message came only from my father's lips. Mother was raised not to speak of it. The topic was lumped in with talk of ghosts and demons.

"The more you talk about it," she'd say, "the busier it gets."

Dad would say the phrase, then point to his chin. The scars he wore put an exclamation point to his warning.

"The woods will answer back," he'd explain. "Anger the Puca, and you'll become its next meal. I tested him once, whistling while cutting across the westerly woods. He whistled back to me. I considered it a game... until he found me. My ignorance nearly cost me my life!"

For much of our youth, my brother and I heeded his warnings. But then, children *do* get older.

It's been forty two years since 'the Devil's year'. That's what Mom called it. She had good reasons. My uncle died of heat exhaustion helping my dad fix our tractor. It was a hot day in July, 1966. I was twelve at the time. My brother was ten. Dad dragged my uncle across two acres of half-shredded cornstalks to get him back to our house. Mama tried everything to revive him: wet rags, elevated feet... nothing worked. I think he was dead before daddy got him to the house. The loss hurt everyone, especially my father. He felt responsible.

Uncle Joel was daddy's little brother, four years younger. He was born "without all of God's senses". That's how grandma used to explain his intellectual disability. He was the sweetest man I knew. Gentle and kind, and for the most part, a man of few words. He'd rather hum a tune than talk to people. He loved doing simple hand magic, like pulling coins from people's ears. I think my brother and I had a thousand quarters pulled out of our ears while we were young. We never guessed it was the same, old quarter, as we didn't get to keep it.

Our farm was like most others in eastern Kentucky. The only flat acre we owned sat beneath the house. Everywhere else was a challenge to work and hard on equipment. Most men in Pikeville learned to cuss working under a tractor. Daddy was no exception.

Joel had insisted on helping Daddy that afternoon. Even though, by helping, he meant to stand behind the tractor and offer him random tools, whether Daddy requested them or not. My father worked for hours underneath that old junker, trying to get it running before nightfall. It wasn't going well.

As the afternoon dragged on, the tools stopped coming. Instinct caused Daddy to call out Joel's name. There was no reply. He figured his brother had gotten tired of standing around and walked home, as he'd done before. But eventually, Daddy crawled out from under the tractor to see for himself. He found Joel lying on his back, ten yards from the tractor. His already reddened face was searing under the blazing sun. His eyes were closed and his mouth hung open.

"Joel! Wake up and get yourself out of the sun before you cook yourself! Joel!"

When he didn't respond, Daddy hooked his arms underneath his and began a panicked trek to the house.

The sudden death of my uncle shocked everyone, but Grandma took it the hardest. She cried for two days and died of a heart attack the night of Joel's funeral. Hence our family's term, 'the Devil's year'.

My father was devastated. For a time, he wouldn't be comforted. Mother said to leave him alone so he had "proper time to heal". My biggest fear was something my Grandma used to say, "Death always comes in threes."

Throughout the remaining Summer, my brother and I got used to being on our own, though he stayed glued to my hip if we were outside. We'd often take our dogs, Sam and Cody, into the woods to hunt. It didn't take long for them to tree a squirrel or two. I carried my father's Crosman 101, an air rifle he'd bought in the 1950's. It was strong enough to kill a squirrel, if you were close enough. My brother's job was to carry the game bag, which was an old wheat sack. Usually, we'd come home with one or two.

Mama hated the idea of hunting squirrels. She said since we could afford to buy our food, it was a waste of God's nature to kill something so beautiful. I disagreed. To me, squirrels were just tree rats with fluffy tails. But it was her house, so anything we brought home had to be dressed and cooked outside, over a campfire. That was my job.

One overcast September morning found my brother and I aching to get into the woods again. We leashed the dogs and headed away from the house. Daddy, who'd become exceptionally loyal to his recliner, appeared on the porch just before we entered the trees.

"Don't whistle in the woods, Ben!" We stopped in our tracks.

"The cool of the year's begun and the woods will be darker than usual. The Puca is surely out now, combing the woods for its next victim. You get back here before the sun goes down!"

His warning sounded unusually passionate this time, though I figured he stressed it to make sure we weren't late for supper again.

I hollered my agreement and laughed with my brother as we entered the woods.

Daddy was right about the changing of the seasons. You could smell it in the air. September brought with it a sense of rest and calm. The land had done its work during the growing season and was taking a rest before Winter's arrival.

Still, Daddy's warning followed us into the woods.

"Does he think we're little kids?" Billy asked.

"Well, you *are* a little kid. But I'll be a teenager in two months."

"No... I'm ten now, Benji. That's double digits. So, I'm *not* a little kid. Little kids are nine or less. Everyone knows that."

"Really? Well, you still call me Benji, don't you? My older friends and the adults at church call me Ben or Benjamin now. So does Daddy."

"Fine, *Ben*. From now on, that's what I'll call you, too."

"Not if you see a Puca, you won't. You'll run and grab my leg, hollerin' Benji! Help me, Benji! Save me from the Puca!"

"Yeah, well... we'd *both* be runnin' if we saw one of those," he said. "I don't know why Daddy didn't shoot the Puca when he had the chance. It was just a wolf. Then he wouldn't have those scars on his face."

"Those marks are like battle scars to him. He's proud of 'em. And no, Billy... the Puca was "just a wolf" when *Daddy* saw him."

"Daddy said it was a wolf!" I sighed and turned to him.

"You don't get it, Silly Billy. A Puca is whatever it *wants* to be. If it wants to fly, it can change into an eagle or a crow. If it wants to tear you up and eat you, it might turn into a wolf or a bear. Oh, and it can talk, too. It can sound like me, or Mom... and even call your name. Then, when you answer back, it'll discover where you are and attack you!"

"Quit it, Benji! You're just tryin' to scare me." I saw his eyes moistening.

"Have you even *listened* to Daddy? The Puca is an evil spirit that can take whatever form it wants. It's a trickster... like a demon or something. That's why you never come in here by yourself. They like to attack people when they're alone... especially little boys."

"Daddy never said any of that. You're just making stuff up now!"

"Daddy said *all* of that. You were just too young to understand, that's all. But it doesn't matter anyway. You're too small to fight him off, so you just better hope he doesn't like the way you taste. Then maybe, he'll spit you out before he chews you up too much." I continued walking.

"Well, I'm not scared of it, anyhow. We got Sam and Cody with us. So quit trying to scare me into runnin' home." I ignored his words, content I had him riled.

We came to the top of a hill and heard some fur-noise ahead. That's what we called small game running through the brush. I handed Sam's leash to Billy.

"Here, hold 'em both. I'll pump up the rifle before we go any further."

I gently swung my rifle's sling to the front and loaded a .22 pellet into the chamber. I pumped the handle as quietly as I could.

"Look around, but don't move your feet," I said. "Let me know if you see any fat ones in those trees." We stood still for a couple minutes, looking for squirrels. All we saw were birds and tree bugs.

"C'mon," I said, "but walk real quiet-like. If I see somethin', I'll tell ya... and don't let those hounds go 'til I say so." Billy followed silently. We walked a few steps before I heard movement again. The dogs were on high alert. In the thicket to my right I saw a fluffy tail sticking out from the ground cover.

"Okay, let 'em go," I whispered.

Billy left their leashes looped around his wrist as he tried to unhook the collars. Cody bolted and dragged him into a tree!

"Ow! My face!" Billy whined as the dog struggled to get loose. I ran over to help. By the time Cody was freed, Billy had several scratches on his cheek from the tree bark. Blood quickly filled them. He felt his face and found blood all over his hand.

"Dammit, Billy! Why'd you leave it around your wrist like that?" I didn't expect him to answer.

The dogs had disappeared into the trees. Billy dropped to his knees and cried. I picked him up by his shoulders and looked him over. His face was a mess, but that wasn't what he needed to hear.

"They're just scratches, Billy. C'mon... there's no time for crying now. We gotta get moving after 'em while we can still hear 'em!" He straightened up and followed me after the dogs.

The barking got fainter every minute. Soon, we lost all contact with them.

"Cody! Sam!" I waited for any sound from them. Billy yelled, too.

"Sam! Cody! Here, boys!" We ran into the trees where they had disappeared. Billy slid to a stop on the slick leaves.

"Hey, I think I heard 'em," Billy said. I shook my head.

"I didn't hear nothin'."

"But *I* did! I heard 'em!" He pointed west.

We headed in that direction. Again, no sign of the dogs.

"Great!" I said, sitting down. "We probably won't see 'em again 'til tomorrow. Daddy's gonna piss gasoline when we show up without 'em!"

"It's not my fault!" Billy said, his face red.

I could tell the sweat was stinging his open cuts. They looked worse now.

"Yeah, I know, brother. Listen, it was just an accident, but we might as well give it up and get home. You can clean up when we get there. Mom will put something on those cuts."

I looked through the tree tops, trying to find the sun's position. After I got my bearings, we started walking... and walking. Soon the tree canopy had blocked out most of the sun.

"Is it past supper, Benji?"

"No, we're just off track somehow. It's still daylight, but the trees are blocking the sun, that's all."

"I don't like it. I wanna go home." His face showed his growing fear.

"I know, Billy. Listen... it'll be fine. The woods are brighter behind us, so we're going east, towards the house." I thought I heard him mumble something.

"Was that you whispering?" I asked.

"No. Are you trying to scare me again? I didn't say anything."

"No, I just thought I— there it is again! Maybe it's the dogs!"

"Cody! Sam!" I called out. Just when I thought I must have imagined it, a faint bark erased my doubt.

We started calling for the dogs again, but heard nothing back.

"Benji, do you think the Puca got 'em?"

"No, that's silly."

"Cody! Sam!" he shouted.

On instinct, I stuck two fingers in my mouth and whistled. The sound carried through the woods like a train horn. Birds scattered from their perches, causing loose leaves to fall to the ground.

"Benji! Stop it! Dad said to never whistle out here! You'll bring the Puca to us!" He was shaking badly.

"Oh... yeah, I forgot. We're fine, though. Dad meant a *song* whistle. You know... like Uncle Joel used to do. Not a calling whistle."

"Yeah, but couldn't you still bring him to us?" I shook my head no.

"Listen, Billy... if anything's out here, it's heard us already. Don't worry about Sam and Cody. They're dogs. They'll come back eventually." I doubted my own words, but didn't want to add to my brother's panic.

As we kept walking, I noticed the woods were becoming uncomfortably still. There was no wind or sound... no sign of movement anywhere. I felt the hairs on

the back of my neck stand up and wondered if a predator was close by. Just then, I heard the dogs barking again. It was louder now and sounded nearby.

"We gotta go look," I said. "Maybe they got a squirrel."

"But they're supposed to keep barking when they tree somethin', aren't they?"

"Yeah, I know. Just c'mon... if we don't find 'em in a minute or two, we'll quit lookin'."

We followed the direction of the barking. Soon, we heard a familiar whimper.

"That sounded like Cody!" Billy said. "He's hurt!" He took off running through the brush.

At that moment, I remembered the look on my dad's face as he warned us to stay together.

"No! Wait, Billy!" I said, running after him. "Billy, stop!" I kept running and eventually caught up to him. He was standing over something. When I got there, I saw what'd made him stop. It was Cody, alright. But he looked to be dead. There was blood all over his head and on the ground around him.

Something big got him, I thought.

I looked at Billy. He'd turned pale and looked terrified.

"Billy!" I spun him around by his shoulders. "Billy! Look at me!" We eventually locked eyes. "Something got him, Billy. I'm sorry. Did you see Sam? They always stay together... Billy! Answer me! Did you see Sam?" His eyes dropped to focus on the blood-soaked canine again.

"No," he answered, "just Cody... and Grandma." His eyes found mine again.

"Grandma? What are you talking about?" I checked his head, wondering if he'd cracked it on something. He held up his hand.

"I touched him, Benji. He was cold... really cold. Like he'd been dead for a while. Then I heard someone say my name. I looked up and saw Grandma. She had her bed clothes on. She smiled at me... over there, next to that tree. She disappeared the second you got here." His face showed his confusion.

"I want to go home now, Benji. Please take me home!" I knelt down and hugged him. He wrapped his arms around me like he did when we were small.

I knew then I had to forget about Sam and get Billy home. Something was with us out here, I could feel it. Something dangerous. I brushed off my suspicion of what it was. I didn't want to acknowledge it, and didn't want Billy thinking about it, either.

"Listen, buddy. I'm going to get you home. It's my job to protect you, and that's exactly what I'm going to do. Just stay close to me and keep your eyes open."

After an hour of walking, we were no closer to home than we'd been at any time since discovering Cody. I worried we were walking in circles. The tree canopy was so thick I couldn't tell where the sun was anymore. I kept my worries to myself, though. Benji stayed on my hip, his head buried against my side. We walked another mile or so before I had to stop.

"I gotta sit down, Billy. I'm whooped! Why aren't you tired?"

"I just want to get home," he said.

"We'll get there. I promise." I said it with as much conviction as I could muster.

The sounds of the woods were beginning to change. It was late in the day and the insects were singing. My heart raced at the thought of having to bunk down for the night. We had no real protection. A pump-action airgun wouldn't scare a predator away, much less kill it. Sounds of coyotes howling filled the woods. Billy didn't seem to notice. He remained close to my side... trusting my promise to protect him.

The golden hour arrived, and the setting sun was beginning to cut through the trees, making it easier to stay on our eastward course. The only problem was I had no idea how far north or south we'd drifted before now. As we reached the saddle between two large hills, I heard my name being called in the distance.

"It's the Puca! Billy cried out, grabbing my side.

"No, it's *not*, Billy. It sounded like Daddy! Walk with me to the top of the hill. It'll be easier to tell which direction he's calling from."

We worked hard, making our way up what was a steeper hill than I had imagined. I looked over my shoulder. Billy had lagged behind, struggling to climb the steep grade. I waited a minute until he caught up.

"Listen... you gotta stay by my side! If you start dropping behind again, say something!" He nodded yes.

We climbed the rest of the hill, Billy holding onto one of my belt loops. When we reached the summit, the pull on my pants disappeared. I turned around. Billy wasn't there. My heart stopped. He must have fallen and slid back down!

"Billy!" I screamed, almost running down the hill. When I got to the bottom, he was nowhere to be seen. I searched every direction, thinking he'd limped off somewhere. "Billy!"

I scoured the woods again. He was gone, like he'd never even been there. I immediately thought of the Puca.

"No, no... no! Grow up, Ben!" I scolded myself. "There's no such thing!" But Billy was gone, and that *was* a fact. Something had to have taken him. I kept searching.

"Billy! If you can hear me, scream and yell so I know where to look!" I listened intently, but there seemed to be no audience for my words... just the rustle of leaves in the cooling trees.

Billy was lost to the Puca. And it was my fault.

I covered my face with balled fists and screamed at the woods. As a faint echo of my anguish found its way back to my ears, I heard my name called again. I turned and looked to the top of the hill we'd just climbed. A dark silhouette of a man stood at the top. The sun's glow outlined his form. It was my father! He was holding his shotgun and what looked like a lantern. I ran up the hill to meet him, my feet barely touching the ground.

"Daddy! Something's taken Billy! He was right behind me! We were climbing the hill. Then he was gone... just gone! C'mon! We have to find him... *now!*" He didn't move.

"Daddy! C'mon! We gotta find Billy before it's too late!"

Still, he didn't budge. My mind was reeling. I immediately wondered if what I was seeing was real. Was this really my father? Or a trick of the Puca? I backed away from him and held my air rifle above my shoulders like a baseball bat.

"Son..." he raised his hand up as if to command that I stop. I gripped the rifle even harder. I was sure now the Puca was impersonating my father.

"Take me to my brother!" I shouted, my 'bat' waving menacingly over my head.

"Son, put that down." His words seemed too calm for a father who'd just heard his youngest son was missing. I refused to obey.

"I know what you are! Take me to my brother now, Puca! I want to see him!"

The trickster held up his palm again and nodded his agreement. Turning his back to me, he began walking down the east side of the hill. I followed several feet behind with my weapon ready.

We passed by our house and continued east another half mile to the paved road that led to town. His lantern still lighting our path, we reached the top of another hill. He stepped off the road and into the grass. He continued a little further, then stopped. The figure held his lamp high above his head now. I saw the glimmer of metal and painted brick flickering in front of us. He turned to me before stepping through the tall gate.

As I followed him down a narrow path, I heard the howls of coyotes again. This time they seemed closer. After another hundred feet or so, he stopped again and sat his lantern on the ground, by his feet. There was a large, polished stone sitting in front of us. His lantern lit the writing on its front.

William Aaron Smithers

Beloved Son

Born November 6th, 1955 - Died May 23rd, 1966

My eyes read the stone's engraving... then again. I didn't understand what I was seeing. I looked at the hulking figure. He picked up the lantern to light his face. His eyes were somber.

"He's dead, Ben. Almost five months now. Cody got rabies and we didn't know. Billy was outside, playing with him when Cody suddenly mauled him. We heard the screams from inside the house. You were first out the door. I followed with my gun. I put Cody down as soon as I got there, but Billy's face and neck were torn up awful. We couldn't stop his bleeding... he passed in the house. You blamed yourself for not being there to protect him.

"Just days after his death, you started having these episodes of yours, thinking your brother was still alive. Your mind hasn't been right since. But it wasn't your fault, son. You *have* to let him go, and allow yourself to go on living without him. It's what he would want."

I knelt down, transfixed by the writing I saw on the flickering gravestone. I ran my fingers over my brother's name. The marble was cold, like his hands at the funeral.

Suddenly, memories of the deadly attack flooded my mind. My father was right. I remembered what happened now. Billy's screams... Cody tearing at his face and throat. I had done my best to beat the dog off of him, but it was too late. I heard my father's shotgun explode by my right ear, killing Cody instantly. Daddy scooped Billy up in his arms and ran toward the house. I heard him screaming for mother, but I couldn't think or move a muscle. I must have been in shock. Eventually, I found myself following the trail of my brother's blood into the house.

Father's lantern continued to light Billy's tombstone. By the time I looked up again, everything had come back to me. He must have seen it in my eyes, as he smiled softly and put his hand on my head. The realization hit me hard. I cried for my brother. Daddy held me close to his side for several minutes. When I'd grieved my last tear, his lantern burnt out.

We began our long walk home, the moon lighting our path. The walk must have done me good. With every step, my sadness began to dissipate. Soon, my mood became much lighter.

When we reached our house, my mother was standing on the porch with her arms held out. I left Daddy's side and ran to her. As she held me, I felt her tears hitting the top of my head. I knew I'd hurt her.

"Mom, I'm sorry I worried you so much. I didn't mean to be gone so long. I know it's really late." She cupped my face in her hands and kissed my forehead.

"I'm just relieved you're okay, Ben. Your father and I thought we'd lost you to the woods."

"Daddy? Oh, Mama, you're silly. Daddy was with me the whole time! We had a great day hunting together. Cody and Sam ran off somewhere, but I'm sure they'll be back by morning."

I looked toward the front door with a renewed sense of excitement.

"Is Billy still awake? I want to tell him everything that's happened!"

The End