

A children's story

Boys search for tree gives Christmas a scary twist

By Raz Austy

Jed Thomas moved his family to a small community so they could grow up in surroundings he enjoyed as a boy. To move worked a hardship on him because he still had to drive to the city to work.

The inconvenience was worth it to know his family would enjoy all the things other families appreciated in a close knit area.

His wife Kay and son Josh were uncomfortable in a small community for the first few weeks because they had lived in a large city for such a long time. It didn't take Kay long to realize the neighbors were not only friendly but sincere. Josh made friends in school and enjoyed going.

One particular buddy was a young boy by the name of Bud Wilson, who lived on a farm down the road from Josh's house.

The woods back of the Wilson home held a strong attraction for the boys. They roamed them constantly, but didn't venture to the deepest section of the woods.

It was rumored by folks for miles around that a strange creature lived in the darkest part of the swamp. Most folks dismissed the rumors as just rumors and didn't pay much attention to all the talk.

On dark nights, sitting around a camp fire, the creature story ran rampant. If getting children to bed was a problem, a creature story always worked. When Bud and Josh went on a camping trip with their fathers a story of the swamp monster sent them to bed early.

They always pretended to be sleepy and not afraid. If the fathers had known the part the creature was going to play in the lives of their sons in the future, they would have toned the stories down some.

As the Christmas season approached, Josh and Bud became less active and more willing to do their chores. Mothers and fathers understand this action for it was the same in their day.

Buying a Christmas tree was not high on Mrs. Thomas's favorite shopping list. It was always an inner struggle to decide whether to get a live tree or artificial one. Knowing his mother worried about buying a tree gave Josh an opportunity to offer a simple solution.

"Mother I will go to the woods back of Bud's house and get us a tree. There are some beautiful trees deeper in the woods. I know Bud will go with me to get one," he said.

"Josh, I can't let you go to those woods without your father, and he will not be home until late this afternoon."

"But mother it will be too late for us to go into the woods this evening. I want to surprise father with a tree when he gets home."

She was having a great deal of emotional stress. "He is 10," she thought. Looking after me while his father is gone is important to him. Will you promise to get out of those woods before dark and under no circumstances will you go without Bud?"

"Yes, I will promise, you will be proud of me, you will see."

"Josh, even though it is just a rumor, I am still worried about the story of a creature in those woods."

"Oh mother, you don't believe that story do you? I am not afraid of any 'ol creature," boasted Josh.

"Just the same, you be careful won't you?"

"Mother, stop worrying. I will soon be 11, I can take care of myself," he replied as he waved goodbye.

Approaching the Wilson Farm, Josh noticed there didn't seem to be anyone around. "I sure hope Bud is home," he worried. When he knocked on the door and no one came, his worst fears were realized.

"Now he couldn't get the tree, and dad would be so disappointed," he muttered. "If only I had not promised mother I would not go alone, I could have convinced her I would be safe," he thought.

Josh was not in the habit of disobeying his parents. Before he left the yard, he had convinced himself it would be excusable to go alone.

While he was coming to grips with all the reasons for disobeying his mother, he failed to notice the weather was beginning to change.

Clouds were gathering in the west, the breeze was taking on the chill of winter, leaves were floating in the air and settling on a wind swept earth.

Racing to the woods so he would not have to worry about being in the dark, Josh began his quest for the Christmas tree.



The younger trees were at the edge of the woods, more beautiful trees grew where it was damp, increasing in size and beauty as one moved further into the woods.

Suddenly it occurred to him that he was surrounded by woods he had not known before.

Dark clouds looming close to the ground turned the once bright day into a creepy shadow.

Fear replaced bravery for a 10-year-old boy. Cold drops of rain mixed with sleet making the dreary woods more frightening.

Josh was determined to remain calm. It became impossible with the rain and sleet whirling like a butterfly caught in a strong summer breeze. A beautiful spruce caught his eye, diverting his attention for the moment from his surroundings.

After cutting the spruce, he was ready to leave the woods. He started searching frantically for signs to lead him out of the swamp. The signs were not to be found, he had forgotten to leave any in his haste to get a tree. A frightened little boy was hopelessly lost.

Searching his confused mind for any clue which would show him a way out only added confusion to a

troubled lad.

Riding on the wave of a roaring wind came a horrible sound like the cry of an angry wolf. "The creature," screamed Josh. "There is a creature in the woods." Hanging on to the tree like his life depended on it, the panicked boy ran. The deafening roar of the howling animal intensified. Josh knew he was gaining ground on him in his rambling flight.

Cracking underbrush from the weight of the creature echoed like thunder from a distant storm. Faster and faster he pushed his small body. He could feel the hot breath of the monster as he closed the distance between them. Suddenly he saw an opening in the woods which led to a field. If only he could reach it before the creature devoured him, someone might hear his desperate cry.

As his lungs screamed for relief he reached the edge of the field but it was too late. A set of powerful teeth gripped his leg, a hairy arm circled his neck. "Too late, too late," cried a struggling child.

"Josh, Josh," came a familiar sound from deep in the woods.

"My dad, that is my dad's voice," he screamed.

"Josh, Josh, calm yourself," the voice yelled almost on top of him.

Turning, trying to break free from the creature, with his last ounce of strength, his twisted body came face to face with a relieved father. Nestling in his father's arm, he whispered, "Dad, the creature got me."

"Son, what creature, I am the only creature that has been chasing you. When I got home and your mother told me you, and Bud had gone for a tree in the Wilson Woods, I decided it would be wise for me to come after you. When I reached the Wilson house and found everyone gone, I knew you had disobeyed your mother and gone alone looking for a tree. I tracked you by the broken limbs. One day I will teach you how to travel without giving your position away. Thank goodness I had not taught you already. When I saw you I yelled, you started running."

"Dad, you mean there is no creature?"

"No, Josh, your imagination was your creature. Those stories of a creature have been passed from generation to generation. If there had been a creature, he couldn't have caught you as fast as you were traveling. Let's go home and then we will talk about you disobeying your mother. You will have to be punished. I am sure you are aware of the seriousness of disobeying."

"Yes, dad, I am so sorry. I just wanted a pretty tree for you."

"I know son. I appreciate your love, however, it still doesn't excuse you. One good thing came out of it, you held on to the tree. We will have the prettiest tree in the neighborhood."

As the sun appeared through the clouds, the winter wind wrapped father and son in a blanket of love as they walked hand in hand toward a warm home.

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