

# Riverwood

Micah James

Down winding roads and cedar tunnels rested the cliffside abode of Riverwood. Its drive was steep, its river torrential, and its trees full of mystique. Comfortable familiarity and the creeping unknown simultaneously characterized that family homestead. For an unconstrained child, the line between fiction and reality is so thin that it is entirely reasonable for one to hop over the line and back again easily, as if it didn't exist at all. The starkness of reason was no match for seven young cousins with imaginative minds and the freedom of time; nor should it have been, in a place as enchanting as Riverwood.

From the peeling porch where we shared many meals, you could look across to the grove of cedar, fir, and ferns, and should you have a keen eye, you might spy the distant shape of our haunted place: the decrepit cabin of *Grumpy Grump*. There were numerous creatures of myth and beast whose existences were told to us in warning of lethal rapids and dangerous trestles, but this character was a being of our own ingenious creation. He was not to be seen save for shadowy glimpses amongst the angular silhouettes lingering at the edges of flickering firelight, here one moment and gone the next. When exactly *He* came to reside in that crumbling cabin and our trembling minds is uncertain, but his grasp on us was thorny and unyielding.

None of us had bravery enough to go there alone, although older brothers would boast through goosebumps and haughty laughs that they had gotten close. It was not until one fateful autumn day that we rallied a peer pressure forceful enough to embark on our exploration. Our usual ringleader had this brilliant idea, of course, and nudged that boastful talk into action. The plan was hatched in the morning over breakfast and under our breath. Parents needed not to be consulted, for this was a mission that we could not risk

being thwarted, even if some of us secretly wished for it. The early afternoon was spent gathering courage and concocting our plan. An order of eldest to youngest was agreed upon for our expedition, placing myself in the rear. It was a wise decision. I might as well admit that though my imaginative capabilities were on par with my elders, my tolerance for horror and 'spooks' had proven to be the least of the group.

The actual appearance of our destination's inhabitant was not as clear to us. No one seemed to agree on it, but each description was given equal space in our minds as a possibility. One thought he was short and round with dragging limbs, two horns, and fangs like razor blades. Another argued he was more like a crocodile, but conceded on the point of his teeth. My opinion was of lackluster appeal compared to these, as I simply imagined an old man worn with time and crooked with hatred for all children. His hair was grey and ran in slimy trickles down a greasy head to curl up at an old, sun-bleached bandana around his neck. His perpetually rain-soaked coat was slate grey and full of tears and stains. His trousers and boots were of an equally rank state, with a suggestion of red splattered up from the soles. His face was the hardest to picture: no eyes could match the hatred in his, no nose quite accurately centred that asymmetry, and no mouth as snarled and peeling could come close to what his must be. He was all that was shadow, grime, and mud stain in that wood by the river.

With this in our minds, we crept single-file past the edge of the trees and left the safety of sunlight. With every sense heightened like the hairs on our necks, we trekked through snapping twigs and squawking birds, the dull thunder of the rapids nearby a reminder of the danger in our surroundings. The cabin emerged from the trees much larger than I had imagined and seemed to loom over us as we approached its slanting porch and torn screen door. There was no turning back now for fear of being labeled a chicken for the rest of eternity.

The door creaked indignantly on rusted hinges as we filed into the small room. Dusty cobwebs clung to every surface and draped the corners, piquing a slightly more rational fear of the many-legged residents of the cabin. Our shoes scraped against shreds of old newspapers littering the wooden floor. A broken chair leaned on its side near the wall and next to it was a ladder. Through a doorway there was a small back room which was briefly investigated, but I remained by the doorway, eyes fixed on the small opening to the loft at the top of the ladder. Returning somewhat dissatisfied from the other room, the others decided that if *He* was in this house there was only one last place to look.

Elevated whispers accused and denied trepidations at length until someone was chosen to make the ascent. Filled with relief, tinged with disappointed curiosity, I moved closer to the door for an easy escape route. Meanwhile, the unlucky tribute pulled himself up, the ladder creaking under his weight. The air was still with our hitched breaths, but our ears were deafened by our thumping hearts. At long last, on the top rung he leaned forward, squinting into the darkness. At once his face flashed into something either bewildered or cunning, I could never quite decide, and he leapt from the ladder, screaming as he shoved through us and out the cabin, the door squealing shut behind him. This, of course, set us all off like a shot, howling like maniacs out of the cabin and through the trees. We collapsed, panting and heaving in the cool, fresh air of the homestead porch where a lunch of grilled cheese and onion sandwiches were getting cold awaiting us.

No amount of prying and prodding could get that cousin to reveal just what he had seen at the top of that ladder, and none of us dared even entertain the thought of returning to see for ourselves. We unanimously decided that satisfying our curiosity wasn't worth the risk. Before long, pride returned, fronts were put up, and reasonable arguments for 'no such thing' occurred at length. Even still, all through the evening our teeth were set on edge and every eye was seen flicking to and away from the dusky form of Grumpy Grump's cabin.