

In The Woods

by

Jessica Haywood

Almost every day, after a salty ham breakfast and her morning lesson, Lydia went out to play. She did not play in the front yard with her rag doll like the other girls did in the town she had once visited. She did not sit inside, at the wooden table like a little lady making paper dolls out of her mama's old Sears-Roebucks catalogues. Instead, Lydia ventured into the woods.

The woods felt enchanted and mysterious, like a secret waiting to be discovered. Lydia had been told time and time again by her Mama and Pa that the woods were not the place for a little girl to play, but she could not stay away, and eventually her Mama and Pa consented to her wood excursions. Every day she skipped down a little trail that had been worn in the forest's soft floor by her own feet. Her little dress bounced around her, and the sun would dance in speckles on her honey-blonde hair. She would often break away from her skipping and singing to examine a red spotted mushroom or ponder how a spider would travel down a pine hill, covered in green and brown needles and dainty little pinecones that the squirrels collected and stored for the winter.

At the bottom of this hill, Lydia would pause for a bit at the little stream in the valley between the two hills. She'd take her shoes and stockings off to splash around in the cold, lively water and investigate under any creek rocks that might be a good habitation for crayfish. She searched the little still pools for groups of tiny minnows or tadpoles waiting to become frogs. She collected the little black snails that sprinkled the soft bottom or the slime-covered rocks, and watched them hide in their shells, until they

slowly re-emerged and inspected their new surroundings. When she was ready to continue up the next bank, Lydia would return the delicate little water creatures to their rock dwellings where they belonged. While listening to the enchanting tinkling melody of the little stream, she dried her feet on the grass. After donning her shoes, Lydia continued on her way up the oak and maple hill.

Her favorite time on this hill was autumn, when the trees would rain their gold and red leaves, and she could make a wish if she caught one. Some days, she could make many wishes. Lydia was quieter climbing this hill, in hopes that she would spot the red fox like she once had, slinking silently over the mottled carpet of the forest floor. She heard the songs of many birds, and she could identify them just by their whistle: the chickadee, the catbird, the whippoorwill, and the mourning dove. Sometimes she sang back to them, trying to mimic their tunes and understand what they might have been saying.

At the crest of this hill was Lydia's special place. She discovered it last spring, when she pursued a brightly colored butterfly. That day, there seemed to be an airy whisper coaxing her away from the path and to a tree. Not just any tree, but a magnificent tree. Lydia had never seen a tree so enormous. Its arm-like limbs seemed to touch Heaven itself, soaking up its radiant serenity which Lydia could feel when she placed her small hand on the tree's body. The splendid trunk was so broad that it would've taken many lengths of her widespread arms to encompass it. The roots encircled the tree in a frenzy of gnarled moss-covered knots. The deep cinnamon bark, patterned like dried mud, was filled with cracks and designs, except where it gave way to

the gaping hole in the tree's side. Through this portal, Lydia could step into the tree's interior and find herself in a dream.

Inside this magical tree, Lydia beheld a room that she could make her own. The wooden walls were smooth and in some places blackened, as if the tree had been hollowed out by fire. She followed the inner walls to a point above her head, where they tapered off, beyond which the rest of the tree grew, unscathed. Lydia had always wished for a tree house or a fort, a place that she could escape to and call her own. She had been told that forts were for boys.

Lydia set to work immediately. She cleared the dead leaves off of the dusty floor of the hollow tree, and dusted the old cobwebs from their niches. She discovered a little ledge, jutting from the wall of the tree that would serve nicely as a shelf, and a small cavity, near the ground, where she could hide her most precious treasures.

In the weeks that followed, Lydia filled her secret hollow tree with special belongings that she collected. At home, she found a small stool that all of the children had grown too big to use. Pa presented to her an old wooden tobacco box, filled with the smells of Saturday nights when he would smoke his pipe. She took an old lunch pail from her brother, Ben. Ma found a canning jar that was missing a lid that she gave to Lydia. Lydia found some twine and a shiny nickel along the dusty road to the Mason's farm. She arranged these treasures neatly in her new playhouse. The rickety stool stood in the back of the tree-room, beside which sat the little rusty bucket, in which Lydia neatly coiled the twine. She hid her shiny nickel that she had found in the tobacco box, along with a black snail shell and a clear crystal rock, which she stored in the little secret niche that she had found the first day. When she skipped through the field near her house

she collected yellow and purple and white wildflowers, which she put in the canning jar filled with fresh stream water.

Lydia lacked only one thing to complete her secret room. After several days of searching and wandering through the field, the pine hill, and the maple hill, she finally found the perfect rock. She had discovered it in the creek, a little up stream from where she usually collected snails and chased the minnows. It lay under the clear water of the stream, the sunshine dancing in patterns on its smooth flat surface. It was as big around as Mama's spinning wheel, and as thick as a ten-pound bag of flour. It was the perfect table!

She was so excited about this discovery that she almost bounded into the stream without taking off her shoes. After rolling up her pantaloons and tucking up her dress, Lydia splashed into the stream to retrieve her table. She reached her small hands into the chilly water and around the sides of the large flat rock and gave a tug. It barely moved! She tried again and again, circling around the rock in the water, trying to grasp it from every angle. The creek would not relinquish the rock, as if some mud-creature was tugging at it from underground. Finally, drained and dripping, Lydia sorrowfully gave up. She gave one last downhearted look at the rock, then sullenly trudged home.

As the days passed, Lydia continued to visit and decorate her tree, between her lessons and helping Mama with spinning yarn and shelling peas for supper. She invented friends who would come and call on her. She would "keep house" by sweeping the leaves off of the dirt floor with a pine branch and refill her canning jar with fresh wildflowers and stream water. She would share pretend picnics with fanciful friends. When she grew bored inside her petite house, she would take up her little rusty pail and

venture out to the maple and oak hill and search for nuts that the squirrels and deer had missed. She dug red clay from the creek banks and carefully molded it and dried it in the sun into little plates and bowls. She sometimes found sticks that resembled forks or spoons, and would take them home and ask her oldest brother Matthew to whittle them into utensils.

One day in mid-autumn, Lydia was traveling the path to her tree, whistling with the birds and feeling the wind on her face, when she glimpsed something out of the corner of her eye. She turned quickly, pivoting on one foot over the brown pine needles, and found herself looking at a boy, curiously, she examined his dirty gray shirt and his pants that showed his ankles.

“Ello,” the boy said, who seemed not at all surprised to have met her in the woods.

“Hello. What’s your name?” Lydia inquired of this boy she had never seen before.

“Thomas,” he replied, polishing an apple on his dirty drab shirt.

“It’s nice to meet you, Thomas. My name is Lydia. Where do you live?” Lydia had practiced these lines before when greeting her pretend acquaintances at her tree.

“Down yonder, ovah on d’ udder side o’ dese woods. My fambly just came ‘ere from furder souf. My Pa is a share cropper at d’ Austin fahm.”

“Do you like it there?” Lydia asked, excited at the thought of making a friend.

“S’perty goot, I guess. I ain’t never been in woods like dese before comin’ ‘ere. Dere’s lots o’ pleasurable thangs ‘ere.”

“I was on my way to my tree fort. Would you like to come? You’d be my first *real* visitor.”

“A tree fort? I ain’t never seen no tree fort befo’. I ain’t never had my own fort, eiver.”

“But you can’t tell any one where it is, because it’s a secret. Do you promise not to tell?” Lydia implored.

“I ain’t got nobody to tell.”

“Follow me then!”

Lydia led him through the woods in zigzags and circles. She didn’t know if she could trust him, so she didn’t want him to know the way to her secret fort.

“Is we almost dere? ‘Ow long does it take to get dere? ‘Ain’t we already seen dat dere grounded tree wit’ the moss and ‘shrooms growin’ on ‘t?”

“Don’t worry; it’s just around this boulder.”

After she was sure that Thomas was thoroughly lost, Lydia led him to her tree.

“Here it is!”

“Golly, dat’s an awfly big tree! Can ya stand up inside?”

“Yes! Look!” Lydia ducked through the doorway and stood inside, stretched her arms out, and spun in a circle.

Thomas ducked inside the tree after Lydia. He was a bit taller than she was, but his short black hair didn’t come close to touching the top of the hollowed room.

“Dis sho’ is a nice fort.”

“I found it last spring. I come here every day to play. I made these dishes out of clay, and I have pretend tea parties sometimes. And I always keep pretty new flowers in

the vase on the shelf to make it fell like home.” As she talked, Lydia showed Thomas her handmade dishes and spoons, and replaced the dead flowers in the jar with a new bouquet that she had collected before meeting him. She offered him a hickory nut out of her little rusty pail, and together they went outside to find rocks to use to crack them.

After tediously cracking and eating a few, Thomas looked up through the tree branches.

“D’ sun’s getting low, I best be getting’ home.”

“Can you come play tomorrow? If you can, I will show you the creek.”

“Dere’s a crick in dese woods? I don’t think I gotta work like I did yestiddy.

What time d’ ya come out?”

“I usually come out a little before noon, when the sun is not quite overhead.”

“Can ya meet me at d’ same place where ya finded me today?”

“Sure!”

“Is dey any feesh in d’ crick?”

“I don’t think so, it’s only a little stream. But we can catch crayfish and snails and tadpoles.”

“Allighty, I’s gotta go. But which way?”

This time, Lydia led him straight back to where she had met him earlier, without the zigzags and circles through the woods. She said goodbye to her new friend and skipped home as fast as she could, humming joyfully in her high spirits.

“Mama!” Lydia exclaimed, bursting in the door of the cabin.

“Guess what!”

“I couldn’t guess, Lyddie. What is it?”

“I made a new friend today! I met a boy in the woods, and I showed him where my tree house is, and he really liked it, and we ate nuts, and we’re going to meet again tomorrow in the same place, and I’m going to show him the creek!

“Well! And what’s this boy’s name?”

“His name’s Thomas. His family lives on the Anderson’s farm on the other side of the woods. He’s a really nice boy, and he really liked my playhouse.”

“Well, I’m glad you made a friend, Lyddie. Can you please run to the spring house and fetch some potatoes for me?”

That night, lying in her small straw-stuffed bed, Lydia could barely fall asleep, her mind was thinking about Thomas, her very first friend. Even in her sleep she dreamt of adventures in the woods and playing with a friend. In the morning, she gulped down her biscuit with honey and fresh milk. Her morning lesson with Mama seemed to last all day. Finally, after writing foursies on her slate, and reading a chapter in her reader, Lydia was free to go to the woods.

She met Thomas by the tree that had grown over the boulder where she had first encountered him yesterday, and with an exchange of grins they headed towards the creek.

“The water is cold,” said Lydia, while removing her shoes and stockings and rolling up her pantaloons, “but after a bit, your feet get used to it.”

“Back war we libed befor comin’ ‘ere, dar was no woods, jus’ field, and I never saw a crick, cept when we all went to d’town a lil’ ways off.” Thomas replied, tucking his mismatched socks into his black shoe with a hole in the toe.

“*Sometimes*, when I’m lucky, I can find a salamander or a newt under the grasses,” Lydia proclaimed, looking through the grasses hanging over the creek. “But I can *always* find a crayfish under the big rocks over there.”

Thomas splashed through the chilly water, following Lydia’s pointed finger. He upturned a rock and exclaimed, “Thar’s one! I’ve ‘eard ‘bout crayfish. Some people says ya can eat ‘em, but they look kinder small to me. Come ‘ere, lil’ sucker!”

“When you pick it up, grab it behind the claws so you don’t get pinched! Here I brought this bucket that we can keep them in,” Lydia interjected, handing Thomas the bucket.

After catching two more crayfish, Thomas and Lydia studied the patterns made by the trails of the little black snails. Thomas was captivated by a snail that slowly emerged from its shell in his hand, while Lydia tiptoed around in the pool, watching how the shining group of minnows moved as one. Eventually, the sun lowered in the sky, and it was time for the Thomas to go home.

“Just follow this little trail here, and it will take you back to the tree growing over the boulder.”

“Thankee. Will ya come out tommorree?” asked Thomas, and Lydia understood that he was as lonely as she was.

“Yes, I’ll meet you at the same place. Bye then!” Lydia waved.

That night at home, she related the day’s events at the dinner table, content as Pa his fiddle.

Lydia met Thomas the next morning and many mornings after that. Sometimes they would go to the tree fort, adopt new names, and act out one of the many plots of

their imagination. Sometimes they would dig for clay and make dolls and little sculptures, which they would leave to dry on rocks in the sun. Once, Thomas discovered some reeds growing on the creek bank and showed Lydia how to make a reed whistle. They had fun playing tunes on these whistles and would often perform “Yankee Doodle” in harmony, Lydia’s favorite.

Thomas was excited one crisp day when he met Lydia at the tree fort (for now he knew his way through the woods.) “Guess wut, Lydia! We’s goin’ feeshin’ today! Yestiddy, I took a different way home, and I foun’ a lil’ pond that gots feesh in ‘t! I knows it’s gots feesh in ‘t cause I saw un jump right outta da wattah an’ flop back in! Grab day ol’ pail; an’ les go digging; fo’ some worms! I brung some ol’ bent nails from home dat we can use for hooks, if ya gots some string.”

“I have some twine in here!” Lydia ducked into the tree and emerged holding up the piece of twine that she had found on the road.

“Now we’s just gotta find us some bait! I’ll start a diggin’ ‘ere an ‘ ya see if ya can find some worms unda a rock o’ somethin’.”

Lydia followed Thomas to the pond that she never knew existed, on their way they collected long sticks that would serve well as fishing poles.

“Ere it be!” Thomas exclaimed, as they reached the muddy pond.

After they collected a dozen or so “squirms,” as Lydia called them, Thomas unraveled the twine into two pieces, and tied a nail on both strings. Lydia attached the twine to the fishing sticks while Thomas baited the makeshift hooks.

“Now we’s set to go!” Thomas dropped his hook in the dark water, which was shortly followed by Lydia’s. They made themselves comfortable on the soft grass and let

the sun shine on their cheeks. They talked about their father's crops and Brenda, Lydia's pregnant milk cow. Lydia described the town nearby to Thomas the best she could remember, for she had only been there once. She was telling about the nice mercantile owner, who gave her free penny candy, when suddenly, Lydia's stick jerked in her hand.

"Pull 'er in! Pull 'er in! Ya gots one! I'll grab 't when ya git it in close enuf!"

Together they towed in the struggling fish on Lydia's twine.

By the time they had to part, Lydia and Thomas had two fish each to carry home for supper.

When Lydia got home, Mama was making her a new dress.

"Lyddie, can you come here and hold your arms up like this so I can get the arms just right?"

Lydia stood still as Mama measured her arms and placed pins in the flowery sky blue fabric.

"Mama," Lydia started, for the fabric had reminded her of something. "If you have any extra fabric, could I please have it?"

"Sure Lyddie. I bought this fabric to make a dress for myself, but I decided that you needed a dress more than I did, seeing the way you wear them out so quickly in the woods! There should be some material left over after I use a bit for my quilt that you can have."

"Thanks, Mama!" Lydia had made a plan for tomorrow's excursion with Thomas.

"We're doing something special today!" Lydia informed Thomas the next morning when they met.

Thomas quietly followed her down the path to the creek that he now knew well.

“Over here! Oh, here it is!”

“Wha’ ‘s it?” Thomas wondered.

“My table!” Lydia replied, matter-of-factly.

“Table? I don’t see no table.” Thomas looked confused.

“Hurry up, you slowpoke! Take off your shoes and help me movie it!”

Thomas followed Lydia into the stinging water. “Dat’s jus’ a rock.”

“It’s my table for the tree fort.” Lydia grunted as they slowly hoisted the rock up and onto the creek bank.

“Boy, dis sho is a ‘eavy table!”

It took much of their afternoon to push that heavy stone-table up the oak and maple hill. Thomas and Lydia had to stop and rest many times as the tress dropped their last few bright leaves to the ground.

“Oh! Now my tree fort is complete!” Lydia exclaimed as they finally rolled it into the tree and settled it into place. Lydia pulled the piece of blue fabric out of her pocket with a flourish. She ceremoniously smoothed it over the rock and set to work immediately, neatly arranging the handmade clay dishes on the table, as Thomas sat on the rickety stool and watched.

“Thank you so much for helping me!” cried Lydia as she threw her arms around Thomas in a big hug. “I couldn’t have done it without you!”

“If’n ‘t makes ya so happy, den I be happy too!” replied Thomas, Lydia’s only true friend.

The next few days, Thomas didn’t show up at the tree fort. Lydia reasoned that he probably had to work for his Pa a bit more in the fields, now that it was harvesting

time. Lydia once again wondered alone through the woods, something she had not done in a long time. The wind was starting to sting when it blew, and none of the trees had any leaves. On this lonely day, Lydia walked further than she had ever walked before.

With a sideways glance, Lydia spotted a black, gaping hole in the side of a moss-covered rock wall. It was a cave! She ducked under the overhanging rock to examine the slippery walls. After advancing a few feet into the cave so darkness enveloped her, she decided to turn back. She was scared without Thomas with her.

The next day when Thomas came back from the fields, Lydia excitedly led him to the cave.

“I ain’t ev’r been in a cave befo’. It sho’ is mighty dark.”

“It’s too bad we didn’t bring any candles with us! I can barely see you!”

“I can see you alright ‘cause yo’ skin glows! Just hold on ter me.”

All light vanished as they felt their way along the cold cave walls. Finally, they decided that the cave would be more fun to explore when they had candles, and they resolved to return another day.

“That was sure fun!” Lydia exclaimed after they had stepped back into the gray daylight.

“Whot ya talkin’ ‘bout? You was scared as a jaybird, holdin onta mah ahm so tight!”

“Okay, I was a little scared. But it was very exciting! Just imagine: an Indian could have lived in that cave or a bear, maybe a bootlegger running from the law!”

“I’s just glad dat we didn’t run inter none of dem while we was in der!”

“Me too.” Lydia concluded as they headed home.

That night, over a chicken and potato supper, Lydia shared her adventure with her family.

“So what did you and Thomas do today, Lyddie?”

“We went to a cave that I found the other day in the woods! It was so exciting! We didn’t stay long, though, because I didn’t bring any candles. It was so dark in there that all I could see of Thomas was his eyes, but he said he could see me because my skin glowed.”

“What did you say Lydia Anne?”

“I said ‘it was so-’”

“I heard what you said,” snapped Pa. “Why couldn’t you see him?” he demanded.

“B-because it was so dark in the cave and ... he just blended in,” stumbled Lydia.

“Do you mean to tell me that this boy is a *Negro*?” spat Pa. “Answer me, child, is he colored?”

“Y-yes, sir,” stammered Lydia.

“What is my daughter doing running around in the woods with a black boy?!”

“Pa-he’s my friend!” pleaded Lydia, tears streaming down her face.

“Not any more, he ain’t!” cried Pa, shaking with rage, “I forbid you to see that boy. He’s nothin’ but trouble, you hear? Now you ain’t allowed to go into those woods anymore. Is that understood?”

“But Pa!”

“But nothing!”

“Mama!” cried Lydia, turning to her Ma.

“I’m sorry, Lydia, your father’s right. Tomorrow you can stay inside and help me clean the house and fix supper.”

“It’s not fair! Thomas is my friend! My only friend! So what if his skin is darker than mine?”

“Lydia Anne! Go to your bedroom now! No more supper for you. I don’t want to hear another word out of you about this!” Pa threatened.

“But he’s my only friend!” screamed Lydia, standing up from the table, banging dishes, and storming off to her bedroom.

Lydia collapsed on her bed, tears streaming down her face. She sobbed until she finally cried herself to sleep.

“Lydia, time to eat breakfast,” Mama called from the kitchen the next morning.

“I’m not hungry,” mumbled Lydia into her pillow. She felt empty and lost inside.

The day wore on as if time had stopped. Lydia only talked when she was asked a question; her mind was on Thomas all day. Mama made her sweep the floors and wash the windowpanes with soap and water. She had to wash the dishes after lunch and help snap beans for supper. Lydia could not concentrate on her lessons, and didn’t care that Mama was very disappointed in her.

“Lyddie” Mama said as she sat down next to Lydia, who was staring out a window. “Lydia, listen to me, honey. I know this is hard, but you just can’t be friends with that boy any more. That’s just not how the world works. Now I see that you’re very upset. Maybe a walk in the woods will help cheer you up. But if you see Thomas, you need to tell him that you can’t play with him anymore, okay? Listen to me, Lyddie.”

Lydia glanced away from the window and at her Mama's concerned face to show she was listening.

"You have to tell Thomas that you can't play with him any more. If you don't tell him that, then you won't be allowed to go into the woods any more. You hear? Now let me hear you say that you will tell him."

"I'll tell him," repeated Lydia reluctantly, her voice as flat as the floorboards.

"Do you promise?"

"I promise."

"Now, remember Lydia; a promise is a promise and must be kept."

"I know, Mama."

"Run along then, and come back with a smile on your little face!"

Lydia ran into the woods, relieved to be free of the terrible house. She yearned to see Thomas, yet dreaded their final meeting. She ran down the pine-covered floor of the first hill and splashed angrily through the creek. She sobbed as she fled up the maple hill, frightening the rabbits and startling the deer. She nearly ran into Thomas when she arrived at the tree fort, and he grabbed her arm quickly to steady her.

"Wha ya cryin' 'bout Lidya?"

"I can't ... I can't ... oh Thomas! It's not fair!" Lydia gasped, throwing her arms around Thomas and sobbing on his shoulder.

"Calm down, now. What ain't fair?"

After gasping for breath and wiping her eyes, Lydia could finally get the words out. "I have to tell you that we can't play together any more. My Mama and Pa said I couldn't be your friend because you're black!"

Yu ...? Thomas paused.

“I still want to be your friend, but I can’t! I don’t understand what’s wrong with being friends. There’s nothing different about us, right?”

“Cept’n dat yu’r white, and I be black.” Thomas said with downcast eyes.

“I’m sorry Thomas. But I have to listen to Mama. If we keep playing in the woods, Pa will give me a beatin’ and will never let me come out to play again.” A large tear spilled down her cheek.

“I guess I bettah be gettin’ home, den. Pa probly needs me in d’ fields anyway.” Thomas stood, looking down at Lydia with sad eyes.

“Thomas,” Lydia paused. “I wish everywhere was like the woods, where we could play together forever, even though we are different. But you will always be my best friend, and I will miss you always.”

“Thankee fo’ bein my friend, Lidya.” Thomas turned, and Lydia sorrowfully watched his gray form fade into the trees.

That day, Lydia grew up, and never returned to her childhood playhouse.