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Resurse pentru învățare și cercetare

MYTHAGO WOOD

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Contents

Introduction by Neil Gaiman	ix
Prologue	I
Part One: Mythago Wood	5
Part Two: The Wild Hunters	57
Part Three: The Heartwoods	181

Libris **PART ONE**

Respect pentru oameni și cărți

Mythago Wood

In May 1944 I received my call-up papers and went reluctantly away to war, training at first in the Lake District, then shipping over to France with the 7th Infantry.

On the eve of my final departure I felt so resentful of my father's apparent lack of concern for my safety that, when he was asleep, I went quietly to his desk and tore a page out of his notebook, the diary in which his silent, obsessive work was recorded. The fragment was dated simply 'August 34', and I read it many times, dismayed by its incomprehensibility, but content that I had stolen at least a tiny part of his life with which to support myself through those painful, lonely times.

The entry began with a bitter comment on the distractions in his life – the running of Oak Lodge, our family home, the demands of his two sons, and the difficult relationship with his wife, Jennifer. (By then, I remember, my mother was desperately ill.) It closed with a passage quite memorable for its incoherence:

A letter from Watkins – agrees with me that at certain times of the year the aura around the woodland could reach as far as the house. Must think through the implications of this. He is keen to know the power of the oak vortex that I have measured. What to tell him? Certainly not of the first mythago. Have noticed too that the enrichment of the pre-mythago zone is more persistent, but concomitant with this, am distinctly losing my sense of time.

I treasured this piece of paper for many reasons, but particularly for the moment or two of my father's passionate interest that it represented – and yet, it locked me out of its

understanding, as he had locked me out at home. Everything he loved, everything I hated.

I was wounded in early 1945 and when the war finished I managed to stay in France, travelling south to convalesce in a village in the hills behind Marseilles, where I lived with old friends of my father. It was a hot, dry place, very still, very slow; I spent my time sitting in the village square and quickly became a part of the tiny community.

Letters from my brother Christian, who had returned to Oak Lodge after the war, arrived every month throughout the long year of 1946. They were chatty, informative letters, but there was an increasing note of tension in them, and it was clear that Christian's relationship with our father was deteriorating rapidly. I never heard a word from the old man himself, but then I never expected to; I had long since resigned myself to the fact that, even at best, he regarded me with total indifference. All his family had been an intrusion in his work, and his guilt at neglecting us, and especially at driving our mother to taking her own life, had blossomed rapidly, during the early years of the war, into an hysterical madness that could be truly frightening. Which is not to say that he was perpetually shouting; on the contrary, most of his life was spent in silent, absorbed contemplation of the oak woodland that bordered our home. At first infuriating, because of the distance it put between him and his family, soon those long periods of quiet became blessed, earnestly welcomed.

He died in November 1946, of an illness that had afflicted him for years. When I heard the news I was torn between my unwillingness to return to Oak Lodge, at the edge of the Ryhope estate in Herefordshire, and my awareness of Christian's obvious distress. He was alone now, in the house where we had lived through our childhood together. I could imagine him prowling the empty rooms, perhaps sitting in father's dank and unwholesome study and remembering the hours of denial, the smell of wood and compost that the old man had trudged in through the glass-panelled doors

after his week-long sorties into the deep woodlands. The forest had spread into that room as if my father could not bear to be away from the rank undergrowth and the cool, moist oak glades, even when making token acknowledgement of his family. He made that acknowledgement in the only way he knew: by telling us – and mainly telling my brother – stories of the ancient forestlands beyond the house, the primary woodland of oak, ash, beech and the like, in whose dark interior (he once said) wild boar could still be heard, and smelled, and tracked by their spoor.

I doubt if he had ever seen such a creature, but that evening, as I sat in my room overlooking the tiny village in the hills (Christian's letter a crushed ball still held in my hand) I vividly recalled how I had listened to the muffled grunting of some woodland animal, and heard the heavy, unhurried crashing of something bulky moving inwards, towards the winding pathway that we called deep track, a route that led spirally towards the very heartwoods of the forest.

I knew I would have to go home, and yet I delayed my departure for nearly another year. During that time Christian's letters ceased abruptly. In his last letter, dated April 10th, he wrote of Guiwenneth, of his unusual marriage, and hinted that I would be surprised by the lovely girl to whom he had lost his 'heart, mind, soul, reason, cooking ability and just about everything else, Steve'. I wrote to congratulate him, of course, but there was no further communication between us for months.

Eventually I wrote to say I was coming home, that I would stay at Oak Lodge for a few weeks, and then find accommodation in one of the nearby towns. I said goodbye to France, and to the community that had become so much a part of my life. I travelled to England by bus and train, by ferry, and then by train again. On August 20th I arrived by pony and trap at the disused railway line that skirted the edge of the extensive estate. Oak Lodge lay on the far side of the grounds, four miles further round the road, but accessible

via the right of way through the estate's fields and woodlands. I intended to take an intermediate route and so, lugging my single, crammed suitcase as best I could, I began to walk along the grass-covered railway track, peering on occasion over the high, red-brick wall that marked the limit of the estate, trying to see through the gloom of the pungent pinewoods.

Soon this woodland, and the wall, vanished, and the land opened into tight, tree-bordered fields, to which I gained access across a rickety wooden stile, almost lost beneath briar and full-fruited blackberry bushes. I had to trample my way out of the public domain and so on to the south trackway that wound, skirting patchy woodland and the stream called 'sticklebrook', up to the ivy-covered house that was my home.

It was late morning, and very hot, as I came in distant sight of Oak Lodge. Somewhere off to my left I could hear the drone of a tractor. I thought of old Alphonse Jeffries, the estate's farm supervisor, and with the memory of his weather-tanned, smiling face came images of the mill-pond, and fishing for pike from his tiny rowing boat.

Memory of the tranquil mill-pond haunted me, and I moved away from the south track, through waist-high nettles and a tangle of ash and hawthorn scrub. I came out close to the bank of the wide, shadowy pool, its full extent hidden by the gloom of the dense stand of oak woodland that began on its far side. Almost hidden among the rushes that crowded the nearer edge of the pond was the shallow boat from which Chris and I had fished, years before; its white paint had flaked away almost entirely now, and although the craft looked watertight, I doubted if it would take the weight of a full grown man. I didn't disturb it but walked around the bank and sat down on the rough concrete steps of the crumbling boathouse; from here I watched the surface of the pool rippling with the darting motions of insects, and the occasional passage of a fish, just below.

'A couple of sticks and a bit of string . . . that's all it takes.'

Christian's voice startled me. He must have walked along a beaten track from the Lodge, hidden from my view by the shed. Delighted, I jumped to my feet and turned to face him. The shock of his appearance was like a physical blow to me, and I think he noticed, even though I threw my arms about him and gave him a powerful brotherly bear-hug.

'I had to see this place again,' I said.

'I know what you mean,' he said, as we broke our embrace. 'I often walk here myself.' There was a moment's awkward silence as we stared at each other. I felt, distinctly, that he was not pleased to see me. 'You're looking brown,' he said. 'And very drawn. Healthy and ill together . . .'

'Mediterranean sun, grape-picking, and shrapnel. I'm still not one hundred percent fit.' I smiled. 'But it *is* good to be back, to see you again.'

'Yes,' he said dully. 'I'm glad you've come, Steve. Very glad. I'm afraid the place . . . well, a bit of a mess. I only got your letter yesterday and I haven't had a chance to do anything. Things have changed quite a bit, you'll find.'

And he more than anything. I could hardly believe that this was the chipper, perky young man who had left with his army unit in 1942. He had aged incredibly, his hair quite streaked with grey, more noticeable for his having allowed it to grow long and untidy at the back and sides. He reminded me very much of father: the same distant, distracted look, the same hollow cheeks and deeply wrinkled face. But it was his whole demeanour that had shocked me. He had always been a stocky muscular chap; now he was like the proverbial scarecrow, wiry, ungainly, on edge all the time. His gaze darted about, but never seemed to focus upon me. And he smelled. Of mothballs, as if the crisp white shirt and grey flannels that he wore had been dragged out of storage; and another smell beyond the naphtha . . . the hint of woodland and grass. There was dirt under his fingernails, and in his hair, and his teeth were yellowing.