

grand prize

A Dance in the Woods

by Jason Minor

The first step is always the hardest. Magic is like that. I don't know why, but it is. I have to focus on the wall in front of me and block everything else out. My books, my video games, my posters, and even my stuffed monkey, Mr. Snugglesworth. I have to forget about all of them. So, I close my eyes really, really tight and think only about the secret hidden inside my wall. I imagine drawing it to the surface. When the moment is right, I move my mind sideways.

I don't know if you've ever tried that but it's hard. I must slip my mind between my body and my shadow. It doesn't happen the first time or the second but, finally, I feel the change and open my eyes. There are chalk lines on my wall now, drawn in the shape of a door with a circle where the handle should be. I stand up to take a closer look. Is this real? I turn back to my chair and I see my shadow still sitting there all by itself. Yes! I did it!

"Dinner's almost ready. I'll be there in a minute to get you cleaned up."

Oh no, it's mom. She'll spoil everything!

"Ariel...did you hear me? Ariel!"

Mom hates it when I don't answer right away. It makes her worry. She's in the hallway. She'll come running in here soon if I don't say something.

"I hear you mom. Okay."

"Answer me when I talk to you, Ariel." She yells from the hallway.

"Okay mom."

I breathe a sigh of relief when I hear her walking back to the kitchen. I got lucky. The rest of the trick is easy. I just have to push on the door until it opens. I put my shoulder against the wall and shove. It takes a little effort but, slowly, light starts to shine through the chalk lines of the door until it finally swings open and fills my whole room with daylight. There's no turning back now. I straighten out my pink dress and tighten my white sash.

I hate pink and I don't like to wear dresses. Mom picked this. She says I look pretty but I don't. My sad shadow is still sitting in the chair. I blow it a kiss good-bye and kick off my pink shoes before escaping outside.

The sun is warm and makes my skin tingle. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, smelling the sweet scents of flowers and pine trees. I love my backyard. It's lush and green and beautiful. It sits on top of a hill and rolls down to a steep ridge where they removed a piece of the ground so our driveway would

be flat. Johnny's house is at the top of the hill – but he's not there right now. On the other side of the yard is Stevie's swing set. Stevie is my little brother – he's a snot. Just beyond the swings, start the woods, full of tall trees and long twisting paths good for exploring. That's probably where Johnny

is but I'll find him later. Right now, I want to go for a swing. Mom would never let me do that. The grass pokes through my toes as I run and tickles my bare feet. The swing's metal chains are hot from the sun but I don't mind. I climb on and push off with my legs. The swing starts to squeak but I "magic" it quiet so mom won't hear. I just say, "Please be quiet Mr. Swing." And he does. I rock my legs back and forth to propel myself higher and higher. The wind rushes across my face and feels so cool and friendly. I think maybe I'll jump. Mom would die if she saw that! I kick out my legs harder and pull down on the chains to get even higher before my jump. Okay, I'm going to do it...now! No, too scary. The only way I can do it is to close my eyes. I wait until I'm almost to the highest point of my swing and...let go! For a moment, I'm soaring up in the air. Flying. My stomach flips over but I'm laughing the whole way. I feel myself begin to fall and I open my eyes. Whoa, the ground is so close. I land on my feet and the shock runs up my legs. I tumble over and roll to a stop...laughing and laughing. Nothing feels so good as jumping from a swing. I stand up and brush the dirt away. The pink dress is covered in grass-stains. Mom would be so angry but I magic them away too. I say, "Mr. Grass-Stains, could you please go find someone else to soil, maybe my snot brother." And they go away.

"A magnificent leap, Miss. Ariel." It's Johnny! Standing at the edge of the woods. I knew he was exploring.

"Hi Johnny!" I run and give him a big hug. His fur tickles my nose and he smells a little but I don't care. He gets all flustered. He straightens his top hat, smooths out his tuxedo, and runs a paw through his long whiskers.

"Madame, I have asked you before to refer to me as Jonathan. I may be a dog but I am also a gentlemen." He says, adjusting his monocle.

"I'm sorry, Jonathan, forgive my manners." I giggle. He looks so cute. "But you are the first gentlemen I've seen without pants."

"Ah, heh-em," he coughs into his paw. "Even gentlemen must succumb to the laws of nature. Pants simply are not tailored for dog's legs. On the other hand, my dear, that pink dress looks like something my litter mate would have hacked up."

"I know. Mom made me wear it."

"No matter, we will simply make the best of it, me with my lack of pants and you covered in pink dog sick." Jonathan smiles.

“EEEEUUUU, gross!” I squeal and we both laugh. “Were you exploring, Jonathan?”

“Indeed I was, Miss Ariel. I have mapped several new trails and delved deeper into the wilds,” he pulls out a folded piece of paper from his jacket pocket and spreads it out on the ground. It’s a detailed map of my backyard. The trees are represented in paw prints and the trails are marked in long, squiggly lines that he probably drew with his claw. “X’s” mark the trails that dead-end. “But, alas, I have yet to discover the resting place of my treasure.”

“Can I help you look?” I ask and his tail starts to wag.

“That would be wonderful. Together we shall sniff it out.” Jonathan puts the map back in his pocket and takes off into the woods. I run after him. The deeper we go into the forest, the cooler the earth feels under my feet. Long beams of sunlight break through the trees and create little spotlights on the ground. There are so many more colors in here. Dark green plants, red and yellow leaves, blue and purple flowers, deep brown tree bark, and bright green moss growing all over. Everything is so wet and clean and smells earthy. I love it.

“Well, where should we start looking?”

“I was about to venture down that path there.” Jonathan points to an overgrown trail I hadn’t noticed before. “Perhaps you can join me. You check the right side of the path and I will hunt along the left.” I tell him okay and he trots off. The ground is spongier along this path and there isn’t as much sunlight poking through the trees. I would be scared but I know Jonathan won’t let anything hurt me. He walks with his nose to the ground, sniffing for his treasure.

I can’t smell as good so I have to look under leaves and inside hollowed out trees, behind bushes and under rocks. Every once in a while, Jonathan will stop, pull out his map, and make some notes. It’s really funny to see him study it so hard. We look and look and look, but we don’t find anything. Finally, I stop to rest but Jonathan keeps going. That’s fine. It’s nice here. The forest is so quiet and peaceful, not too hot, not too cold. I sit on a tree stump, wipe the gunk off the bottoms of my feet, and listen to the stillness. I don’t know why mom won’t let me come out here. It’s so nice. I think she would like it too if she wasn’t afraid of me getting sick or stuck somewhere. But that’s not fair. Mom says life’s not fair, and maybe she’s right, but I think life is more than sitting in a dark room all day because you’re afraid of what might happen. I guess she loves me in her way. I love her too...but she can be a snot just like my brother. I giggle to myself. Mom would be so mad if she heard me say that.

After a while, Jonathan comes back. He looks tired and sad. “No luck, my dear. I fear that my treasure will never be found.”

“You really are a dumb dog, aren’t you?”

The voice comes from somewhere above and startles Jonathan and me. We look up to see a strange boy sitting in a tree. He might be the same age as me but it’s hard to tell. His skin is a beautiful shade of blue

and glitters in the sun. His face is long and thin with the biggest grin I've ever seen. It looks like he's wearing a mask; the kind a Jester might wear in Venice during Carnival. I've read about Carnival. I think this one is called a Jolly Mask or a Harlequin, something like that. When I look closer though, I see it's not a mask but an elaborate black and red tattoo that goes from his nose to his forehead and down his cheeks. His hair is black and sticks straight up in flat, twisting, triangles like the flaps coming off the jester's mask – but there are no bells hanging from the tips of his hair. The boy's eyes are as black as night and a little hard to look at. He's not wearing a shirt but has black ribbons tightly wrapped around his forearms and a black sash wrapped around his midsection. His pants are also black and very baggy but gather at his knees. And he's not wearing shoes. He reminds me of an acrobat...or a pirate. I wonder how long he's been sitting in that tree?

"What are YOU doing back?" Jonathan scowls.

"Did you miss me, Dog?" The boy leaps down and lands in front of me without a sound. How did he do that?

"My name is Jonathan, I'll have you know. Not dog!"

"Yes, yes," the boy waves Jonathan away and looks at me. "Who do we have here?"

"I'm Ariel. Who are you?"

"His name is Rufus, he's a magician." Jonathan doesn't like Rufus. But why? Is it because of his eyes? They are a little scary but something about Rufus makes me feel comfortable. It's odd but he feels familiar.

"You're a magician? I love magic. I know some myself. I used it to escape from my mo...a terrible monster just today."

"Did you now? And is this monster the same one who dressed you in that pink mess?"

"Yes...I hate pink." I'm so embarrassed.

"No, not a good look is it?" He takes a step back to examine me. "Maybe blue would suit you better?" I can't look into his eyes for very long so I look down. When I do, I see my pink dress is now the same shade of blue as his skin and glitters in the light. My white sash has changed to black, just like his.

"How did you do that?"

"I believe the dog did say I was a magician." He smiles and my heart seems to skip a beat. I twirl around holding the edges of my dress. It sparkles like diamonds.

"I love it! Thank you Rufus."

"My pleasure, Miss Ariel." His cheeks turn purple. He's blushing.

“Yes fine,” Jonathan snorts. “The dress is not pink but blue – and you look very nice Miss Ariel – but we were looking for something. So, Rufus, perhaps you’d better go back to your wall where you belong.”

“Stupid dog, your treasure is buried right over there next to that tree. Where you left it.” Rufus points to a very large and old oak. Jonathan looks confused.

Maybe he’s remembering now where he buried his treasure. He runs to the old tree and begins to dig. “As for going back to ‘my wall’, it was not MY wall and I’ll never go back.” Rufus looks mad. It scares me a little.

“What are you talking about? What wall?”

“It was a prison. I was held captive inside a brick of the Berlin Wall. But I was freed when a kind young man chipped away at my brick. He just wanted a souvenir but it was enough for me to slip out.”

“I read a book about the Berlin Wall. It divided East Berlin from West Berlin and made a lot of people unhappy. But that was a long time ago. How old are you?”

“Hergit ho odd he is. Aaa im eyy he as in hiss in da herst lace.” Jonathan comes walking back with a bright red ball in his mouth. He’s found his treasure at last.

“What did you say?”

Jonathan drops the ball at he feet. “I said, forget how old he is. Ask him why he was in prison in the first place.”

“Okay, why?”

“It’s a long story my dear,” Rufus gives Jonathan a dirty look. “But the simplest truth is that not everyone likes magic. I entertained the people and made them happy. But some were afraid. They didn’t understand my magic so they conspired to wrongfully ensnare me.” He looks away, sad. “During the wall’s construction, I was tricked into a large brick and sealed into the wall. And there they left me for 28 years.”

“Why would anyone do something so awful?”

“Some people fear what they cannot control. People like your monster. The one you escaped from earlier today.” Rufus winks at me. My mother isn’t a monster. I shouldn’t have called her that. But she worries too much. The only time she doesn’t worry is when I’m locked up in my room. That’s where she thinks I’m safe. Maybe what really scares her is that she might lose control of me one day and then she’ll feel guilty if something bad happens.

“I’m sorry those people hurt you.” I touch Rufus’s arm. Jonathan snorts in disgust.

“Quite dog or I’ll make your ball disappear again.” Rufus snaps.

"I knew it was you, you scoundrel. How dare you tamper with my belongings. Of all the..." Rufus acts as if he's picking up Jonathan's treasure and pretends to throw it like a baseball. The red ball floats up and flies off into the bushes.

"Fetch!" Rufus grins and Jonathan runs off, he can't help himself. He may be a gentlemen but he's still a dog. I laugh and laugh. So does Rufus. "I suppose I shouldn't be mean to poor Jonathan but he's so stuffy." Rufus smiles at me. "I mean really, he's a talking dog in a top hat. You'd think someone like that would be more interesting."

"I like Jonathan, he's cute." I try to look at Rufus but I can't without getting lost in his eyes. So I don't.

"Cute? Really? I suppose. But he has no imagination, no appreciation of magic, he doesn't joke, sing, or dance. He's not like you." Rufus moves around me like a whisper. One minute he's on my left, the next he's on my right. "Now, I know what you're going to say, we've just met, but I can tell by looking that you've danced all over this forest."

"Actually, I don't dance."

"What!" Rufus stops floating around and looks at me in disbelief. I start to fidget with my hands. Mom hates when I do that. "Why on earth would you not dance?"

"I can't...my legs are clumsy."

"Nonsense! Of course, you can dance. Even clumsy dancing is still dancing. Everybody dances! Well, everybody but Jonathan." Rufus smirks.

"And me. I don't dance. I never learned how. My mother wouldn't approve."

"Wouldn't approve, huh? I bet she dances."

"She does, I saw her once. She was beautiful. I wanted to dance with her but she got scared I'd fall. I haven't seen her dance since."

"This won't do," Rufus folds his arms. He thinks for a moment, then spins around to look at me. Normally, I'd look away but this time I stare right into his black eyes and I'm lost. "Ariel, will you do me the honor of a dance?"

"Um...no...I can't. There's no music."

"There's music everywhere. The forest will be our orchestra. The trees and the wind..." As he talks, the sounds of the woods begin to change. The trees start to sway in rhythm, their leaves rustling a melody. "...the insects and frogs..." A bullfrog croaks out a beat and the crickets chirp in time. "...the squirrels and the raccoons..." The chatterings of little creatures slowly merge together into perfect harmony. "...and the birds." Suddenly, many different kinds of birds fill the trees and sky above us. They are singing. All of them together, like a chorus of a thousand small voices. They circle around us in a whirlwind, flying so

fast that they blur together. It scares me at first but it's so beautiful I start to laugh. Rufus takes my hands in his and gently turns me into a dance. Soon we are swaying to the rhythm. My feet are not clumsy at all and I move gracefully with Rufus. It's so much easier than I thought. Then we are no longer on the ground. The birds are lifting us with the wind from their wings. We float above the bushes and small trees, still turning to the music of the forest, still circled by birds. Up we go, past the branches of the old oak and into the sky. My heart fills with the beauty of it all and tears run down my cheeks. I look up into Rufus's black eyes.

"How are you doing this? It's impossible."

"It's not impossible. It's magic and the only difficult thing about magic is the first step – believing it's real. You already know it's real. The rest is easy." And it is. I close my eyes and enjoy the dance.

"Ariel? Ariel! What's wrong?"

Who's that? Rufus doesn't seem to hear the voice.

"Ariel! Why are you crying?" It's my mother.

The birds stop singing and break away from us in all directions. I start to fall. Rufus reaches for me but I slip through his grasp. I fall and fall and land back in my room. Back in my pink dress with the white sash. Back in my wheelchair. Mom is wiping the tears from my eyes with a tissue.

"Ariel, for God's sake, answer me. Why are you crying?"

"I'm okay, Mom. I'm just happy."

She stops wiping my face, puts her hands on her hips, and looks at me annoyed. "Why?"

"Jonathan introduced me to Rufus. He's an amazing magician who taught me to dance." I smile. Mom sighs.

"Another one? Ariel, really, how many imaginary friends can one girl have?" Mom doesn't believe in my magic friends. "You really have to stop with these fantasies. They are pointless." She walks around me and releases the breaks on my wheelchair then rolls me into the bathroom. "The sooner you realize you can't dance the better off you'll be. Your legs are not going to get better." She pushes me in front of the sink and re-sets the breaks. "I know you wish you could do more but wishing for something doesn't make it so. Hold them out." I hold my hands over the sink and she thoroughly scrubs them.

"Wishing DOES make it so. That's magic." I say but mom ignores me.

"Rinse." She turns on the water. It's too hot but I don't say anything. I never do.

"Can I go out and play on the swing set after dinner?"

"No ma'am, you may not. It's getting dark out and besides; you know that's your brother's swing set. It's not set up for you. You might get hurt."

"I can do it."

"I said no. Now let's go, dinner is ready." She releases the breaks and carefully rolls me back into my bedroom and out into the hall. All of a sudden, we hear a loud crash from the living room. Sounds like one of mom's vases, her favorite. A flash darts across the hall and into my little brother's room.

"STEVEN! What did you do?" Mom screams at the top of her lungs.

"I didn't do nuthin, mom! It wasn't my fault!" The little snot yells from his room. Mom starts to take off down the hall but then she remembers me.

"You wait there, honey. I'll be right back." Then she disappears into my brother's room. "Steven, why do you have to be such a crazy person? And why are you covered in grass-stains? Wait until your dad gets home!"

I listen to them argue for a while but it's boring. I don't want dinner. I want to play and I don't care what "Monster Mom" thinks. I roll my chair down the hall and go slowly past Stevie's room. Mom is still yelling but Stevie isn't listening. That only makes her madder. In the living room, I see the broken vase. I roll past it and head for the back door. I don't have much time and I have to be quiet. If mom hears, she'll flip out. I open the back door, wheel myself out, and quietly close the door behind me. I've never defied her like this and my stomach is in knots, but in a good way. I roll across the deck, down the ramp next to the stairs, and out by the driveway. But there is the steep ridge and hill between the swings and me. Mom and dad never made the backyard handicap accessible. Why should they, only my little brother would want to go out there, right? I lock the wheels, pull myself out of the chair and swing my butt over onto the earth ridge. It's not far to the swing set so I start walking up the hill on my hands, dragging my legs behind me. My arms are very strong so it isn't hard but I bet my pink dress is getting very dirty. Good. Jonathan is sleeping in front of his doghouse and looks up at me as I go by. He cocks his head and whines a little. I tell him to be quiet and he lays his head back on his paws. I crawl on to the swings and pull myself up so that I'm lying face down on the seat. Then I grab the metal chains and flip over so I can sit up. My back is to the house and that makes me a little nervous. Has mom realized I'm gone yet? How much time do I have left? My legs hang limply from the swing and my feet are just touching the ground. They'll drag if I don't do something. I undo my sash, poke one end through a link in the chain to my right, and tie it off. I thread the rest of the sash under my knees and pull my legs up until they are off the ground. Then I tie the other end to the left chain in the same manner. There, now my legs have a nice little hammock to sit in. I hold onto the chain and my sash and start to rock my upper body, lying back then pulling myself forward. The swing moves slowly at first. I rock harder and continue to propel myself higher and higher. The wind in my face feels so cool and friendly. Back and forth I go, soaring through the air. I'm Flying. My stomach flips over but I'm laughing the whole time.

"ARIEL!" Mom yells and it scares me so much I almost fall out of the swing. She screams again and comes running to catch me. I hold on to the chain and don't fall but mom grabs me anyway and squeezes the life out of me. "Damn it, Ariel! What the hell do you think you're doing? You could have been hurt! And then where would you be? Stuck out here with no one to help you."



“Let go, you’re hurting me.” I struggle with her but she doesn’t hear me. “I don’t need anyone’s help! I can do things by myself!” I yell and push her hands off of me.

“Oh my god, what were you thinking!” She’s not listening to me. Mom looks down the hill at my wheelchair and back at me. “My god, my god! How did you get up here? How?”

“I walked.”

“Don’t be stupid. That’s impossible and you know it!” She’s talking very fast.

“It’s not impossible,” I say and hold my hands out for her to see. They are covered in dirt. She ignores this.

“Well, that’s it, isn’t it?” she says to herself. “I’m just going to have to watch you even closer now. I can’t trust you to take care of yourself. I’m going to have to watch you every minute, I guess. It’s not like I haven’t already sacrificed my whole life for you!”

“I didn’t do anything wrong, mom! I just wanted to play!”

“Damn it, Ariel, you can’t just play. You could get hurt. You could get killed. You’re a cripple for Christ’s sake!” Mom screams at the top of her lungs.

She’s never called me a cripple before. She treats me like one but she’s never said it out loud. Tears well up in my eyes. She realizes what she’s said but doesn’t know how to take it back.

“You make me crippled!” I scream at her. I can’t stop myself. “You don’t let me do anything for myself. You lock me in my room and dress me in stupid dresses and you never let me play or dance or anything!”

“I’m protecting you. You don’t know your limitations. I...”

“You don’t know my limitations, mom!” I scream and tears run down my face. I can see tears in mom’s eyes too but she’s trying to hold them in. “I can do things if you’d just believe in me! But that’s what you’re afraid of, isn’t it? If I can take care of myself then you can’t control me and I don’t need you anymore!”

“I don’t want to control you. I want to protect you. I love you.”

“You love me so much you’ve turned me into a prisoner! Locked behind your wall! But I’m not your prisoner and I’m not your cripple! I’m your daughter!”

I break down crying. Mom is quite. Her lower lip starts tremble. She puts her hand over her mouth and the tears finally fall from her eyes. She must be so angry with me but I can’t take it anymore. I don’t care if she ever stops being mad at me. Mom turns towards the house and walks off. I put my head in my hands and cry.

Then I feel her behind me. She stands there for a minute but I don't turn around. I don't want to look at her. I feel her hands on my back. Maybe she's going to drag me to the house. She doesn't. Instead, mom gives me a small push. I swing forward. I look behind me and see mom crying. She can't bring herself to say anything but when I swing back to her, she pushes again – harder this time. I swing out higher. She pushes even harder the next time and I start to smile. I close my eyes and feel the wind dry my tears. Maybe mom actually heard what I said. Maybe she didn't. Maybe tomorrow she'll be the same as always but I decide not to care. Magic doesn't last long so you better enjoy it while you can. For this one moment, I'm playing with my mother. I hold on to the chains and pull down to make myself go higher. When I look back, I see mom smiling too. She keeps pushing me higher and higher.

Rufus was right. The first step is always the hardest.