

# The Wind in the Woods

by Jonathan Harrell

Ralph Simpson looked as though he wouldn't last through the weekend. His skin, yellowing from the cirrhosis, covered his hands tightly enough so that the veins looked like they would burst from the pressure. Black and purple bruises covered his arms. Leonard made a mental note to check up on the orderlies again. He was worried that they were being too rough when they picked Grandpa up from his bed. Grandpa might not be in a first-class nursing home, but Leonard paid enough to ensure that the orderlies could at least be gentle with the old man.

"Grandpa, are you awake?" Ralph Simpson lay on his back with his head on the pillow, breath coming in great, ragged gasps.

The old man opened his eyes. "Huh?" He blinked furiously, trying to clear his vision enough to make out the blurred figure sitting beside him.

"Hey, Grandpa. I'm sorry to wake you." Leonard looked concerned, as though he had maybe interrupted a chance for his grandfather to slip peacefully into death.

"No, no. It's okay, Leonard." Ralph pushed up on his reclining bed to sit up straighter. He still had strength enough for that, at least, and he was thankful. "I'm glad you came, buddy."

"Of course I came. It's Sunday, isn't it?" Leonard was proud of himself for making every effort to visit the old man for an hour each Sunday afternoon. He never spent time with his grandfather while he was still healthy, but once he became nearly invalid, Leonard was more than happy to make everyone think that he alone was responsible for the care of the old man. "Besides, I'd feel guilty with you sitting here all by yourself on a beautiful day like this."

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Leonard got up from the uncomfortable wooden chair beside the bed and strode to the window. He grabbed the metal pull-cord and raised the blinds until the beautiful October sunlight flooded the room. It may be a second-rate nursing home, Leonard thought, but at least this room had a hell of a view. Looking out the window, Leonard saw a vast ocean of red and gold. His grandfather's second floor room overlooked the rear of the facility's property. Just past the edge of the grounds flowed a creek, swollen with rainwater. If you were to cross the creek, it would be less than ten steps until you reached the edge of a beautiful expanse of forest, hundreds of acres across. Treetops flowed far into the distance. Only in New England do you find a view like that, mused Leonard.

Ralph turned in his bed, straining to see out of the window. "Is it nice out there?"

"Oh, yeah. It's a gorgeous day, Grandpa. If you're feeling up to it, I'll see if we can get you in your wheelchair and take a stroll outside."

Ralph sighed. "I'd love to, buddy, but I just don't think I have the strength." His voice was strong enough to be heard easily, but his was straining with the effort of turning in his bed.

"That's okay, Grandpa. Maybe next week. Hey, the Patriots are playing. Do you want me to turn on the television? We could watch the game together, if you wanted." Leonard figured that if he'd have to be here anyway, he could at least watch the football game that he was sure to win some money on this week.

"No, that's alright," Ralph said. He laid his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes for a moment. "No, let's just talk for a while."

“Anything you want, Grandpa. Can I get anything for you?”

Ralph smiled. “A cold beer sure would be nice.”

Leonard frowned, disapproving of his grandfather's inappropriate sense of humor.

“I know, I know.” Ralph looked disappointed. “I can't have alcohol while I'm in here. Besides, I know you well enough that you wouldn't sneak it in here for me anyway.”

“You're exactly right, I wouldn't sneak it in here anyway. And that's not funny to start with. What did the doctor say on Friday?”

The on-call doctors made their rounds every Friday, gauging which of their patients' beds would be emptied during the weekend. Their news for Ralph was getting progressively worse, so he stopped paying attention to what they said. To him, it didn't matter what their prognosis was. He figured that he'd either live or die, regardless of what the doctors said or did anyway. There would inevitably come a day that the doctors told him he would die soon, he thought, and when that day came, he'd be shocked if it actually happened. In his extensive experience with medical professionals, he had learned that when they are right, it's usually due to luck.

“They said the same old thing, really. You're sick, take your medicine, try to get some exercise, blah blah blah. What does it matter? The nurses know more than they do, and they're being positive.” Ralph gasped and began coughing. Wet sounds came from his chest. He was getting pneumonia again.

Leonard shook his head and reached for the box of tissues. He waited for Ralph to stop coughing and held the box out to him. Ralph reached for one.

"Thanks, Leonard. This damn cough just won't go away. What time is it?" He squinted at the clock mounted on the wall by the door but couldn't make it out without his glasses.

Peering over his shoulder, Leonard checked the clock for him. "It's fifteen past two. Why, do you have to get ready for a date?" Leonard leered at him in a way that he hoped seemed friendly and joking.

"Yeah, smartass," Ralph replied. "I've got a date at four with a fat nurse and a nebulizer to try to get my lungs clear again." He smiled at his grandson. "Speaking of hot dates, how is that beautiful wife of yours?"

Leonard shuffled uncomfortably. "She's great, Grandpa, really great. She's volunteering at Habitat for Humanity most days during the week now." Leonard left out the fact that she was volunteering in order to spend more time with her new boyfriend, Peter Wesserman, who she's been fucking for the last four months. Leonard didn't think it wise to share this information with his grandfather, who has made it known that he frowns on divorce without exception. Leonard wanted to keep the old man happy, at least happy with Leonard, until he kicked the bucket.

"That's good, buddy. It's a shame you two didn't give me any great-grandchildren, you know." Ralph knew that this was a bit of a sore subject for Leonard, but he just couldn't help but rub it in on occasion.

"Yeah, a shame." Leonard's face turned a slightly darker shade of pink. He stood and took off his jacket, hanging it on the back of his chair.

"Hey, I didn't mean to... you know." Ralph cleared his throat. "Sorry, buddy."

“Forget it, Grandpa, it's no big deal.” Leonard thought for a moment, searching for a new conversation topic and finding none.

They lapsed into the uncomfortable silence that is found whenever two people are forced to spend time with one another through obligation.

“Leonard, I've got to be honest with you.” Ralph sat up a little straighter. “I don't think I'm going to make it much longer.”

Leonard's mouth fell open from surprise. Maybe this would be The Talk. “Grandpa, what are you talking about? You're still tough.”

Ralph looked at him with an intensity Leonard hadn't seen in years. “Don't bullshit with me, buddy, okay? I... I reckon I've got a little while left, but not much. And there are a few things that we need to talk about before I croak.”

Leonard shifted in his chair. Finally, he thought, they were going to have The Talk. This would be the moment when all of his patience paid off. All those years of keeping in touch, visiting during the holidays, and the last two years of hospital stays and nursing home expenses were about to come to fruition.

“What do you mean, Grandpa? What is there to talk about?”

“I told you not to bullshit with me, kid.” Ralph cleared his throat and locked eyes with his grandson. “You know exactly what we need to talk about. I'm getting tired pretty quickly, but I might have enough strength left today to tell you what you need to know. How about go get me a glass of apple juice, would you? My throat's kind of dry.”

“Sure, Grandpa, you just sit right there, I'll be right back.”

Ralph chuckled. "That's rich, buddy. 'Sit right there.' A real laugh riot."

Leonard blushed, embarrassed by his choice of words. He mumbled a hasty apology and trundled out of the room.

Ralph closed his eyes and tried to compose his thoughts. He knew that he didn't have much time to tell his grandson everything, but he also knew that he had to try. He had put this conversation off for too long now, and he needed Leonard to understand things before he did something stupid. He fumbled on the nightstand beside his adjustable, motorized bed and found his glasses.

A few minutes later, Leonard walked back in. Ralph looked at him, really looked at him, for the first time in years. The kid wasn't aging well, Ralph thought. Leonard was barely forty years old and already losing most of his hair. Male pattern baldness didn't run in the family, so Ralph assumed that the hair loss must be due to stress, both at work and at home. Leonard worked in the finance industries, specifically in selling securities, and his body reflected his work. He was built like a banker, to use a phrase from Ralph's younger days. Leonard's midsection was bulging slightly, carrying that famous spare tire made possible by too many microwavable meals and too much television. He was well-dressed, as befits a man who makes a large amount of money each year doing a job that he hates. Ralph knew that he had almost nothing in common with his grandson, but he must try to make him understand.

Leonard handed him a small plastic cup, with more ice in it than beverage. Ralph muttered a word of thanks and sipped from the kind of bendable plastic straw that you can only find in hospitals and nursing homes.

Leonard waited a moment for his grandfather to finish his juice before speaking. "So, what do you need to talk to me about, Grandpa?"

Ralph put the cup on the nightstand slowly, as if it took a lot of effort. It probably did, thought Leonard. That cup probably feels like it weighs ten pounds to him.

"I wanted to talk to you about my will." Ralph cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses.

Leonard sat down quickly, his knees feeling a little weak. He'd been waiting for years for this talk. "Okay." He didn't really trust himself to speak yet. He didn't want to appear excited, for God's sake. It wasn't too late for the old man to change his mind, after all.

"I'm not going to be able to talk for long, but there's a lot that I need to tell you, so please just let me talk. You're going to have a damn lot of question, I know, but just hear me out. Okay?" He raised his eyebrows in question.

"Yes, sir. You just say what you need to say." Leonard was practically licking his lips with anticipation. A fortune was at stake here, and he was eager to get to the nuts and bolts of the matter.

"Okay, let's get right to it." Ralph took a deep breath. "Your grandmother passed away more than twenty years ago. Your mother, my only daughter, passed away herself more than five years ago. You're the only family I have left, and I'm leaving you everything I've got."

Leonard exhaled slowly, suppressing a grin.

"Oh, don't act like you're surprised, kid, it's why you've been putting in your time with me, isn't it?"

The younger man's mouth fell open in shock once again. Before he could protest, Ralph spoke again.

"It's alright, don't think I'm offended, or anything. It's just that you never showed much interest in me until I got sick enough to die. I'm old and sick, but I'm not stupid, buddy."

Ralph cleared his throat. "But I'm going to give you what you want. No doubt you feel as though you've earned it. Here's what I've got, okay? I have several bonds worth a couple hundred thousand dollars. I have some stocks that aren't doing so well, but there are a lot of them. There's the house, which is probably in terrible shape, since I've been stuck here for so long. And, of course, there is the crown jewel: I own two thousand, three hundred and seven acres of prime woodland in the heart of Massachusetts.

"The stocks, I don't care about. You can sell 'em or keep 'em. I don't care about the bonds, either. You can burn them for all I care. Although, knowing you, you'll cash 'em out the day they're signed over to you from my estate.

"It's the land that matters to me. Understand?"

Leonard nodded vigorously, but Ralph knew that his mind was only on dollar signs. Ralph could start talking in Korean, and he knew Leonard wouldn't even notice.

"Hey, kid, I'm serious. That land is important. It's almost sacred." Ralph's eyes bored through Leonard's haze and seemed to find their mark.

"Okay," Leonard replied.



“I know you don't remember, but when you were just a little kid, I used to take you to the edge of the property. Do you remember?”

Leonard shook his head. “No, I can't say that I do, Grandpa.”

“That's all right. I never took your mother out there at all. But you and I sat at the edge of the woods on more than one occasion, eating sandwiches, playing in the leaves. You were probably five or so when we stopped going. You lost interest. I always wanted to take you further in. Show you around the place, but you didn't seem to want to.”

Leonard opened his mouth to speak, but Ralph held up his hand, cutting him off.

“Now, let me tell you a little bit about it. First of all, it's gorgeous. I've never seen another place as beautiful. There's a brook running along the eastern border of it, and I've caught many a fish out of there in my day. The water's always clear and cold, and it tastes great, too. You wouldn't know anything about that, anymore, with your fancy bottled water, but you've never tasted anything like it, I guarantee you.

“Now, over in the north-west corner of the property, there's a series of granite outcroppings. It looks like they were carved away from mountains by the cavemen, or something. There's one called Redhead Point. I figure it gets its name from the trees this time of year. If you walk up it, following the old trail, you'll get to the top of the point and can look straight down. It's about a hundred feet up, and it will give you one of the most glorious views you've ever seen. I've spent a little time up there, myself, just thinking.

“Anyway, I think you should go there. Go walk around for a couple of hours in daylight. It'll help you get in shape, too, but more

importantly, it will give you a sense of the land. You can just feel the life in it.”

Ralph took another deep breath and had another attack of coughing. Leonard glanced around the room, wondering how much longer his grandfather was going to take. Now that it was official, Leonard wanted to get on the phone with his lawyer to prepare for his new wealth.

Ralph wiped his mouth with another tissue and cleared his throat. “All right, now that I’ve given you a little insight into how beautiful it is, I want to tell you what happened.”

Leonard looked up at the old man, whose face had become completely serious.

“I’ve spent an awful lot of time up there,” Ralph said. “I thought nothing of staying a weekend in the woods, fishing, building a fire. I was twenty-six when I inherited it from my father, but we’d spent so much time in it together it felt like I’d lived there most of my life. It was like my second home, if you can understand that.

“It was that first year when it happened. My Pa had just passed on maybe eight months before, and I hadn’t set foot in those woods since that spring. I grieved for my Pa, but finally decided that he left it to me for a reason. So I set out. It was just after the first real frost of the year. I parked my truck at the old service road entrance and loaded up. An old rucksack on my back, small toolbox in one hand and my old .410 shotgun in the other. It was squirrel season, and I figured I’d find some to put in the icebox for dinner when I returned. I planned on staying that whole weekend, you see.

“So I went up the west side, toward the rocks. I camped just south of there, setting up my tent in a small clearing. I went ahead and build the fire pit, knowing I’d be too tired to do it when I returned.

Those damn squirrels can be hard to find, you know. Well, no, I guess you don't. You never took the time to find out, did you?"

He pauses for a moment to regain his breath. Leonard wants to tell him how it's not fair how his grandfather treats him like less of a man just because he's never spent a night in the woods, but he says nothing. Just let the old man rant, Leonard thought. It'll be over soon enough.

"Okay, so I grabbed my shotgun and put some shells in my pocket, and took a walk toward the heart of the property. I'd only been in the middle of that piece of land a few times, because the hardwoods are so thick. There was almost a thick ring of trees and brush circling the center of the land. I headed there because since the trees were so thick, I was all but guaranteed to find a squirrel or two.

"It was midday, and I decided to stop and wait for some movement in the treetops. So I sat down just within that thick circle of trees. I saw a couple of squirrels, but nothing I would have been able to hit, so I just kept waiting for the perfect shot. After a couple of hours, it started getting dark. I was hungry, and I wanted to eat some squirrel that night, so I pushed on through the ring of brush and trees until I reached the center. It was beautiful.

"It was a large clearing, with foot-high grass. I tried to be quiet, because I didn't want to scare off my quarry. I also didn't want to disturb any deer that might be bedding down nearby, and I sure as hell didn't want to bring a bear around wondering who's making a racket. So I crept in slowly.

"There were a couple of trees in the clearing, but they were too small to house any squirrels. There were a few large bushes in the center, too. They looked like they had been planted there. The last rays of sunlight shone down on them, and they were beautiful. Deep

hues of purple, red and green glowed softly in the dying light. I wish I had taken a picture.

“I sat on a stump and faced the woods again, waiting for a shot. The wind started picking up a little, cutting right through my coat. I was getting cold and ill from being out there so long without getting anything. Finally, one came close enough for me to claim. I waited for it to settle down, and I raised my shotgun to my shoulder. No matter how many times you go hunting, when you raise that gun to your cheek, you always get that rush, that adrenaline surge from being perfectly in the moment. I thumbed off my safety as quietly as I could and took a shot.

“The little .410 isn't a loud gun, by any means, but in that clearing, it sounded like a cannon. The squirrel dropped from the branch, and I stood up, stretching my back. The wind changed a little, and I noticed that it was whistling funny through the branches of the trees. Like someone whispering in another language.

“That's when I heard the rustle behind me. It was almost dark, but I could still see enough. Fearing the sound was a bear, I reloaded my gun, knowing that there was no way it would hurt anything big enough to hurt me, but it made me feel a little safer just the same. I turned around, looking for the source of the noise, and when I saw what it was, I dropped my gun.

“The bushes in the center of the clearing were moving. Not from the wind, either. They had gotten taller, like a man standing up from a crouching position. In the fading light, they still glowed those beautiful colors. And then, they started walking.

“There were four of them. These bushes started taking honest-to-God steps toward me, buddy, and I wanted to scream. I had never been so scared in my life. The wind whipped up a little, and I heard

it call my name. I remember it like it happened just an hour ago, Leonard, and I'm telling you, the wind called my name.

“And still the bushes kept coming toward me. I wanted to run, but my legs just wouldn't move. Three of the bushes started spreading out, like they were going to flank me, but there was one of them that walked straight to me. After a couple of seconds, it was close enough for me to make out a little more detail. It was in the shape of a man. Two arms, two legs, and a head, and it was walking toward me. I started backing up slowly, but I tripped over a fallen branch, and landed in the brush. The three things on the outside started walking around me, like they would surround me. I tried to keep my eye on them all, but my gaze kept going back to the one that was almost in front of me.

“The wind called me again. It knew my name. And then I looked up at the monster again, and I realized that it was familiar. It stopped about five feet away from me, close enough for me to see it clearly. It was made entirely of tangled vines, branches and beautiful leaves. All but the face. I stared into its piercing blue eyes, and realized that I was looking at my father. It was my Pa, Leonard. It really was.

“The wind continued. It whispered that I should not be afraid. It said that all was right. It called my fucking name, buddy.

“I took a step forward, looking to make sure of what I saw, when my Pa's eyes flashed at me like they used to when I was a stubborn child. The wind told me that I was welcome in the woods, but not to come back here. I was safe with him there, but I might not always be. I nodded, telling him that I understood, and turned to go.

“The other things that had walked around me were standing at the edge of the woods, huddled over together. I bent down to get my shotgun, and one of them looked up at me. Its face was ancient, and

its leaves were not as beautiful or as vibrant as those on my Pa. Then it grinned, revealing teeth like thorns. Its mouth was covered in gore from the remains of my squirrel.

“I left. I ran like hell out of there. I left my tent, my gear, all of it but the gun, and I ran like hell to the truck. I was so scared.”

Ralph stopped again, straining with the effort of telling the story. Leonard just stared at him, believing that the old man was finally out of his mind.

“Grandpa, are you sure you saw...?”

“Leonard, let me tell you something. I'm eighty-two years old. There are few things I remember clearly these days. This is something that I'll never forget. Yes, buddy, I promise you that I'm sure.”

Leonard reached for the plastic cup and handed it to his grandfather. Some of the ice had melted, and Ralph drank it greedily.

“Buddy, I know you're a bright guy. Let me tell you this: I've had several offers for that land in the many years that I've owned it. Ten years ago, a developer offered me six million dollars to sell it all so they could turn it into a resort lodge.”

Leonard grew faint at the idea of his inheritance being worth more than six million. And who knows? Now it's probably worth even more.

“I told him no, of course. Six million dollars is a lot of money, but I could never sell that land.”

He looked at Leonard.

“I don't want you to sell it, either.”

Leonard's eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, not sell it?”

“Now, buddy, I realize you're a grown man. And if I leave this land to you, you have every right to do with it as you wish. But I just want you to consider keeping it just like it is. Okay? Just consider it. I want you to do me a favor, actually.”

Leonard leaned in. “What?”

“I want you to go there. After the land passes to you, I want you to go there. I want you to walk to the center of the property and find that ring of trees and brush. I want you to walk inside of it and wait. And if you hear the wind, if it speaks to you, don't sell it.”

Ralph sat back onto his pillow.

“That's all?” Leonard asked.

“That's it,” Ralph replied. “If you don't hear the wind, then you can just forget everything I said. If you don't hear it, just do whatever you want with it. But if you do, buddy, if you do hear it, consider just leaving it alone. Okay?”

Leonard smiled genuinely at his grandfather. “I promise.”

Ralph's head dropped back slowly as his eyes closed. “Good. That's good. Make me proud, okay?”

A very fat nurse walked through the door with a nebulizer machine. “Mister Simpson? Are you ready for your breathing treatment, sir?”

Leonard seized his opportunity and said his goodbyes. He was dialing a number on his cell phone on his way out the door. Ralph smiled wistfully, hoping that his grandson would show enough respect to do as he had been asked.

The next week, the head nurse called Leonard at home on a Sunday morning. There was no need to visit, she said. His grandfather had passed away that morning. Leonard hung up and immediately called his lawyer.

Six months later, Leonard drove out to the property. His SUV made it pretty far into the woods on the old trails and service paths. He smiled as he passed the trees. He was glad he waited until spring to come out here. This place would be impossible to get to in the snow.

After a few minutes of driving, he came upon a large four-door work truck and several smaller pickups. Leonard parked his SUV and climbed out. As soon as he closed his door, he heard his name being called. He looked around and saw the source. Aaron Vinson, head developer for Radiant Springs Resorts, LLC, was waving to him.

Leonard walked toward the uncommonly thick copse of trees and brush.

“Hey, Aaron. How's it going?”

“Going great, sir. Glad you made it out here. We've figured that this is pretty much where the main building is going to go. We're going to start clearing the land from here in the center this coming week. We'll just work our way out in a circle.”

Leonard smiled. “Sounds great. Do you foresee any problems?”



“No, sir. Actually, this wood we're standing in here is the toughest part. It's funny, really. This part is like a ring that goes around a clearing. It's really beautiful. You ought to take a look.”

Leonard paused, then turned to look at Aaron. “Did you say that it surrounds a clearing?”

“Yes, sir. If you want to see it, I'll be glad to show you.”

The two walked in silence for a couple of minutes, pausing only to untangle Leonard's jacket from the many thorn bushes. They reached the edge of the wood and Leonard looked out.

“Isn't it beautiful?” asked Aaron.

Leonard peered into the center of the clearing and saw not four, but five beautifully colored bushes.

The wind began to blow his name.

