

By: Thomas Rempalski

White Rose

Witherbranch was a small town, the kind of town where everyone who lived there knew everyone else. There was one general goods store, one gas station, and one cafe where everyone gathered at night to cool off after a full day's work. Farms covered the town--countless acres of fields full of corn. This is where Ezekial and his family lived--on a quaint countryside street of Witherbrach with only five other houses on the mile long block. At the end of the block was a quiet forest, where Ezekial enjoyed free time with his friends playing Cowboys and Indians between sweet-smelling pine and shady, cool oak. He would be playing with his friends right now if it wasn't for his daily garden chores. As it was fall, leaves crowded the ground and plants were choked out of existence, creating an eyesore out of a once beautiful bed of flora. Ezekial pulled out dead weed after dead weed from the overgrown garden hoping each weed was his last before another one would appear right behind it. The work was tedious, and his muscles ached for a little rest, *but if I ever rested*, he thought, *I will never be able to shoot pretend guns at my friends*, so he pressed on with constant encouragement from his mind.

As he scrounged through the soft dirt, his hand fell upon a thorn. "Agh!" Ezekial yelled as pain coursed through his hand. He wiped the bead of blood on his worn out, dirt encased pants and looked up. It was a dead rose, but there was another, and another. Dead roses ran around in a circle surrounding a central rose, but this one was

different? Instead of having a dead, rotten bulb like the other roses, it was a white rose, healthy and blooming.

“Huh, that’s weird,” Ezekial said to himself delicately piling the dead rose shoots together. But, then again, who knows if his mother recently planted the white rose or something like that. Ezekial shrugged off his tentative worry, yet he stored it in the back of his mind, just in case.

After completing his chores, he quickly ran off to the woods not waiting to ask his mom, dreading to be held back from his friends due to it being “too late”. His shoes slapped on the hard packed dirt road as the sun began to fall below the clouds. He heard the yelling of other kids as he entered the forest, jumping over roots and crawling under branches as he followed the sounds. He tramped into a clearing, where a ring of trees beheld a leafy floor with sunshine pushing through the branches. In this clearing was a rotting, wooden shack with a sign dangling on the front that said “Fort Hemlock”. Two kids, a dark-skinned boy in a cowboy hat with fingers poised as a gun and a blonde-haired girl with a feather in her hair pulling back a pretend bowstring, ran around the fort and behind trees, making “pew” and “twang” sounds with their mouths. They heard the crack of twigs and turned towards Ezekial with joy-filled smiles on their faces.

“Hey, you started without me!” complained Ezekial.

“Well, you didn’t get ‘ere soon enough,” crooned Sara leaning against a tree. She was about the same age as Ezekial and was always was the curious one, exploring new landmarks in the forest and sometimes getting into trouble.

“Yeah, and, I mean, there’s still some time left in the day. Draw your weapon and fight,” said Abraham pointing his finger gun at Ezekial. He was a bit older than Ezekial and Sara, yet just as fun as the two. He was usually the leader of the group, most of the time leading the trio away from the danger of Sara’s ventures.

Ezekial sped inside the shack and pulled a headband and a dirty turkey feather off the right wall shelf. Strapping the feather to his head with the headband, he ran out of the shack and jumped into a nearby bush. Peeking out, Ezekial sent volleys of arrows at Abraham who jumped behind the fort while Sara tried to flank from behind. The three played and played for hours and hours. An amber harvest moon crested above the horizon, shining between the trees, highlighting the golden colors of the leaves hanging from the trees. Ezekial saw Abraham stop running and stare at the moon with a worried look plastered on his face.

“Ah no, I need to get home before dinner’s over,” fretted Abraham, shivering at the new cool breeze that had suddenly spawned. “My mama’s going to be worried sick about me.”

“Ugh, come on, it feels like I just got here,” cried Ezekial also glancing at the autumn moon. He noticed it was bigger than usual, but he reasoned that to some moon phase thing he would eventually learn at school.

“We can come back tomorrow Zeke,” reassured Sara. “Anyways, I spotted this new cave that I’d really like to explore tomorrow!” she added on excitedly. “C’mon, let’s go.”

The three stumbled and tripped through the dark forest back toward their homes, feeling through the writhing trees with the dim light fostered by the moon. Abraham led the group, pacing faster and faster, trying to get home for dinner. The air got cooler and breezier as Sara and Ezekial tried to keep up. It seemed like the three had been running forever, each tree looking the same as the one before, and Ezekial could've sworn that the moon had risen up a little more than when he last checked. When Ezekial looked back up, he saw that Abraham had gotten a little ways ahead of him and Sara, who was fighting to catch her breath.

Abraham turned around and yelled, "Hurry up, guys! We're almost home."

"Shouldn't we be BACK home by now?" Sara complained, stopping for a breather.

"Nah, I can feel it. It won't be long now," said Abraham turning back around and walking forward.

They kept walking, slower now, starting to shiver from the frosty wind that whistled through the trees. It sounded like voices, taunting them, telling them they were going the wrong way. Abraham looked around, starting to wonder if they were going the wrong way. Ezekial's stomach growled, crying for something to satiate its hunger. He spotted a blueberry bush, an uncommon sight in this forest.

"Hey, let's stop here," Ezekial gasped shambling over to the bush.

"But we're almost home," replied Abraham, yet walking to the bush with temptation in his eyes.

Sara ran over to the bush and started shoveling berries in her mouth. “Mmbf, yep dart’s gud,” she said around her full mouth.

Abraham popped a few berries in mouth and started to walk toward a clump of trees. “I’m going to use the bathroom,” he said.

Ezekial and Sara turned away and kept eating the berries off the thin branches.

“Hey, uh guys, look at this,” Abraham called with a quaver in his voice.

“This better not be one of your ‘hey look at this puddle’ tricks,” mocked Sara.

“No, I’m serious. Look at this.”

Sara and Ezekial followed Abraham’s voice to where he was crouched, looking at something on the ground.

“What are you looking ...?” Ezekial trailed off seeing what was on the ground.

Footprints. What were they doing all the way out here, in the middle of nowhere?

“Are these ours?” asked Abraham.

“Nope,” said all three looking at the patterns on the soles of their shoes.

“I wonder,” started Abraham following the tracks with his eyes.

“Let’s follow ‘em!” said Sara finishing his thought and pursuing the prints.

“Wait!” Abraham cried, knowing full well he wouldn’t be able to talk her out of following the tracks. Hope arose in Zeke, however, that following the footprints might lead them out of this never ending forest. Hopefully. *Hopefully.*

They pressed on, following the tracks, around trees, over rocks, and through small mushy bogs. The tracks didn’t seem to know where they were going, just wandering through the woods with no intent on following a specific direction. Yet,

Ezekial and his friends chased them as it was their only lead. What seemed like hours passed as they ventured further and further than before into the seemingly never ending forest. The pale orange shadows of the trees got longer and longer as the moon began to crest midnight in the sky above. The three were now huddled together as the frosty chill penetrated their dirt marked pants and thin T-shirts. Slower and slower they got as their legs choked for a rest. Their faces started to diminish, losing hope in ever getting out, ever getting home to their families. Then Ezekial stopped and sat with the smash of leaves.

“No, we can’t stop now,” encouraged Abraham, his quaking voice contradicting his words. “We’re almost home, I can feel it.”

“You can’t feel anything!” retorted Ezekial. “Face it, we’re never getting out of here! We can’t do anything! Why don’t we just sit here and die!”

“We ain’t gonna die,” said Sara facing them while walking backwards. “We just have to keep...WOAAHHH!” she screamed falling over the edge of a hill.

“SARA!” screamed Abraham running after her with Ezekial stumbling at his heels.

They slid down the side of the hill and met Sara gripping her hand at the bottom.

“Are you hurt?” asked Ezekial worrying at her spasming hand.

“Nah, just a small scratch,” She said unclasping her hand. A large scarlet smear was sliced along the crease, dripping with fresh blood.

“That ain’t no small scratch,” commented Abraham staring at the wound.

Ezekial looked down to where Sara had fell. A pile of leaves were piled around something white and blood soaked. He touched the white object and felt dry, barkless wood. *She must've scratched herself on the root.* He looked up to find no white trees in sight, but he did notice that the white root led through the forest floor to something up ahead. *A clearing?* Desperate for some way out of this mind numbing forest, Ezekial followed the white root that trailed along the ground to the expanse up ahead. His friends had figured out where he was going and tentatively followed him. As he walked, a sight made him stop in his tracks. Shapes that looked like people were circled around a white, ominous looking tree. But that didn't bother Ezekial as his spirits lifted when he saw the people. Running, he edged on the clearing and his stomach tightened. These shapes weren't people, they were trees. Dead trees. The trees were twisted into the shapes of people, with white roots which had climbed up the trunks, penetrating inside the tree as if sucking the sap that gave them life. The white tree in the middle was alive with branches twisting every which way, highlighted by the now crimson moon at the top of the sky. Abraham investigated the dead trees surrounding the central tree, peeling away the bark to find nothing, hollow core and nothing. Ezekial stood back, contemplating what was happening in this unnatural space.

Sara jumped back with a startled expression on her face. "Did any of y'all just see that tree move?"

Ezekial looked back at the tree seeing nothing.

"Are you sure you ain't just seeing things? We've been out here awhile," said Abraham with a quaver in his voice.

“No, I think I saw it move,” replied Sara backing away from the circle.

Rustle. Ezekial looked behind Sara and saw a white root creeping unnoticed behind her back.

“SARA, WATCH OUT!” yelled Ezekial rushing to grab Sara.

The root suddenly wrapped around her ankle as she made a gesture to run. Sara screamed at the top of her lungs as she struggled against the grasp of the root. Ezekial and Abraham rushed to her aid and tried to wrench her away from the root’s grip, but the root kept climbing up her leg, twisting and twisting, constricting her movement from where she stood. Ezekial and Abraham let go of Sara as it climbed up her torso and over her arms. The root steadied her hand and suddenly pierced through her flesh wound. Sara let out a bloodcurdling scream as the root writhed through her body, soaking up her blood and energy fresh from her veins.

“We gotta get out of here!” yelled Abraham starting to run from the tree that was consuming Sara. Ezekial sprinted after him, running away from the dreadful place, running away from the plant that was killing his friend, running anywhere but here. Suddenly, Abraham tripped on something covered by the leaves. A white root grabbed his leg and started to surround his body.

Ezekial stopped and turned to his friend. “ABRAHAM!” he yelled starting to run back and rescue his last friend.

“GET OUT OF HERE NOW!” commanded Abraham as the root wrapped around his neck, preventing him from saying any more.

Ezekial ran. He sprinted, not thinking about what had just happened. Sprinted without stopping to catch his breath. Sprinted not knowing if a root was behind him. Sprinted anywhere but there.

The warm air hit him like a gush of air on a calm day. The sun greeted him with a bright face as if nothing had happened. He was out of the woods, running home, where he belonged. As he ran, he thought about his friends. *They're dead. Both of them dead. Swallowed up by the tree. All now just wooden husks of bodies just like the ones around the tree.* Ezekial called to mind a memory from the day before. *Victims, just like the dead flowers around the white rose.*