

# Hide and Find

# One

"One, two, three..." Larry started his count, leaning against the great old oak on the corner. The Jerome Place kids all ran for cover. In Jerome Place hide-and-seek, you could hide anywhere on the block: anywhere you could get to within the count of one hundred. Andrew ran to the woods at the far end of the block, and leaped into the brush just as he heard Larry cry, "One hundred! Ready or not, here I come!" The cry sounded faint to Andrew because of his distance from Larry and the cover of the trees.

The thought of his mother flitted through Andrew's head. This hide-and-seek game had begun as soon as all the kids had stampeded off the school bus. Andrew had not yet returned home. He had not even poked his head into the house to yell "I'm home" to his mother before running to the woods. In his mind, he saw her standing in the entrance to the kitchen, a wooden spoon in her hand. "She'll get mad when it starts getting dark," he thought, but then, "After this one game, I'll run right home. This will be quick."

As he slowly made his way deeper into the woods, Andrew thought, "Larry will never find me here." The woods were much darker than the street, and Andrew needed to feel his way until his eyes adjusted to the gloom. He told himself he needed to walk quietly, lest a snapping twig or rustling branch give him away. But this was only a story he was telling himself. Had he instead just listened, he might have heard the truth being whispered in the canopy of leaves:

*Larry will keep seeking the kids hiding nearest himself, at the other end of the block. Larry will not hear noises, not even loud noises, coming from these woods.*

*Walk through the woods quietly anyway—because the woods demand it.*

The woods frightened Andrew. Only recently had his mother given him permission to walk to this end of the block on his own, and he wasn't really sure her permission extended into the woods. He had stepped into the woods only once before, not staying long enough for his eyes to adjust. He had seen only profiles of looming trees, had heard animals rustling in the brush, and had seen the shape of a dead squirrel, its skull exposed. He had shivered in the cool air of the woods, and had run back to the sunlight of the street.

Now Andrew's eyes had adjusted to the dim light, He saw the tall old oaks; and the scrub oaks and small plants crowding the floor of the woods. He saw a lacework of little trails worn through the underbrush by people and deer who had explored these woods before him. One of these little trails brought him to the hole.

Andrew found a hole, sunk into the floor of the woods, amidst a circle of trees. The hole was large enough for a full-grown man to lay down in it without having his head or feet protrude from it. If an eight-year-old boy stood in its center, only his head would appear above the ground. If he sat down in it, he would be very hard to find. Andrew climbed carefully down into the hole. He thought, "Larry will never find me in here," and "This can be my secret place."

*No-one will find you here.*

When he reached the bottom of the hole, Andrew sat on a tree root protruding through the ground. He sat still, and listened. He saw a centipede wriggle under a leaf. Andrew heard a battery of footsteps drifting through the woods to him from the street. The Jerome Court kids had run to the edge of the woods, had paused, and had run back up the block. "Maybe they're running from Larry," he thought. "He'll probably get to this end of the block soon." Then, Andrew noticed that the leaves in the hole vibrated with hundreds of tiny motions, as insects walked over them or nibbled at them. He used a twig to overturn an active leaf, and found a nest of tiny white wriggling things.

A cool breeze made Andrew shiver, and he realized the woods were getting darker. "I hope Larry finds me, or yells 'I give up,' soon." Andrew heard only the sounds of the high leaves trembling in the cold breeze.

Sitting in the hole, Andrew clutched his knees to his chest, and remembered trying to play soccer with the Jerome Place kids a week earlier. Andrew had brought the ball, and invited the kids to come out to the open field with him where they could play. But once in the field, the kids had taken an interest in other soccer games. Eventually, they all joined the other games. The kids had left Andrew alone with his ball. Andrew now slipped from the root onto the ground at the bottom of the hole. He stretched out his legs and started covering them with leaves. He told himself that he wanted to see if the leaves would warm his legs.

*Make your legs disappear.*

Andrew thought about that soccer game as he buried his legs. He started humming a sad tune, and made up words for a song. The word didn't rhyme. They seemed to wander like someone lost.

I brought the ball so we can play.  
Will you play with me?

You stand over there; I'm over here.  
Say you will play with me.

I'll kick it to you, and...no?  
Would you rather I throw it?

OK, here it comes, and, oh,  
It flew right past you. What?

You were watching their game, over there?  
Not the ball, not our game over here?

Larry, Andrea, will you play?  
Chuck? No, he went over there,

To that game over there,  
But we can play here.

Will you play with me?  
I brought the ball.

Andrew found himself lying on his back, and he covered himself with leaves up to his chin. “Larry will never find me like this, especially if I cover my face too. But when I hear his footsteps nearby, I’ll jump up from under these leaves and scare him. OK, if he’s not even looking for me, my mother will come for me in a while. I’ll just wait and see.”

Andrew covered his face with leaves and listened to the crackling the bugs made as they chewed. Even if his mother had come looking for him, together with Larry and all the Jerome Place kids; even if all of them had found the hole in the woods—and stared straight into it—they would not have detected the shape of Andrew lying under those leaves, at the bottom of the hole, in the dimming evening light.

And Andrew would not have heard them. Andrew had become lost in the crackling, had melted into the sweet earthy smell of the rotting leaves. He had left the Jerome Place kids—and his mother—behind, somewhere far outside the woods. All that remained of them was the melody, lingering in the back of his mind, of his sad humming tune. And the canopy shivered above him.

*Take your rest.*

# Two

When Andrew awoke, he could still hear the crackling and the sad humming tune. The smell of the rotting leaves seemed to fill his very pores. But the ground beneath his back had grown hard, knotty, and icy. He teeth chattered from the cold. When he lifted his head through the leaves, his eyes found, not dusky sunlight, but darkness. Even the silhouettes of the trees were barely visible, Through the canopy, Andrew saw only a black sky, and now a small star. Larry had not found him, and the game of hide-and-seek must have ended long ago. "I guess this means I won," Andrew said to himself. From the black sky, Andrew guessed that dinner was long over too.

As he stood, many leaves clung to Andrew's clothes, but he did not shake them off. As he took his first step, his toe touched something under the leaves. It was something hard, but it was light enough to move at the touch. Andrew bent over, and let his fingers explore the area near his foot. They felt something cold and smooth, and from under the oak leaves and acorns, his fingers brought up a disk. It was a black vinyl phonograph record. Andrew could only imagine why, or how long, this record had lain at the bottom of the hole in the woods. It had lain there without cover, and without explanation, like any acorn.

*Take it.*

Andrew took care not to scratch the record as he walked slowly, quietly, out of the woods. On the street, he turned to face the woods before he headed home. He felt awe, but not fear. He raised his eyes to the whispering canopy, now only a black silhouette against a starry black sky. The fear was gone, and Jerome Place had somehow receded from him while he lay in the hole in the woods. The words to his humming song returned to his mind, but now they sounded stupid to him. Still, he hummed its sad tune as he turned for home.

*Listen.*

# Three

As he entered the house, Andrew caught sight of his image in the alcove mirror. Oak leaves were pinned to his sweater, and one stuck out of the hair behind his right ear. His pants and shoes were covered with mud. His face was streaked with the dirt from his leafy cover, and moist trails, one starting just under each eye, ran through it.

"Andrew!" He saw the silhouette of his mother standing in the entry to the kitchen, lit from behind by the glaring kitchen neons. "Why didn't you come when I called you for dinner?" Then, as her eyes adjusted to the dim light of the alcove, she shouted, "What have you done to your school clothes?" Andrew stood looking at his mother, and, for the first time, saw only a woman, a human being like any other, as sad as any other. He said nothing, but became aware again of the vinyl disk he held under his arm.

His silence turned his mother's anger to maternal pity in an instant. "What happened to you, sweetheart? Are you hurt? Let me see you. Tell mama what happened." She had stretched her arms toward him, but she found her rage again when Andrew brushed past her on his way into the living room. "Don't you dare track mud across the carpet!"

Andrew walked straight to the stereo, wiping dust from the record with his sleeve. He held it before his eyes so he could examine its surface. One small scratch ran through a short section of one side, and a longer, but faint, scratch ran through the tracks on the other. He turned up the side with the short scratch. Through the mud on the label, Andrew could make out the name *Tchaikovsky*. Scratching off a bit of mud, he read *1812 Overture*.

Andrew placed the disk on the turntable, watched it spin, and waited for the tone arm to make the slow journey from its cradle to the surface of the record.

"Andrew," his mother said. Her voice was low, though he had left a trail of mud and leaves all the way to the stereo. She said his name in a half-whisper, wanting to pull him back—from what, she did not know—to draw him into her arms. She was afraid that she was already too late.

Andrew did not speak, determined that neither of their voices would mar the music. He shot a stern glance at his mother. She now seemed distant, frail. His glance had brought her to silence.

The somber notes opening the *1812 Overture* rose quietly from the stereo with a fragrance. Andrew smelled again the sweet earthy smell of the rotting leaves, as though his face were still covered with them. The crescendo of the strings brought to his skin the feeling of oak bark. As the notes passed through his body, it became oak. He stood before the stereo, tall, but poised for motion. Like Toscanini before an orchestra, Andrew stood like an oak awaiting a breeze.

Andrew had never before heard *God Save the Tsar!* nor *La Marseillaise*, and their melodies in the *Overture* did not, for him, evoke the battling armies of Russia and France. The *Overture* was only the song of his woods: the sound of its liquid energy rising from the soil. He swayed with the sound. He raised his hands before the stereo as he had seen conductors raise their hands before orchestras. At first, his hands floated on the surface of the sounds, but now they reached into the orchestra and drew new sounds out from it. He pulled, and drew out the light percussive munching of leaves by the insects. He spread his hands above his head, and released the songs of birds. The music grew strong with the yearning of the trees as they stretch sunward. But it was not the sun for which the woods yearned. Andrew leaned into the orchestra, arms moving rapidly, caught in Tchaikovsky's rhythms, trying to reach it.

*What is it that the woods yearn for?*

The symphonic waves now lifted his body and propelled it forward. The pulse of the orchestra, the sap of the oaks, ran through Andrew's core. *This* is what the woods wanted. This is what the woods had planted in him while he was buried under the leaves, in the nest the oaks had opened for him. The woods long ago had whispered their desire to Tchaikovsky, and Tchaikovsky had given voice to that desire. Long before they had a voice, the woods had pushed through rock

and soil; but in the orchestra the woods had grown beyond wood. Pushing through human flesh and blood, the woods had ascended into music. Now, the music itself was changing in Andrew, as Andrew was growing in the music. No great oak ever had conducted a thunderstorm with more power than Andrew now sent into his orchestra—waving his oaken limbs in the philharmonic storm whirling from his stereo. He raised his hands high above his head, then threw them straight out to right and left, his palms open toward the sky. He stretched his arms straight out to either side, straining, as though he could will his limbs to grow—longer, thicker—and the explosions in the *Overture's finale* cleared the last echoes of the self-pitying song from Andrew's mind.

Andrew silently thanked the oaks for the nest they had opened for him in the woods, and for the vinyl record they had dropped into the nest. Like any acorn, the music of the vinyl disk had needed soil. As Andrew swayed in the final waves of the *1812 Overture*, rotting leaves, munching insects and rustling animals, soil and rainwater, all pulsed in his veins: luminous, kindled with their slow-burning green fire.

**Hide and Find** by Stephen Muratore

© 2008