

The Forest

By Rob Steele (Originally published under the name Connor Sloan)

I wonder if he did this to me on purpose.

Yes, I'm not in the best shape I've ever been in. Not that I've ever been in tremendous shape, but my doctor says I have to lose weight. He recommended walking. I do have an almost idealistic neighborhood to do that with, I just didn't want to. I like to do things purposefully. Walking in a circle seems pointless to me. Mathematically speaking, it is. Circles don't have points.

It's like window shopping. Carol used to make me go window shopping. Ooh, look at all the wonderful stuff we can't afford. Why tempt yourself like that? All it can do is make you miserable – realizing you don't have enough money to buy something really neat is depressing. That's why I've never gone to a strip club. Not that the women wouldn't be attractive, but seeing something like that would make me want to do things I'm not allowed to do. Then I'd go to jail and there's nothing positive about that.

That's why I work out of the house. Accounting is one of those wonderful professions where you don't have to have an office. Just a quiet space with a computer and a desk... and an internet connection... and maybe a phone. I can work all day, quietly, in my little house, with no one to bother me, and I'm content.

But then the chest pain began and I went to the doctor who told me that I'd have to start an exercise regimen if I wanted to stay alive. It's not that I'm horrifically obese. Yeah, I'm hefty. I have a gut. I was annoyed when the doctor said 'beer belly.' I hate beer. But I do seem to, well, not necessarily *enjoy* living – but I'm not ready to try death. So here I am. Walking in circles.

My house is not exactly secluded, but it is a bit out of the way. It's situated on a heavily wooded plateau. It's not alone up there. It's part of a subdivision, for lack of a better term, where people who don't like to be bothered live. There's a wall around the whole neighborhood with two entrances, one on the east side and one on the west. I'm more on the west side which is farther from the road leading down the mountain toward town.

My walk consists, basically, of leaving through the west gate and taking the side road around to the east gate, and back through the neighborhood. There's a sidewalk next to the wall and across the road is a lovely pine forest. Part of me is drawn to it. I can see it out of my kitchen window. The forest runs up to the top of the mountain and most of the way down along the road. And it is beautiful. I've never really been one for nature. It's my understanding that we accountants are more interested in numbers, logic and computers or technology. But this view is why I moved here. Well, that and the seclusion.

I don't care for people. Individuals? Maybe. But people on the whole annoy me. Prejudices and wars and, seriously, don't get me started on religion. Near as I can tell, that's the cause of most of the prejudices and wars.

Of course, thinking like that is what drove Carol away.

She was the only real love of my life. Some people said she was plain but not to me. She was more beautiful than anything I've ever seen. And smart, too. She could outdo me on any spreadsheet and she knew her way around tax laws better than most lawyers. But she also loved Jesus... and I didn't. And that became another source of my dislike of religion. I thought we were all supposed to get along no matter what. But I guess not. She left me three years ago. Which makes me wonder why I'm thinking so much about her tonight.

We never walked through the woods together. Never even left the city where we lived. I'm pretty sure the 'urban jungle' doesn't count. Maybe it's the smell of the forest. The trees pollenating in just the right way to create a smell that reminds me of her. I'm not sure Carol ever smelled of *pine*, but something has gotten me going. Maybe the exhilaration of walking? I've heard there's something about a high you get from exercising. But I'm not really doing that much. Just because I'm coming up on my halfway point at the east gate doesn't mean...

Wait, what was...? That voice. Is that Carol? Calling for me? What would she be doing here? Surely not looking for me. I heard she'd gotten married to some bible thumper and moved to Iowa or some such state. But there is a voice. It's coming from down the hill – in the forest.

The road down hugs the mountain most of the way down, but the forest slopes away meeting the road again in the valley. Technically, I suppose it would be a shorter way to get down the mountain, but it's steep. And that voice... is it calling my name?

I deviate from my usual route and begin down the hill. Could this just be the wind? I'll be really annoyed if it is. I get about fifty-feet in and mother nature decides to cruelly put a chill in the air, and a few wisps of fog. We don't get fog this time of year. I'm beginning to think that this is just some endorphin induced hallucination. I start to turn and head back up the hill... But there! Out of the corner of my eye.

Carol?

I don't recall seeing her in a gray... dress. Hell, that could be a bedsheet! She's disappeared into a thicker fog down the hill. I couldn't see her face but the hair, the short blonde bob-cut... and the voice again, calling my name. Who else could it be?

I begin down the hill again. Gravity is 'helping' me pick up speed. I'm not really sure if I'm running or just falling gracefully. I can't see her at all. And the voice, it's like an echo from the valley. So faint, and yet it seems so near. Am I even headed in the right direction?

Suddenly I stop. How big is this forest? So many trees. It never really looked this big from the road, or from home. What is going on here? Why is Carol back? The voice? Down there? Farther down the hill? I've got to be getting close to the bottom by now, haven't I?

Part of me knows that the road is miles long and even cutting through the forest like this I'm nowhere near close to the bottom. It just feels like I've been running down this slope for hours. How am I going to get back up? Can I find the road and hitch a ride? Will I want to if I ever catch up with Carol?

Too many trees. It's getting thicker. I'm running so fast now. Not even bothering to notice how many of the branches have scratched my arms, my legs, my face. That would be a horrible thing, to be so scratched up that when I catch up with her she doesn't want me since I'm so scarred up.

I see sky ahead through the trees. The voice is coming from that way. I run faster. If I can see sky, maybe there's another clearing. Maybe I can see her in the clearing! Faster, I have to go faster. My legs burn. It doesn't matter anymore. I'm committed to the chase. I have to find her.

Where did the ground go? I'm... wait... where am I? The forest is gone. No. Down there. More forest. I turn to see a precipice. Did I just run off...? I turn again. I'm falling... and spinning! How could I have run off a cliff like that? I turn one last time to look at the cliff face...

And there she is. The woman I've been chasing. That's not Carol. The gray dress isn't a dress. The blonde hair isn't hair. I'm not even sure that's a woman. What is that?

The first thing that hits me is a realization that maybe, just because I don't believe in anything supernatural, doesn't mean it isn't there. There was that story my neighbor Steve told me about the forest being haunted. And I just laughed at him. Maybe I was wrong.

The second thing that hit me was the realization of the first thing was about to be nullified by the rapidly approaching ground. This can't be real. It has to be a dream. Yes! That's it! A dream! This has to be a dream! It has to be a dream. It has to be a dream. It has to be a dream. It has to be a dream.

VERY special thanks to The Cure for being so inspirational in the writing of this story and the use of the song "A Forest" in the background of the audiobook version.

Band: The Cure

Song: A Forest

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Album: 7 Seconds

Written by: Simon Gallup, Robert Smith, Matthieu Hartley and Lol Tolhurst

Produced by: Mike Hedges and Robert Smith