

Forest for the Trees by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

A Short Story

Kristine Kathryn Rusch's most recent story for us, "June Sixteenth at Anna's" (April 2003), will appear in Gardner Dozois's *_Year's Best Science Fiction_*. Her latest novel, *_Consequences_* (Roc), is the third stand-alone book in the award-winning Retrieval Artist series. Ms. Rusch also writes books as Kris Nelscott and as Kristine Grayson.

On Wednesday, there were three cop cars in front of Louisa's house. On Thursday, she didn't come to school. On Friday, when she joined the smokers in the parking lot, I grinned at her as if nothing was wrong.

"Wanna cut class?" I asked.

She bummed a smoke and sucked on it like she'd been smoking all her life. Actually, when I met her a year ago, she'd never had a smoke or a drink. She'd never done anything except follow the rules which, I gotta admit, I thought was pretty boring.

"We could see the forest," I said.

She looked at me sideways and I could see she was tempted. We'd been planning to go to the forest, but no one wanted to do it on the weekend when it would be full of tourists.

Dodging tourists was part of living in Seavy Village -- just like the traffic and the foggy mornings and the pounding surf in the middle of the night. People said we were lucky to grow up here, but what did they know? The town was only interesting when you came to visit. Staying was something else altogether.

"The forest, Anne?" Louisa asked, stubbing out her cigarette on the school's brick wall. "How would we get there?"

I shrugged. "Walk?"

It wasn't as strange a suggestion as it sounded. Seavy Village was only seven miles long. The high school was at the south end. The forest, as everyone was calling it, was most visible in Seaview Beach, which was a mile south of Seavy Village. In fact, most tourists thought the town of Seaview Beach was still a part of Seavy Village. But we locals knew different.

"Why the hell not?" Louisa said. She still hadn't looked at me directly. "Let me get my gym shoes from my locker."

She walked to the main door and disappeared inside the school. I smoked another cigarette and watched the buses pull up. Kids from all over the county came to Taft High. Some of them had bus rides of an hour or more. I used to think living in town was bad until I dated a guy who lived out. There was nothing to do at his place. He didn't even have neighbors for a mile in either direction.

I didn't have a lot of neighbors either -- most of the folks who owned houses near us were weekenders -- but there was the comfort of being in a neighborhood. And when Louisa moved in down the hill, I actually had the chance to make a friend.

She came out without her book bag. It was strange to see her without it. We were good students. We studied and everything. But class got pretty redundant, so we stayed away as much as we could.

Her Reeboks looked out of place with her dark brown pants and matching top. Louisa was one of those color-coordinated girls. You know the kind, the ones who always understood which earrings went with what shirt and who learned to carry a different purse with each outfit when they were, oh, maybe five.

I tried living like that for a week once in the ninth grade and decided it was way too much work. Sometimes I thought I wasn't meant to be a girl. I couldn't put on makeup to save my life; I usually wore jeans and a sweatshirt; and I didn't even care what my mom's best friend -- who also happened to be our stylist -- did to my hair.

The thing I liked best about Louisa was that she didn't try to make me just like her and she didn't hang out with me because my lack of style made her look good. She hung out with me because we could talk, and because, it seemed, she thought I was smart, which most people didn't get right away.

"You ready?" she asked, shooting a nervous look at the buses. The drivers had to report truants and tardies if they saw them. But right at that moment, they were busy making sure everyone got off the bus. They wouldn't notice us if we hurried.

"Yeah," I said, and headed out.

We took the path that led around the school. The first few blocks would be the hardest. Once we got to the beach, we'd be okay.

I'd cut class a lot of times before, and I'd never gotten caught as long as I stayed on the beach.

I didn't know what Louisa was thinking. She had her hands in her pockets and her head down. She didn't even notice the equipment moving dirt as we walked up the footpath to High School Drive.

They were breaking ground for a new movie theater -- a sixplex, according to my mom, who was a real estate agent -- but I'd believe it when I saw it. Nothing good ever came to this town. At least, that was what it felt like.

We didn't even get the stuff most kids considered normal -- CD stores, bookstores, good clothing stores. The sixplex wouldn't open until after we graduated, so we were stuck with the Bijou that had the same movies all the time.

I took up smoking just to have something to do. It added a little thrill, a sense of adventure, a hint of bad. If I got caught, it would be a change of pace.

We crossed Highway 101 and headed down 40th to the beach access. The steps were steep and the railing had washed away in a December storm.

The wind was cold down here and the fog was so thick that the sand and the sky melded into one gray nightmare.

"I don't think we can walk down there," Louisa said, and she had a point. Whiteout conditions were dangerous. You couldn't even see the line of the surf, and you'd have no idea if a big wave or a log or something was rolling right at you. Plus you could get lost.

I squinted at the fog, as if that made things better. "Let's take back roads, then."

Back roads were almost as good as the beach, especially on foggy days. No one would be able to tell who we were or how old we were. Even a cop car passing would be concentrating on avoiding the pedestrians, not seeing if they were delinquent kids.

We were halfway up Brown's hill when I finally had the nerve to bring up Wednesday.

"You wanna talk about it?" I asked. I didn't have to clarify. Louisa knew what I meant.

She shoved her hands deeper in her pockets and walked a little ahead of me, the fog swirling around her. Our footsteps rang on the pavement, but that was the only sound except for the ocean pounding below us. Louisa wasn't going to tell me. She never did.

Still, Wednesday had been pretty bad. Three cop cars, like I said, and her mom across the street, sitting beneath our mailbox, wrapped in a sweater and crying. I stood in our living room window and watched, holding my breath most of the time.

I could see two cops inside, just their legs through the doorway, and Louisa's dad's legs too, his feet shuffling as if he were trying to get past someone and do something else. I never saw Louisa that day, and I was too scared to call.

When the third cop car showed up (and for one scary moment I thought it was an ambulance), Louisa's mom had the cops escort her back inside. She came out nearly ten minutes later, carrying a suitcase and a pillow, looking stressed, her head down as if she couldn't face the neighborhood.

That was enough for me. I got my mom and asked her if we should go down there, maybe tell the cops that Louisa had to be inside, and that she shouldn't be left alone with her dad. But my mom said getting involved would only make her dad madder if, indeed, that was the problem (_Her mother is crazy, you know,_ my mom added as if that made it all better), and maybe I should think about finding a new friend.

"You think the forest is still there?" Louisa asked.

Her voice sounded rusty. We were on the downhill side of Brown's Hill, walking past the stucco mansion that kept falling apart in the rain.

"Yeah," I said. "They don't think it's going to go away until May."

We were wet by the time we crossed the bridge over the Dee River, the divider between Seavy Village and Seaview Beach. The Dee was a tidal river that flooded real bad in a freak storm a couple of years ago. I always went over it with caution now, afraid that I'd be on the bridge when the next freak storm hit.

The forest was another one of those freak things that made this part of Oregon a little stranger than most. It wasn't really a forest, not any more. It was the remains of a forest, hundreds of years old. The tree stumps were petrified and then buried by sand.

They reappeared every fifty years or so and only on a winter beach. Mr. Johnson said that was because there was less sand on a winter beach -- the sand got washed out to sea or something in the fall, only to get put back in the summer. And some years, the years the forest came back, the sand got sucked down to some prehistoric level or something.

Not that the forest is prehistoric. It's about four hundred years old. You see, in the early 1700s there was this massive earthquake along this coast, so big that Japan got hit by a tsunami. Since Japan had a society then that recorded time and tragedies and stuff, we know the exact time the wave hit (and wiped out some villages, I guess). If you calculate backward, and do all sorts of math like wave speed and force and stuff like that, you can figure out to the minute when the earthquake hit the Oregon coast.

A whole chunk of coast fell into the ocean during that earthquake. There was a tsunami here too, and it knocked down the entire forest. The trees snapped like twigs, and the logs washed away, probably to

get thrown up on some other beach, or travel inland along the rivers.

But the stumps of those trees petrified somehow. And every so often, they get uncovered, just like they were this winter. The first time in my lifetime.

When we reached Seaview Beach, most of the fog was gone. We ducked down a side road, through a housing development, and practically ran to the beach. All our caution seemed to be for nothing. Most of the houses were empty, and they shouldn't have been. This housing development was new and affordable, according to my mom. The kind of place that locals bought, even if it was on the west side of 101.

We'd nearly reached the beach access when Louisa stopped. She turned to me, her face dotted with drops from the fog, and her cheeks red from the cold.

"Maybe we shouldn't do this," she said.

"Why not?" I asked. "We're here."

"Just a feeling."

"You think someone's gonna see us?"

She peered at me as if trying to understand my question, then shook her head. "Not cops or grownups."

"Who then?"

She shrugged and turned away. "No one, I guess."

She started down the road that led to the beach access. I followed. There were no cars parked nearby, and no one in the surrounding houses.

Here, the fog bank held off to sea, a big thick cloud that could come inland at any point. If we were going to see the forest, we had to do so quickly or it might get hidden in whiteout conditions, just like we'd found on the beach farther north.

Louisa stood above the stairs that led down to the beach, her arms crossed. I passed her and took the steps two at a time -- a stupid thing to do, considering they were wet and covered with sand. But I was committed, so I continued all the way to the beach itself.

"Come _on_," I said.

She glanced over her shoulder once, as if she wanted someone to stop us, and then she climbed down.

I had never been to this beach access and it took me a moment to see the forest. At first, I thought the sand was littered with an unusual number of rocks. As I got closer, I realized they were stumps, flattened and molded by the sea.

The tide was out, and the water's edge seemed very far away. Overhead, a gull cried, its sound plaintive and mournful in the still air.

Louisa stood directly behind me, so close I could feel the heat of her body.

"Oh, my god," she said. "Do you see it?"

"See what?" I asked. "The trees? They're kinda cool. I was thinking maybe we should get close to them,

see what they feel like. I mean, they look like stone, but maybe they feel like wet wood -- "

"No." Louisa grabbed my arm, keeping me back. "Stay here."

"Why?"

"Can't you see it?"

She was beginning to get to me. "Of course I can see it," I said. "They're right in front of me."

"Not the trees," she said. "The faces."

I squinted. Try as I might, I couldn't see any faces anywhere. "What are you talking about?"

"In the wood." She pointed with her other hand, the one that wasn't clutching my arm and cutting off the circulation. "See? On top of that one, and the side of that one...."

Her voice was shaking. She actually saw faces, and it was freaking her out.

"Yeah," I said. "It's like seeing monsters in fluffy white clouds. Get over it."

But she didn't move and she wasn't letting go of me. I shook her off and walked down the sand. It was hard-packed, like a path, and the water didn't come up this far -- at least, it hadn't in the last week or so. I could see all the footprints of the people who'd come before to look at the weird trees.

"Anne, please," Louisa said. "Don't go any farther."

But I was feeling tough that day. I walked deeper into the trees and finally crouched by a big flat one. I looked at its side, its sheered top, molded round by the water, and the side half-hidden by sand. I didn't see a face at all.

"It looks safe to me," I said.

"It can't be." Her voice was soft. "They're dead."

"They've been dead a long time." I didn't even try to hide my exasperation. "Any souls they have have long since gone to heaven."

"Don't mock," she said, holding up her hands in a gesture I'd never seen before. "Please come back."

And because she was so freaked, I did. I peered at her, trying to see my friend in that panicked face, those staring eyes. "What's wrong with you?"

She looked away. "Can we go now?"

"We just got here."

"I don't want to stay. I want to go to school."

"Okay," I said. "But this might be our only chance to be down here alone."

"I hope so," she said. "I really do."

* * *

I didn't see her for the whole weekend. There weren't any cop cars in front of her house, though, and her

mom was back, laughing with her dad as if nothing had happened. My mom sniffed and said something about the cycle of abuse and how I should learn from it and maybe she could find me some reading material on it, and I stopped listening at that point because it sounded too much like homework.

There was a new movie at the Bijou, but Louisa didn't want to go. By Sunday, I'd seen it three times, and decided it wasn't really worth the repeat viewings. I walked down to the beach a couple of times to sneak a cigarette, and I did my homework, and when my dad wanted to see the forest late Sunday afternoon, I decided to go with him.

My dad's a strange guy. Lanky and so young looking that sometimes people ask me if he's my brother. He's like this computer whiz and he's worked at home as long as I can remember. Important people call him on the phone or e-mail him and ask him to do these impossible projects and he just does them, like it's nothing.

But because he works at home, he gets these bugs up his butt for no apparent reason. Once he took me to Cascade Head in the middle of the week because the hiking trail had opened and he'd heard that a rare wildflower was blooming up there. We never did find it, but later he told my mom that we'd done a lot of daughter/father bonding.

I thought we'd done a lot of daughter/complaining, father/placating, but I never said that to him. He'd had fun, and I guess that was enough for me.

I've always been a little protective of my dad. He never does really seem like part of the world. Which goes a long way to explain why when he asked me to see the forest with him, I didn't roll my eyes and tell him I'd already _been,_ thanks. I just went.

It was creepier the second time, even though the sun was shining and the ocean glistened a pretty blue. The stumps still looked like rocks. I finally touched one and it felt like anything you found on the beach, slimy in some places, dry in others, and covered with so much sand that it just kind of clung to you.

But that uneasy feeling Louisa had sparked in me stayed, and I found myself walking through the broken forest, looking for faces.

"You seem intense," my dad said.

"You think people lived in these trees?" I asked him. "You think maybe they all died when the wave hit?"

"There's no way to know, hon," he said. "I'm sure there were some people here. A lot of Native Americans camped here in the summer."

"But the quake was in the winter."

He gave me a lopsided smile, my dad's apology smile, the one he used when he had only half a piece of information and knew it. "Well, then," he said. "Your guess is as good as mine."

I was just trying to figure out what set Louisa off, and I couldn't. Maybe it didn't have anything to do with the trees. Maybe it was about the cop cars and the stuff she wouldn't talk about, the stuff that my mom said made her bad friend material.

Because my mom didn't approve of Louisa, I didn't feel like I could talk to my dad about her either. My parents shared stuff with each other, mostly everything, from what I could tell, and sometimes it made me feel like the odd person out. I didn't have anyone to share everything with, and if I told one of them, they'd tell the other, even if they weren't supposed to.

Still I tried one more time. "You think a lot of people died on this beach, Dad?"

He frowned at me -- his concerned look. "What's this with you and death? Are you depressed? Do we need to talk about something? Is there something you're not telling me?"

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. "Da-ad."

"Listen, Anne, you know how precious you are to us. You know...."

I knew and I stopped listening, just like I always did. Since the high school shootings started, and all the articles about stuff like that being one way kids dealt with depression (the other, apparently, being suicide), my dad would occasionally freak like this.

He was always convinced he'd missed something. I suppose that was because he usually did. He went through life missing stuff. I guess it was only reasonable to suppose he'd miss important stuff with me too. Not that I cared. If I really needed his help, I asked. Maybe I wasn't normal that way.

I'd asked this time, he'd misunderstood, and I decided not to say any more. It was okay. The way things've gone, I'm kinda glad we never talked about it. I guess there are just some things in life you don't want your dad to know.

* * *

On Monday morning, I was in my usual spot, sneaking a smoke from T. Walker, when Louisa ran over. Her hair was a mess and her shirt had an old grease stain running across the front. She'd never come to school looking like that, and it scared me.

"Anne," she said, grabbing my arm and pulling me away from the wall. "I figured it out."

"Figured what out?" I leaned backward so I could hand the cigarette back to T. Walker. He raised his eyebrows like he was as shocked at Louisa as I was, even though he probably couldn't have cared less. T. Walker didn't care about much except his smokes and his guitar. That was probably why I liked him.

"How we can save them."

"Save who?"

"The faces."

Okay. That was it. She wasn't acting like Louisa at all. Maybe something had happened at home, and maybe she wanted to talk about it. But this seemed like a strange way to do it.

I walked farther into the parking lot, crossing the small grass divider and going into the forbidden section where the teachers parked their cars. We could get in trouble for standing there, but were guaranteed that no other kids were going to join us.

"Louisa, there aren't any faces. I went with my dad this weekend. I didn't see -- "

"You what?" She sounded like I'd committed mass murder.

"I went with my dad. He wanted to see them."

"It's not safe there, Anne. Jeez." She ran a hand through her hair. I finally realized how it got so mussed.

"Didn't I tell you that?"

"It's the beach, Louisa. Of course it's not safe."

She looked at me as if I was the crazy one. "It's not the beach. It's the spirits."

"Huh?"

"The tree spirits. I'm not sure what kind they are."

"What are you talking about?"

She sighed. "Come to my house. I'll show you."

God, the first invitation and it had to come like this. Right after my mom went through one of her big rants about abuse. Less than a week after the cop cars show up for the umpteenth time.

"We got class," I said.

"Like that's important to you."

"It is," I said.

"Mr. Carlson's the only one who grades on attendance, and you don't have him until sixth period."

"We cut on Friday."

"So?"

"So -- I don't know. You're being weird, Louisa."

Her entire expression changed. One minute she was my friend, and the next it was like a mask fell over her face. She nodded, then gave me the fakiest smile. "You're right. I was being weird. It's not like me. I'm sorry."

I'd never seen her do that before. The change, I mean. I'd seen the fakey smile before, usually when she was talking to some kid she didn't like, some kid who harassed her. She'd never given me that look before.

It scared me. "I didn't mean anything."

"No," she said. "You're right and I'm wrong. Every once in a while, I forget...."

She let her voice trail off as she turned away from me. The smokers on the side of the building were all watching us. Had one of us raised our voice? I didn't think so, but I couldn't remember.

"Forget what?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Let's go inside. It's almost time for first period."

"I'm sorry if I said something wrong."

She gave me that fakey smile again. "Of course you didn't."

Then she started across the parking lot. I had to run to keep up. When I reached her side, I said, "You know, Louisa, maybe we should go to your house anyway. You need to change shirts."

"I'll take care of it." She kept walking, going even faster as if she were trying to get away from me. She

got to the building before me and by the time I got inside, she was gone. I searched for her, looking in all the usual places -- near her locker, in the bathroom, outside the cafeteria -- and she wasn't in any of them.

She didn't show for first period, either, or for third. By then I was getting a little freaked myself. When I got into the hall in the crush between classes, I leaned against a bank of lockers and hit the speed dial on my phone.

No answer. I had dialed Louisa's cell, which made it even weirder. She usually answered her cell.

I used my address book and tried her home number. I'd put it in on a lark. I'd never had to use it before, because Louisa kept her cell with her at all times. Once I'd even called her in the middle of the night, and she'd answered. She'd been asleep, but her cell had been right there beside her, just like usual.

The phone at her house rang and rang, too.

"Problem, Miss Moore?" Ms. Silvani was watching me from the door to her room. She was our English teacher. Pretty young, according to my mother, and really woo-woo, according to my dad. What it meant to me was that she knew a lot of New Age stuff and didn't bore us with all that Christian crap, although she could explain it when she needed to.

I hung up the phone and stuffed it in my purse. "Do you know anything about tree spirits?" I asked.

She gave me a little smile. "Tree spirits?"

I nodded.

"Is this for a class?"

I couldn't lie and say it was for English because she would know. So as I nodded, I thought it through. "Extra credit in social studies."

"Extra credit? What do you need that for, Anne? Have you been skipping again?"

All the teachers, it seemed, knew I skipped whenever I felt like it. Most of them never mentioned it, the way you don't mention that someone's got really bad b.o. or toilet paper stuck to their shoes.

I shrugged. "Do you?"

"What would tree spirits have to do with social studies?" Ms. Silvani asked.

"You know that forest that just washed up?"

"Yes," she said.

"We've been talking about it, and I thought I'd do a paper on beliefs, you know. What would the Native Americans have thought. They believed in tree spirits, right?"

Ms. Silvani took a deep breath, like I'd asked her the secret of the universe. "The tribes here on the coast had their own culture and much of it has been lost."

"Okay, but -- "

"The belief in tree spirits is specific to particular regions."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't know much about Native American belief systems, I'm sorry to say, and I know even less about the local tribes. But I do know that European myths deal with tree spirits. That's why we knock on wood, to awaken the spirit in the tree so that it hears our wish."

"Oh," I said. This wasn't what I wanted to hear. I had to work hard at trying not to look at my watch. I knew Ms. Silvani. She could go on for hours. My mistake for asking her.

"A lot of cultures believe that if a tree dies, its spirit dies too. The Greeks said the Dryad, their version of a tree spirit, was tied into the life of her tree. If her tree got ill, so did she. Some cultures thought that destroying a tree would bring the wrath of the spirit upon them and others had no thought that trees were anything but -- well, trees."

"Um, thanks," I said, hugging my books close. "I guess I should go look up the Greek stuff, huh?"

"I'd look up the local myths, if you can. There are some people in Portland who might know about the local tribes. I'd recommend that you go to the casino, but the Natives there really don't specialize in traditions. They might be able to send you to someone who does -- "

"No offense, Ms. Silvani," I said, "but that sounds like too much work for a two-page paper."

She smiled. "I thought work was something you liked."

Usually. But not at the moment, not when I was trying to figure out what to do about Louisa. I'd hoped that Ms. Silvani would have given me a clue to what Louisa was talking about and --

She had. I must have looked like a light bulb went off behind my face.

"What is it?" Ms. Silvani asked.

"I, um, just figured out how to do the paper," I said.

She smiled.

"Thanks!" I waved at her and headed down the hall, as if I were going to class. The second bell rang and I waited a few minutes before going back to my locker.

The hall cleared the minute the bell rang. It went from being too crowded to being empty. I dialed Louisa's cell phone again and got no answer. I swore, my voice echoing in the empty hallway. Then I went back to my locker and got my coat.

Louisa had seen dead faces in the trees. Now she was talking about tree spirits. I didn't know what she'd been watching on TV, maybe too much Buffy, but I had a hunch she was about to do something strange.

And, I guessed, she told me about it so that I would stop her.

* * *

It took me longer than I thought to get home. I had to duck twice because some school buses arrived late -- apparently there'd been a blockage on 101 and they couldn't get by. I didn't want anyone to report seeing me on the road.

When I got to our street, I saw that Louisa's parents' cars were gone. The house looked pretty empty.

So did ours, up on the hill. The windows were open, but the lights were off inside. Dad must have forgotten to turn them on again.

I pulled my coat tighter and went to Louisa's front door. Up close the place looked kinda small. The paint was peeling on the garage side of the door, and the screen door was covered with coastal rust.

I never thought of Louisa's parents as being poor. I kinda thought they might have money. She always looked so great and had the trendiest stuff, which I never got unless I bought it myself. My mom said it made me appreciate it more. Yeah, right.

I knocked, then took my hand back as if I could take the knock back. This probably wasn't a good idea. What if her dad was here by himself? Would he get mad at me? I had no idea how this abuse thing worked except what I saw on TV, and I knew that wasn't real.

I had just started to walk away when the door opened.

"Hey," Louisa said.

I jumped.

She was standing behind the screen, looking messier than she had before. Like she was baking or something.

"I thought you were going to stay in school." At least she didn't have that fakey smile any more. But she was watching me like she didn't know me.

"I got worried about you."

She shrugged. "Now you know. I'm fine."

"I'm sorry about what I said -- "

"I don't care. I'm busy. Is that all you wanted?" She'd never been that cold to me before.

"No," I said. "Whatever you wanted me to do, I'm willing." She studied me for a moment. I thought she was going to tell me to go away, and then she said, "Okay. Come on in." She pushed open the screen door. It squealed from the rust and the lack of WD40, something my dad would have done at the first hint of a squeal.

I stepped inside.

The house wasn't as dingy as it seemed outside. In fact, it was full of bright light, even though the sky was gray. I looked up. The entire ceiling was a skylight, coated with some kind of yellow that seemed to make it even brighter in there. I thought it might be unbearable on a sunny summer day.

Plants grew everywhere, climbing the wall, creeping over iron chairs, lining the window that overlooked the interior of the garage. I recognized the design of the house. There were others in the neighborhood just like it. Mom said it was a 1940's development -- kind of a ranch. Only someone had covered over the walkway that led to the entrance and made it into a room.

It was cozy and it smelled green. I liked it.

"Cool," I said.

She grinned. It was the first real look she'd given me since I'd called her weird. "I was in the kitchen

when you knocked," she said.

She led me past the plants and up one concrete step into what used to be the front door. This opened into the living room, which was L-shaped. A big picture window with a view of the ocean dominated the room. An old-fashioned brick fireplace sat in one corner, and the faint smell of wood smoke made it clear it was used a lot.

The kitchen was to my right. There was a pass-through window, made of wood, and then the kitchen itself, small and boxy. I thought of the big modern kitchen my dad had put into our house three years ago, and wondered how anyone could cook in this thing.

It was clear someone was cooking, though. A pot of water boiled on the stove, making the room humid, and three books were open on the tiny counter.

Above the sink was another window with an ocean view. Those windows kept the place from feeling too tiny. Still, I had no idea how three people could live in such a small area.

"Okay," Louisa said, leaning up against the counter. "I'm going to tell you what I'm doing. If you don't like it, don't say anything. Just go back to school. I don't want to hear that I'm weird. I know that I am."

I nodded. Until that day, I'd never thought of Louisa as weird. She seemed pretty defensive about it, so I didn't say anything.

Louisa ran a hand through her hair. "You never asked about the cop cars."

"Yes, I did," I said, surprised at the change of subject. Did she think she was weird because her dad hit them? If my mom was right, that wasn't weird. It happened to lots of kids.

"No, you didn't. You just wanted to know if I wanted to talk about it and if I didn't, that was okay. Most other places, everyone would want to know. Why were there cop cars? What was going on? And then someone would call the social workers and they'd start the whole processing thing until they'd realize it wasn't what they thought. Although in some places, they thought it was worse."

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"My mom," she said, very carefully, "is a witch."

I shrugged. "Mine can be too."

"No," she said. "I mean it. She's a real witch."

"Like on Charmed?"

She rolled her eyes. "That's made-up stuff. My mom follows the Old Gods."

"Oh," I said, not knowing there were old gods.

"And sometimes she does stuff that -- I don't know." Louisa shook her head. "Never mind."

"No, it's okay." I really didn't care why her dad beat her mom up, but if she needed to talk about it, I was willing to listen.

"People call the cops," Louisa said, her voice low. "And it's none of their business. She does rituals. Like when she planted the garden. On Wednesday. Our yard is fenced, you know."

"I know," I said, hoping I didn't sound as confused as I felt.

"So she thought she had the right to -- " Louisa blushed.

"To?"

"It's a fertility ritual. You have to be naked." She said the words all in a rush.

"_That's_ why the cops were here?"

Louisa nodded. "They took her away because they wanted her to see some counselor. She came right back. The counselor yelled at the cops, and told them they needed training in alternate religions."

"But your dad -- "

"Is used to it. He doesn't fight it any more. He just waits."

I was really surprised. Our town was so small someone usually gossiped about this kind of stuff. I had no idea why I hadn't heard anything this time.

Or maybe they all believed like my mother did.

"So," Louisa said when it was pretty clear I wasn't going to ask questions. "I looked up the trees in my mom's books."

"The trees? Oh! The trees." I had forgotten for a minute. My head was spinning with the thought of Louisa's naked mom outside (it was _cold_ that day. What was she thinking?) and her dad just waiting his way through all this stuff, and the whole town thinking they hated each other when they probably didn't at all.

"Yeah. I looked them up," Louisa said, "and there's this ritual that if you do it right might set the spirits free."

"You don't have to be naked, do you?" I wouldn't do that. Not on the beach in the spring. It was always chilly on the beach.

Louisa laughed. "No. We just have to make this potion and sprinkle it on the trees and then say this stuff."

"Does it work if you don't have magic?"

"See, that's where you watch too much TV." She grabbed a wooden spoon and turned toward one of the bowls. "It's not about powers you're born with. It's something you learn. That's why it's called witch _craft_."

"So there's no good witches and bad witches?"

"Sure there is, but my mom doesn't know any of the bad witches. She doesn't have that kind of stuff around the house."

"You've done this before?" I asked.

Louisa shook her head. "Mom wanted me to, but Dad says that religion is a choice and I don't have to make any choice at all if I don't want to."

"Is he a witch too?"

"Not hardly. He's Episcopalian."

"Oh," I said again. We didn't go to church enough for me to really know the difference between the Episcopalians and the Methodists or the Baptists. All I knew was that the Catholics had Mass and a ton of rules that we Protestants didn't have.

"Do you want to help?" She didn't sound as guarded as she had before.

"I asked Ms. Silvani about tree spirits, and what would happen to them if they'd been in the forest when the earthquake hit," I said. "She said they'd be dead."

"Ms. Silvani isn't a witch."

"But she knows -- "

"She dabbles, my mom says," Louisa sounded like an authority. "She doesn't really practice anything."

"You said they were dead that day."

"They looked dead. You saw it."

"No," I said. "I've looked twice. I don't see anything."

"Because you're not trained. If you were trained, you'd see it." She was stirring whatever was in the bowl. There were lots of ingredients on the tiny counter, all of them in plastic bags marked with purple marker.

"How can you tell the difference between dead and not dead?" I asked.

"I can't," she said, and she seemed really unconcerned. I was getting uncomfortable. No wonder she was feeling strange about being called weird. Maybe if she told other kids in other towns that she knew all this stuff, they called her weird and left and made fun of her later. That's what people do.

I wouldn't. But I've seen it happen a lot.

Still, I wasn't sure I wanted to be standing there.

"Okay, but you said if they're dead, then we shouldn't do this, so I'm thinking that maybe we should wait until your mom gets home and tell her."

"I did," Louisa said. "She said it was four hundred years ago, and not my business."

"Maybe you should listen."

"To my mom? You don't listen to yours."

Okay. She had me there. But my mom didn't dance outside in the nude for a gardening ritual and specialize in magic.

"I still don't see why you think they're not dead," I said, thinking that might be the way to talk her out of this.

She poured the contents of the bowl into the pot of boiling water, and instantly a smell like flowers and freshly mown grass filled the room.

It made me sneeze.

She handed me a Kleenex, and then set the timer. The water boiled and looked very green.

"The books say that if a person kills a tree, he kills a spirit, depending on the kind of spirit."

"Yeah," I said. "Ms. Silvani said that too."

"But mostly, the spirits are immortal. They move from place to place, tree to tree, when the time comes. They act as guardians for the forests."

"They don't do a very good job," I said, thinking of all the logging that went on around here. The original forests in this part of the state were long gone.

"Well, I don't think they can do their job," she said. "They've been imprisoned since the earthquake."

"You think a person did that?"

She shook her head. "One of my mom's books says that sudden acts of God -- a hurricane, a flood -- can trap these spirits in the dead tree stumps. Can you imagine being stuck in the same place for four hundred years?"

A shiver ran through me. I was having trouble imagining staying in Seavy Village for another six months. I didn't want to think about being trapped inside a tree stump for eight hundred times that long.

"Now do you want to help?" she asked.

I wasn't sure. Louisa was throwing too much at me too fast.

"It's okay if you don't," she said into my silence. "I mean, I know it's weird."

"It's not weird," I lied. I didn't want to hurt her, not again.

She gave me a half smile, like she knew I was lying, but she approved anyway. "You don't have to come."

"I know," I said. "But I will."

* * *

We finished the potion, which was like making some stupid soup no one ever heard of, and then we walked to the forest. Part of me was glad my folks didn't know what was going on and part of me was really worried. I kept thinking about all the magic stuff I'd read, from Harry Potter to The Wizard of Oz, and I knew messing with this stuff could only get you in trouble.

I had to admit I was kinda surprised nothing blew up when we put the last of the ingredients into the potion. I thought it should have smelled really bad or something, but it didn't. It kinda jelled into this liquidy gooey stuff, but that was it. I'd seen worse in the home ec class my folks made me take sophomore year.

Middle of a school day, middle of a work day, and no one was on the beach anywhere. It was drizzly too, which was probably one reason, and cold, so we were pretty bundled up.

The tree stumps were lost to the mist, and you couldn't see the ocean just beyond them. It was like we were in the remains of a ruined forest somewhere inland, and it made me wonder if these tree spirits that

Louisa was so worried about had known we were coming.

What if they did something to us? What if they traded our bodies for theirs? What if we got stuck in the trees?

On the way there, I started to talk to Louisa about all of this, but she shushed me. She said thinking about problems was the worst thing you could do around magic. That was why so many spells went wrong.

So I tried to clear my mind and that didn't work. It was like trying not to think of pink elephants -- suddenly they popped up everywhere. I didn't tell Louisa my fears any more, but I think she knew.

She seemed pretty quiet herself.

She was standing next to me at the beach access, her hooded raincoat hiding her face, and she would've looked like some medieval witch if the coat wasn't neon blue. She was carrying one bucket of potion. I had the other one, and it was heavy. I wished more than once on the walk here that we'd thought of a different way to carry the stuff.

She took two serving spoons out of her pocket and handed one to me. "I think we should get right in the middle of the trees, and each work in a different direction."

I thought we should go home, but I didn't say so. I guess her friendship was more important to me than I'd known until that minute. I really didn't want her to get mad at me again.

I clutched my spoon in my fist like a club and followed her through the sand-covered stumps. We got to what she thought was the middle (I thought we were a little too close to the ocean for that) and stopped. She set down the bucket of potion.

At that moment, a wave broke against the shore -- a big wave, what we call sneaker waves in Oregon -- and it splashed us, grabbing at her potion and trying to take it out to sea. Louisa dived for it, but I'm the one who caught it with my foot.

She got up, soaking wet, and gave me a grin. "Thanks."

I nodded, too cold and scared to talk. She slipped her hood back and pulled open the Tupperware top on the bucket. A wisp of smoke came out and curled into the mist. I told myself it was steam, that the potion was still hot, but I had no idea how it could be after that long walk from the middle of town.

"You go north," she said. "I'll go south. But wait until I give you the signal."

"Wh-what signal?" I managed to ask.

"I'll pause and then nod at you."

"Okay." I was still gripping the spoon like a club.

Louisa dipped into her bucket and I dipped into mine. We started flinging gelatinous bubbles of potion in all directions while she recited nonsense words -- at least they sounded like nonsense to me. It also sounded like she had practiced them, because she didn't slip up and when she repeated herself the words sounded the same.

The bubbles of potion landed on the stumps and stayed, or on the sand and disappeared into it. The mist backed off as if it were afraid of us, and even the ocean quieted down. I thought I smelled something old and decaying, but that might have been coming from the waves. Sometimes the ocean had a rotting scent

all its own.

Louisa and I kept backing away from each other, and eventually, the only way I could tell she was still around was the sound of her voice, saying those goofy words. I was glad to hear it, so that I didn't feel like I was flinging potion all on my own.

Slowly the bucket emptied, my spoon got clotted, and the bubbles didn't fling as far. The stumps disappeared into the sand, and I had reached the edge of the forest.

I was about to ask Louisa what was next when I realized I didn't hear her any more.

I didn't hear anything any more, which really freaked me out. The coast is rarely quiet, and the beach even less so. There's always wind or traffic or the sound of the ocean pushing against the beach.

But there was nothing. It was as if someone had dropped a glass cage around me. I couldn't even feel a breeze, which just wasn't natural. There was always a breeze on this beach. Always.

My damp hair hung beside my face. The mist was still here, the drops holding their place in the air as if they'd been painted there.

Then I heard a sound. It was a creak, like a floorboard in an old house. The creak was followed by another, and another, and suddenly an entire series of creaks. Then the creaks became snaps, the snaps became bangs, and I was surrounded by faces -- clear, floating faces, all of them with that surprised look that people get when they've just been awakened from a really deep sleep.

The faces swirled around me, coming at me, peering at me, and I backed up, tripping on the sand and falling against a rock. I may have screamed, or it might have been Louisa. Or maybe we both did. I don't know.

All I could think about was all those TV shows and movies where spirits floated in and out of people like light, taking them over and becoming them. What would a tree spirit do with me? Kill me for setting it free? Even accidentally?

They swirled closer and closer, hovering over me, peering into my eyes as if they could see what got me to free them. Then they rose up and banded together, like a water funnel in a windstorm. They rose higher and higher, more of them pulling out of the stumps, until they were toweringly high, so high, I couldn't see the top.

I didn't move from my place in the cold damp sand. The faces didn't come near me now. They just kept rising and rising until there were no more coming out of the stumps.

Then they flattened themselves against the skyline, like a giant cloud that had come in too close and was going to pelt us with rain. They hovered for a moment, and a thousand eyes, maybe more, looked down at me.

I never felt so tiny and insignificant in my entire life. I cringed, still hanging onto the spoon.

Finally the faces turned away from me. The cloud swirled for a moment, then headed inland, so fast that a moment later, the sky was clear.

Even the mist was gone.

The tree stumps looked cracked and empty, blacker than they'd been, as if they weren't going to last through the winter, as if a big wind would take what was left of them and send them out to sea.

It took me a minute to find my voice. "Louisa?"

She didn't answer. Maybe they'd taken her. Ms. Silvani had said in class that some of the minor deities required sacrifices. Did the spirits look at me and decide I wasn't worthy? Was that why they stared, then flew away?

Or had they flown away because they'd looked at Louisa and knew she was the one they wanted?

I managed to get up and stagger through the decaying stumps. The sand seemed thicker than it had been, and it was hard to slog through. I finally reached the south side and saw the neon blue coat, crumpled against a rock.

It took me a minute to realize I was looking at Louisa. She was huddled there, her hands over her head, her bucket beside her, the spoon half buried in the sand.

"Louisa?" I asked.

She huddled even more.

"Louisa?" I put my hand on her back.

She looked up, startled. "Are they gone?"

I nodded. "Didn't you see? They went inland."

"Oh." She moved like an old woman, as if each muscle hurt. "I hid when the first face came at me. Did they come at you?"

"Yes."

She stared at me for a minute. I decided not to tell her the rest. About how the faces inspected me and then stared at me before swirling into a cloud and heading east.

"The forest feels different now, doesn't it?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Do you think we did the right thing?"

I sat down in the sand beside her, more tired than I cared to think about. I didn't know the answer. Maybe I was scared of the answer, just like I'd been scared of magic all along.

"You said it before." I brought my knees up and wrapped my arms around them, hoping to stay warm. "How would you like to be trapped in one place for four hundred years?"

She nodded once, then smiled at me. "Thanks for coming with me," she said.

"Wouldn't have missed it for the world."

And, at the time, I was telling the truth.

So it's spring now and graduation's only two weeks away. Things here still pretty much look the same. There were cop cars at Louisa's house last week -- some springtime fertility ritual gone wrong, Louisa says -- and her parents are talking about moving again. Mine are wondering if they're doing the right thing, letting me hang out with a girl whose parents are so abusive they get reported to the cops every

month.

The winter beach is going away. The sand's coming in with the spring tides and the trees are nearly gone. The local newspaper's full of articles about disappointed tourists and the fact that the trees might not be uncovered for another fifty years.

The paper's been full of some other things, too. Stuff about "eco-terrorists" burning logging trucks, and sabotaging logging equipment and putting up blockades that make logging roads impassable.

The strange thing is that no eco-terrorist organization is taking credit. They all say things like, "We think what happened is great. Wish we'd done it."

Louisa and I are the only ones who believe them. But we don't talk about it.

We got enough to talk about. We got accepted to four of the same colleges, all of them out East, and we're trying to decide where to go. We've decided we'll go together, so there'll be at least one familiar face, but we've also decided wherever we go, it'll be far away.

After all, who wants to stay in the same place forever?