

Through the Woods

Matthew tugged his shirtsleeve down to cover the bruises. He worked hard at not looking conspicuous. He didn't want to draw any attention.

He took one last glance in the mirror before leaving the boys' bathroom. Tidy, short hair, cargo pants and nondescript shirt, open face. He looked too young for fourteen, but it worked to his advantage on days like this. No one would notice him. No one would guess.

The kids who looked the part were like the ones at the other end of the row of sinks. Guys in denim over layers of t-shirts, streaks of blue and orange in their hair, bits of metal gleaming from their ears, eyebrows, and noses. Guys who would bad-mouth a teacher even if they were being complimented. Guys like that were always suspect.

But Matthew never was. He got good grades, returned his library books on time, paid attention in class, and spoke respectfully to teachers. Not too respectfully. That would make him stand out. They'd wonder, *Who is this kid who's always so polite? What's he up to?* Nobody did that with Matthew. He was the sort of kid an adult would look at and, in a fraction of a second, decide, *He's all right. No need to bother about him*, and move on to someone who looked like trouble.

"Take a picture, moron," one of the metal boys said, catching Matthew looking at them. They knocked him into the sinks as they left the bathroom. Not hard, just the usual sort of random male violence that high school was all about. Usually, the thugs left him alone, just like the teachers did. It was no fun messing with someone who didn't look scared. Instead, Matthew looked like someone who would fight back, hard, if he was really pushed enough. He would, too. That was something else his open, boy-face camouflaged. He wasn't afraid of pain. Not anymore.

Matthew picked up his books from the floor where they'd fallen and went out into the jungle of the corridor. Eat or be eaten. There was always something to avoid. Sneering groups of girls he didn't like. Jenna, a girl he did like, clinging as usual to the school's sports hero, Cro-Magnon Guy. Athletes throwing basketballs in the hallway—forbidden, of course, but that was how

it went. And teachers, those unpredictable creatures with the powers to ruin his whole day. Matthew would have tried to blend in even if he wasn't on a mission.

Today's date with destiny was waiting for him in the library. The Religious Studies shelf was positioned in such a way that anyone standing there had a clear view of the library door and the study hall, where bored teachers prowled, looking for trouble. The librarians behind the desk couldn't see what was happening in Religious Studies. No one went to that shelf except for the sci-fi freaks, looking for books on UFOs. And they'd stay away once they saw that Hammer was there.

Matthew entered the library and saw the hulking figure of the football captain waiting for him. Hammer looked almost comical, pretending to browse the shelf. Matthew didn't go straight to him, but approached in a circular way, through Biology, Biography, and back behind History.

"Searching for God?" Matthew asked Hammer in a voice just above a whisper.

"You're late."

Matthew checked his watch. He was early but he didn't say so. They were there to do business, not to argue.

He took down a book on liberation theology. Peasants and workers overthrowing tyrants around

the world. It was his usual choice. The size was big enough for cover, and the title was interesting enough to be plausible. What kid wouldn't dream of overthrowing tyrants?

Matthew always thought up elaborate schemes for this moment. Should he pretend to sneeze and reach into his pocket for a handkerchief? Should they count to three, then do the exchange? But once he was there, though, quick and simple always seemed best; and it was always over with before he had a chance to get theatrical about it.

He had a single fifty-dollar bill folded small and tucked into the side pocket of his Chinos. Matthew assumed Hammer was overcharging him, but what was he going to do about it? He held the book open in one hand, and with the other, he handed over the money. Hammer gave him a small, plastic ziplock bag. Almost as quickly, Matthew made it disappear. On business days he always wore his cargo pants. The bag in his pocket wouldn't be noticed.

"How nice to see you in the library, Alexander." Mr. Hennessy, one of those soft-soled teachers, suddenly appeared beside them.

Hammer stumbled and fumbled. Matthew quickly picked up the ball.

"He asked me to help him find a prayer for the

locker room," Matthew said, keeping his voice calm and polite, even though his insides were shaking, rattling, and rolling.

"Big game coming up against Brant Collegiate," Hammer said, recovering. "Wouldn't hurt to have an edge."

"There's another edge that will help you," Mr. Hennessy said. "It's called studying. Big test coming up, too." Mr. Hennessy taught Geography.

"I could give it a try," Hammer said, with a grin. Football stars could make jokes with the teachers.

Then two girls in the study hall started arguing about sharing space at one of the tables, and Mr. Hennessy went off to lay down the law.

"Great," said Hammer. "What if he talks to the coach? What am I supposed to say?"

Matthew reached up and pulled down a book called *Prayers for All Occasions*. "Your coach will be impressed," he said and started to walk away.

Hammer grabbed his arm. "What about some meth?" he asked. "I can get you a good price."

Matthew pulled his arm away and left the library. Business was over.

There was still the afternoon to get through.

Matthew was always tempted at this point to keep the plastic bag on him, close to him, but it was too big of

a risk. Suppose it fell out of his pocket? Every now and then, police would walk through the school with drug-sniffing dogs. The students had all been warned. Announcements were made regularly that this could happen, and notes were sent home with each report card. Dogs would find the bag in his pocket. Matthew hoped his locker was safe.

The lunch-time corridor was crazy with activity. Couples necking, kids arguing, boys harassing girls, girls harassing girls. The air stank of old lunches and desperate survival.

Matthew got to his locker. He looked around without appearing to look. Then it was just a matter of leaning the right way and making a quick transfer. He'd already positioned his gym shoes. The plastic bag fit right down inside the toe. Right after it, he shoved in his bunched up, still-damp gym socks. He'd worked out especially hard in gym class that morning. He hoped that, if this was a dog day, all the dog would smell at his locker was stale foot sweat. It wasn't a great plan, but it was the best he had so far.

Three classes in the afternoon: Physics, Math, and Biology. Fortunately, they were the sort of classes that required concentration. Matthew could get lost in formulas and equations, only occasionally losing his focus to the bag in his gym shoes. History or Literature classes gave him too much time to think.

At the end of the day, he had to stop and chat with his teacher about the Math Olympiad coming up. That was normal, and everything normal had to be done. Putting his shoes and socks in his backpack afterward was normal, too. Anybody would do that.

Still, he felt like he had a big sign over his head as he left the school and headed through the town—a big, Las Vegas neon sign, flashing on and off. Arrest This Boy.

"Hello, Mrs. Pierce," he said to a friend of his mother's, who was stepping out of the Clip and Curl. Mr. Dreyer, the owner of the hardware store, lived next door, so Matthew had to greet him too as the man straightened the collection of lawn rakes leaning against the store wall.

It's a normal day, Matthew thought. I'm heading home from school on a normal day.

When he got through the downtown, he didn't turn right when he passed the cenotaph, the way home. He turned left instead. He crossed the High Level Bridge, high up over the Grand River. But he paid no attention to the view. Views were for the way home, when the job was all done.

At the store on the corner he bought a couple of Kit Kat bars and a pack of rolling papers. It wasn't far now. The Meadowvale Nursing Home was just ahead.

"Hello, Matthew." The nurse on duty at the front desk greeted him with a smile, the same as always. "She's out by the fountain."

"Can I take her for a little walk?"

"I think she'd like that. Don't let her get chilled, though."

It was a warm day, but getting chilled on warm days was an old-lady specialty.

The little woman in the wheelchair sitting by the fishpond had pain written on her face, but it brightened when Matthew walked into the sunroom.

"I'm always so afraid for you," she said as he bent down to kiss her cheek.

"Couldn't be easier," he said. "Ready?"

She already had her shawl draped across her lap. He put it around her shoulders to keep the nurses happy. They left by the front door.

Gran was so slight it wasn't hard work at all to push the wheelchair up the hill, along the little dirt pathway behind the Home, through the woods, all the way up to the old Anglican cemetery. The groundskeepers had just given the lawn the final mow of the season. The grass was short and it was easy to roll the chair to the bench under the maple tree. The leaves on the tree were so brilliantly red they looked like they were on fire.

Matthew opened his backpack and took the little plastic bag out of his gym shoe.

"How are things at home?" Gran asked.

"The same," he said, then corrected himself. "Better." He tugged on his shirt cuff.

Matthew did the rolling. Gran's fingers, once nimble and intelligent, were too arthritic now for such fine work. He passed the joint to his grandmother and struck a match.

"I wish I could have kept you with me," she said.

"It's better now," he told her. "Really." He motioned for her to put the joint in her mouth, and he touched the flame to it.

She took a long breath in, held in the smoke, then exhaled slowly, with relief. She smiled at Matthew.

"Nothing else works," she said. She filled her lungs again with the drug. Matthew had told her how to smoke it, passing on what Hammer had told him. "Pretty professional for a lifelong nonsmoker, eh?" she said. She said that every time.

"Top of the line," he told her.

Matthew settled back on the bench and rolled the rest of the joints while Gran smoked. He felt her relax beside him, the pain and the tension sliding away.

The rolled joints made a little pile on the bench. Later, they'd have fun hiding them around her room

for her to smoke on her own when he couldn't be with her.

The last joint he rolled made a small, smooth tube, a little slip of a thing he could cup in his hand and drop into his pocket. He could smoke it later, leaning over the railing of the High Level Bridge, looking down over the river and waiting for the night to fall and his parents to pass out. Time and pain would disappear with the smoke, and for a while, like Gran, he would be at ease and at peace. He ran his fingers over the joint, smoothing out the wrinkles, imagining what it would feel like to have that weight and worry lifted off him.

"Kit Kat?" asked Gran. She grinned.

Matthew grinned back. He put the joint on the little pile with the others, and broke out the Kit Kats. They ate the chocolate, Matthew getting Gran to eat half of his along with hers—she was so thin!—and they looked out across the graveyard at the changing colors of the trees. They listened to the birds and exchanged small thoughts, and Matthew doubted that he'd ever feel this close to anyone, ever again.

Pretty Flowers

She stood in the middle of her family's poppy field, giving Zameer a lesson. The sky was a clear, brilliant blue—as blue, Tahmina thought, as her own eyes and those of her younger brother's as well.

"You can't cut too deeply," she told Zameer. "Just cut the skin. If you cut right into the pod, the *sheera* will pour out too fast, all over the ground. And how will we collect it then?"

Tahmina was an expert. She'd harvested opium with her father for two years on another family's plot, and she knew, just knew, how much pressure to put on her knife. It was good to be good at things. Tahmina was twelve years old, and good at five things: harvesting opium, arithmetic, planting things so that they would grow, looking after her little brothers, and making her mother laugh.

Through the Woods Questions

Working in groups of 2-3, answer the following questions. You will each have to write your own answers on the space provided, but you can work together to come up with the response.

1. What do you think of Matthew and his Grandmother. Are the behaviours and emotions of these characters believable? Why or why not?

2. Relate an experience you or someone you know has had that in some way parallels the experiences of a character(s) in the story. How might you respond to experiences like these?

3. Explain how Matthew's home/school life contributes to the decisions he makes.

4. The ending of the story is open to interpretation. What do you think the future holds for the main characters?
