

# *A Short Story*



## *The Forest Talks*

**ANDREW CHEFFERS**

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As our world changes in no time, the words of this story are assisted by AI; the story itself was constructed and designed by the author.

Andrew Cheffers  
andrew.cheffers@gmail.com

# PROLOGUE

The Algonquin Provincial Park is one of Canada's most iconic wilderness areas, a vast protected area of forest, lakes, and rivers in southeastern Ontario. The park feels like a classic northern forest—endless stands of maple, pine, and spruce broken up by over 2,000 lakes and winding waterways. In autumn, the landscape transforms into a vivid display of red, orange, and gold, the best that Canada has to offer. Algonquin is deeply quiet and immersive. Adventurers could paddle across a misty lake at sunrise, and see moose standing at the water's edge or hear the haunting call of a loon echoing across the water. Wildlife is abundant—black bears, wolves, deer, and countless bird species live within its boundaries. There's a strong sense of both accessibility and wildness. Deeper into the park lies a true backcountry experience where people travel by canoe from lake to lake via portages to camp at remote shores. Overall, Algonquin Provincial Park is a place where water, forest, and sky blend into a peaceful, expansive wilderness—simultaneously serene and alive.

Historically, the area has long been connected to Indigenous peoples, especially the Algonquin (the Anishinaabe people). One of the Anishinaabe legendary storytellers, Nanabozho, is both a teacher and a trickster. His actions are sometimes wise and sometimes foolish, and teach lessons about humility, respect, honesty, and the consequences of greed or carelessness. An unsuspecting

camper could find out about these lessons not through the teachings but in other ways.

# THE FOREST TALKS



On this beautiful autumn day, the breeze would disturb the foliage, causing a whispering sound. A calming, soft sound, described as a gentle rustling melody. The occasional buzzing insects, yelping frogs, and bird calls would echo through the high canopy and cascade back to earth in a tidal wave of noise. The forest was at peace. Although this area of the woods had a path between two lakes, it can be disturbed by frequent travellers who portage their canoes and backpacks along the way.

On this day, footsteps, mixed with the hum of a human, appeared. The humming was slightly higher in pitch, a juvenile male vocal cord; the tune was trivial, perhaps made up on the spot, but with a nervous tone. The hiker wasn't carrying anything; his pack and canoe were back at the lake, his eyes weren't on the path but darted out towards the trees, and he had heard a remote call somewhere off the track. He was searching for a girl he had only met 20 minutes ago. She had lost her friend Sandy, her canoeing companion, and she had gone off to look for her. The young man was caught in a paradox, looking for the person who was looking for someone else. He stopped and called out her name, waiting, hoping for a reply. The slight call, a distant voice off the path, had inspired him to step into the abyss.

The trees started watching him the moment the path disappeared. Jack told himself that was ridiculous. Trees don't watch. Trees don't think. Trees are just there, quiet and patient, like they had been for hundreds of years before he was born and would long after he was gone. That thought didn't help as much as he hoped. He turned in a slow circle. The trail had been clear a few minutes ago—packed dirt, a ribbon of certainty winding through the woods. Now it was just... gone. Replaced by leaves, roots, and too many identical trunks stretching in every direction. "Okay," he whispered, because silence felt worse. "Okay. Don't panic." His voice sounded small, like it didn't belong out here. Jack tried to remember what his dad had said on their limited hikes. Something about staying put. Or was it keep moving? That seemed like an important detail to forget. A breeze slid through the trees, and the branches answered with a soft, whispering shhhhhh. Jack's shoulders jumped. For a second, it sounded like someone telling him to be quiet. "I am quiet," he muttered quickly, as if the forest needed reassurance. Each step felt like a decision he'd regret later. Twigs snapped under his shoes, loud as breaking glass. The deeper he went, the dimmer it got, even though it was late morning. The canopy overhead entangled the sunlight into thin, weak threads. What if he walked in circles? What if his family couldn't find him? What if— "Stop," he said sharply, pressing his hands to his face. "Stop thinking like that." But his thoughts didn't stop. They multiplied. Every shadow became a flicker of darkness. Every bend between trees looked like a path until it wasn't. The silence kept breaking in strange ways—rustling leaves, distant creaks, something skittering just out of sight. Each sound sent a fresh spike of panic through him. He

looked up towards the canopy and thought, “WHAT THE HELL AM I DOING HERE?”

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Jack had received a call from his uncle, asking, How would you like to go on a camping trip? Part of him was already saying no, loud and repeatedly, but another part - the quiet one was curious. Curious about camping, the woods, hiking, and what there was to see. “Would it just be us?” he asked. No, there is a bunch of us, including your brother. Jack hesitated. He loved his older brother, but he could be a handful. He knew that his brother would go, regardless. Jack thought again, hoping it might be fun. Jack had previously finished high school and was contemplating going straight to university or taking a year off. The call came at the right time. Jack had never been camping before or ever been in the woods for too long. Yes, he went for hikes with his family, but they were only short walks, like stopovers where his father would see a lookout sign on the highway, and they would hike the short distance to the lookout platform. Those tracks were normally dirt, but easy to walk on; his mother had a phobia of creepy crawlies. So, their walks were conditional.

Jack had a comfortable life; his bed was tightly made, his meals were glamorously prepared, and his laundry was folded and neatly put away in his closet. He liked having these things done for him, but he also liked being independent and had to start doing things on his own, leaving home, getting a job and being responsible. He looked through his wardrobe to pack his clothes and noticed he had no hiking garments; the closet was mostly collared shirts,

long slacks, and polished shoes. He would need to go shopping, but he had no money and would have to ask his parents for help.

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Jack woke up one morning during his camping trip like he'd been dropped into his own body from a great height. “—and it exploded—”

He flinched, eyes snapping open to a ceiling of dull green fabric inches from his face. For a second, he didn't know where he was. The air smelled like plastic and damp grass with a hint of poo. Something pressed against his leg. His heart was already racing, like it had started without him. Then, he heard the sound that smelled like guts everywhere. “Oh my—can you stop that?” Jack croaked, voice scratchy and small. The smell was overbearing. His brother giggled, and then Jack rolled onto his back, blinking hard, putting his hands to his nose. The tent glowed faintly with early morning light, shadows shifting every time someone moved outside. The fabric walls breathed in and out with the wind, as if the whole thing were alive.

Peter was kneeling, looking into his bag, his hair sticking out in every direction, dressed and ready to go.

“You're awake! Finally! I've been up for ages. You were narrating a horror movie in my ear.” Like a zombie in survival mode.”

Jack slid his hands down his sides and sat up slowly. The sleeping bag tangled around his legs like it was trying to keep him there. His head felt thick, like it was full of cotton. Outside, birds were shouting over each other. A zipper

buzzed. Someone was laughing. Everything already seemed too much.

Jack focused on breathing—slow in, slow out—just like he’d practised. But it was hard to find a rhythm with Peter bouncing around the tent, knocking into things and rustling plastic bags as if they personally offended him.

“Where’s my sandals?” Peter asked suddenly.

“I don’t know.”

“It was right here.”

“I just woke up, Peter.”

“Well, it’s not here now,” Peter insisted,

Jack’s chest tightened. The question felt bigger than it should have been, like it wasn’t just about the shoes. Like everything was slipping out of place—the cramped space, the noise, the movement, the feeling of being stuck in something too small with no quiet way out.

Jack swallowed, staring at his hands. “I just... I don’t know, okay?”

Peter’s expression shifted—not exactly apologetic, but softer. “Dude, calm down,” he said, a little quieter. “It’s just a sandal.”

“I know.” Jack let out a shaky breath. “I know, it’s just—” He gestured vaguely at everything. “All of this.”

Peter followed his gaze like there was something specific to see, then shrugged.

“It’s camping, also, I can see you’re sitting on my sandal.” Jack blinked, then looked down.

Sure enough, the missing sandal was wedged under his leg.

“Oh, sorry,” he said.

Peter snorted. “Mystery solved.”

Jack smirked, “Now, where are my sandals?” Peter said, “Next to you, of course. Now let’s go”

Peter unzipped the tent, and the morning rushed in—bright, loud, overwhelming. Jack felt the familiar flicker of panic start to spark in his chest. But he stepped out anyway.

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Jack took a few careful steps forward, eyes scanning the ground for twigs, leaves and fallen dry branches. Shadows that shifted around him caused him to turn his head. A crack sounded somewhere behind him. Jack froze. His heart jumped instantly like it had been waiting for an excuse. He turned slowly. Nothing. Just trees. Quiet and still.

“Focus!” he said out loud. “You are just looking for firewood.”

He crouched and picked up the first branch he saw. Too small, another too damp, then he found some just right and put them under his arm. His uncle had offered to help him, but he refused. He just needs time away from people to clear his head. He now regrets that decision.

“Never mind”, he thought, I just need to get on with the task. He needed something dry, not too rotten and not too thick, just wood to fit on the fire. He turned back and scanned carefully now, the leaves crunched under his sandals, the soft brush of branches against his side; he was confident he would find another. He was becoming increasingly comfortable in the bush. This wasn’t so bad, he thought. His uncle smiled when he returned to the fire,

“You are back and with a big bundle. Well done! Now let’s eat.”

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After breakfast, Jack was hunched over, staring at his rented pack, trying to remember everything he needed. He scanned the tent and noticed nothing out of place; all his items seemed to be in his bag. He zipped it up and noticed a parchment stuck within a plastic sleeve on the outside of the pack. It read, “You must take everything with you.” Instantly, Jack remembered the conversation with the Ranger at the outfitters’ store, who mentioned that to ensure you take out what you take into the park, otherwise the Nanabozho will appear. Peter curiously asked, Who is that? Ranger said he is an old Aboriginal trickster who made sure little boys behaved. His brother at the time snickered at the Ranger, as to say “Yeah! We will”, with a hint of sarcasm. Then he heard his brother outside the tent demanding, “Come on, Jack, we need to pack up the tent and go.”

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The canoe wobbled the second Jack put his weight into it. “Okay—nope—this is already a bad idea,” he thought, gripping the sides as if the lake might suddenly decide to flip him over out of spite.

“Relax,” his uncle called from behind him, pushing them gently away from the shore. “It’s more stable than it feels.”

“It does not feel stable at all,” Jack replied.

The water stretched out in front of him—wide, dark, and quietly endless. The surface looked smooth, but not calm. It shifted in small, unpredictable ripples that caught the light, making it hard to tell how deep it really was.

“Just take the paddle,” his uncle said. “Nice and easy.”

“Remember what I said about paddling. Now Paddle!”

Jack exhaled slowly and dipped the blade into the water. The canoe shifted.

Jack tightened his grip and pulled the paddle back, more carefully this time. The canoe glided forward, a soft slicing sound following the blade through the water.

“...Okay,” his uncle preached: “Dip, Pull, and Lift.”

The rhythm felt awkward and uneven, but the canoe didn't fight him. It responded. Not perfectly—but predictably enough. They moved farther from the shore.

Jack looks back and notices how small the campsite is becoming. How distant the land felt. How there was now nothing under them but water.

“You're doing fine,” his uncle said, voice calmer now. “Just focus on what's in front of you.”

Jack looked down at the water beside the canoe. It was clearer than he expected. He could see faint shapes below—rocks, maybe plants, shadows that shifted when the light moved.

“Try matching my strokes,” his uncle said.

Jack listened. Behind him, the paddle dipped into the water at a steady pace.

Dip. Pull. Lift. Jack followed, and the canoe steadied. Not perfectly. It still swayed slightly, responding to every movement—but it felt less like it was about to betray him and more like it was... cooperating. His breathing began to slow. Dip. Pull. Lift.

The lake stretched out, but it didn't feel as overwhelming now. The ripples were just ripples. The movement is just water responding to wind and motion. Again and again, Jack

dipped the paddle. His hand didn't shake as much now; he was getting the hang of it. The canoe moved forward, cutting a quiet path across the lake. And for the first time since they pushed off from the shore, Jack didn't feel like the water was something to escape. Just something to move through.

In the distance, Jack saw it before his uncle said anything. A break in the trees. Not big. Not obvious. Just a thin gap along the shoreline where the forest seemed to step back for a moment, like it had made room for something.

"There," his uncle said from behind him, nodding toward it. "That's the portage."

Jack stopped paddling. The canoe drifted slightly, turning just enough for the opening to come into clearer view. Jack noticed it was just a muddy edge. A narrow strip of land leading into darker trees. No dock. No indication that this was a *place* people were meant to go—just a suggestion that you could. Jack started paddling again, slower this time. Dip. Pull. Lift. The canoe glided closer. The lake around them felt bigger the nearer they got to the shore—as if the open water was reluctant to let them go.

Jack knew, technically, what it meant about a portage. Carry the canoe. Walk through the woods. Reach another body of water. As they got closer, details emerged. Flattened grass. A faint path worn into the dirt and a yellow sign with an image of a man carrying a canoe. The canoe's bottom scraped lightly against the shore.

"We're good," his uncle said. "Hop out."

Jack looked at the water, which was about a foot deep. He hesitated—then carefully shifted his weight and stepped out. The canoe wobbled. He froze. It steadied. "...Okay," he whispered. He stepped into the water, and his sandals sank

deep into the mud. He tried to manoeuvre out of the boat but couldn't.

"Great," he muttered. "I can't lift my foot."

"You're kidding", his uncle said. His uncle climbed out and came around the boat to see Jack's leg far into the muddy water. "Wow!"

His foot was completely buried, up to his knee; the mud was thick and wet, clinging tightly around his leg. The surface of the water was up to his waist. He tried to pull free, his arms reaching for something stable, hands either grabbing the canoe or pressing down on his other foot for leverage. He clenched his jaw and heaved, and his foot didn't move. He was properly stuck. His other foot was steadied on a submerged rock, making the whole situation feel unstable. Jack could feel his sandal still touching his skin. He tried to pull out his foot with the sandal, but the surface area of the sandal was stopping his foot from rising.

Just then, his brother and his cousin coasted beside their canoe. Hey, Jack? Peter said, "You look like the portage itself has grabbed hold of you and won't let go. Both his cousin and Peter laughed. Jack looked over and said,

"I'm stuck, and I can't lift my foot." Peter jumped out of the boat to take a closer look.

"Wow! Can't you just slip your foot out?"

"I probably could, but I would have to leave my sandal behind."

His brother responded, "Oh dear, well, it's either you or your sandal, what will it be?"

With that in mind, he was able to slip his foot out of the mud. He reached down to see if he could grab the buried sandal, but the water was too high for him to reach,

otherwise he would need to submerge his head. Frustrated, he gave up and walked out of the lake and looked down at his muddy leg. Peter came over and joked, Poor Sandy, stuck in the mud. The hint of humour touched Jack's heart, and they both laughed.

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The path felt narrower once Jack was actually on it. It hadn't looked that way from the lake. From a distance, it was just a break in the trees—a line you could follow. He was carrying the canoe upside down. It had a bar, called a yoke, across the middle, which you could lever the canoe onto your shoulders. The weight pressed down evenly, digging into his shoulder, making him lean just enough to feel balanced. Every step had to be deliberate. Too fast, and he'd trip. Too slow, and he'd start overthinking—which, admittedly, was already happening. The trees closed in tighter along the path. Branches brushed against the sides of the canoe with soft scraping sounds—shhk, shhk—that made Jack flinch every time. He was following a thin line of flattened dirt and trampled leaves. The ground dipped slightly, turning muddier at times. Jack's shoes sank just enough to make a soft sucking sound when he lifted them. He was falling behind the others, but he didn't mind; he liked the solitude. He noticed a log on the side of the path and decided to rest.

With the canoe still on his shoulders, swaying back and forth. Jack doesn't so much *sit* on the log as carefully negotiate with it first. He stands in front of it for a second too long, eyes scanning the surface like it might have hidden intentions. The bark is rough, a little damp, dotted with patches of moss that look soft but suspicious. His shoulders

are slightly hunched, like he's not fully committing to stopping.

"Okay," he mutters quietly. "It's just a log." When he finally lowers himself down, it's slow and controlled—hovering for a moment before actually making contact, like he expects something to shift underneath him at the last second. His weight settles cautiously, never fully relaxed. He keeps his feet planted firmly on the ground, ready to stand again at any moment. Listening. The forest feels louder with his head in the bows of the canoe. Leaves rustle somewhere off to the side. A branch creaks overhead. Something small moves through the underbrush, unseen but definitely there. Each sound pulls his attention instantly, his posture tightening just a little more each time. He exhales slowly, trying to steady his breathing.

"In. Out," he whispers, barely audible.

The log is solid beneath him. Grounded. Real. Leaning back would off-balance the canoe, so he kept his posture upright and steady. After a minute, his shoulders drop just a fraction. Not relaxed. Just... less braced. Like he's allowing himself, very carefully, to exist in the moment.

In the distance, he could hear a call; someone was yelling out a name. The call grew louder as footsteps approached.

"Sandy!, Sandy!"

Jack stood up and cautiously started walking towards a meeting. He could just peek ahead under the front of the canoe. He sees a girl in a red jacket. Jack stopped and asked,

"Have you lost someone?"

With the front of the tipping canoe initially blocking his view of her face, he could see she was wearing a red jacket. Her arms didn't stay still—swinging from side to side. Her

greeting was direct; he could hear her breathing was a little too fast, her chest rising and falling like she had been running even when she hadn't.

I've lost my Sandy. She said quickly, as if annoyed by his question. Then she added, "Have you seen Sandy on your way here?" Jack thought it was strange how the question was phrased, as if he already knew Sandy. He replied, "No, but I'll keep an eye out for Sandy." He wasn't sure whether Sandy was a boy or a girl, so he offered to search for Sandy at the next portage once he put down the canoe. She then said something odd.

"I'm not sure Sandy made it that far."

The girl walked past him, and he could hear her trot down the path from where he had just come from.

"Sandy! Sandy!" He could hear her call.

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When he arrived at the next portage, he spoke with his uncle about meeting a girl who had lost her Sandy. Then he asked,

"Did you see her?" She had come from the direction they were going, so he assumed that they would have crossed paths, but his uncle said that he hadn't.

Just then, the girl in the red jacket appears at the portage. His uncle approaches her and asks if they could help. She thanked them and mentioned that Sandy had taken a separate route to this lake. On the map, they noticed an interconnecting river between the lakes, parallel to the portage path. Since the river was mostly marshy and didn't flow freely, they suspected that Sandy could have taken

another route. Perhaps traverse the path. The girl mentioned that it would be impossible. His uncle was confused by her statement, but left it because he didn't know Sandy. The girl said she would go back down the path again, and his uncle added that they would search for the river in their canoes. Perhaps they could intercept Sandy at the river. The girl turned and left down the track again.

His uncle and Jack enter the lake in their canoe and paddle around where the river could be. When they approached the entrance, the river didn't flow so much as breathe. Wide, slow, and heavy, the flow pressed against the banks with a quiet, constant movement. The edges weren't clean—just stretches of dark, marshy ground where water and land blur together into something uncertain. Jack mentions that a canoe would be unable to pass. The mud looks deeper here than in the woods. Softer. Less forgiving. Patches of water sit on the surface, reflecting the sky in broken, shifting pieces. Reeds poke up in uneven clusters, swaying gently like they're pointing in no particular direction. Jack yells,

“Hello?” His holler carries—but not far. The open space eats it differently than the trees did. There's no echo. Just distance. His uncle and Jack agreed that a canoe wasn't going to get through there, so they returned to the portage. His uncle turned to the three boys, Jack, Peter and their cousin and asked who was willing to go back down the path again to let the girl know that paddling the river was impossible. They were all tired from carrying their gear through the portage, and none of them volunteered. So they decided to choose with a scissors, paper, rock game.

They stand in a loose circle at the edge of the portage, like this is somehow official. Like this is how serious decisions are supposed to be made. Jack already regrets agreeing to it. “This is a terrible system,” he says, arms crossed tight against his chest. “It’s fair,” his brother replies. “It’s random,” Jack corrects. “That’s not the same thing.” “Exactly,” his cousin adds. “No arguing. Just do it.” Jack glances past them, toward the woods. Still quiet. Still waiting. His stomach twists. “Or,” Jack says, trying one last time, “we could just... think about who’s best at directions? Or—”

“Rock, paper, scissors,” they say in unison.

Jack sighs. “Great. Love that for us.”

They shuffle closer, forming a tighter circle. Three hands hover awkwardly in the middle, like none of them are fully confident in what they’re about to decide.

“Best two out of three?” his brother asks.

“Absolutely not,” Jack says quickly. “One round. Fast. Minimal suffering.”

“Fine.”

There’s a brief pause. Jack flexes his fingers, then clenches them again. His hand feels weirdly heavy, like it suddenly matters too much. This decides who goes into the woods. Alone. His chest tightens.

“Ready?” one of them says.

They bring their hands down once—twice—

“Rock, paper—scissors”

Their hands shoot forward. Jack doesn’t even process his own at first. He just stares at the others. There’s a beat of silence. Then—

“Oh no,” Jack says.

He looks down. Scissors.

“Wait—no, hang on,” he says quickly. “We should clarify the rules. Like, does losing mean you go, or winning means you go? Because those are *very* different—”

“You lost,” his brother says.

“Yeah,” his cousin says. “You’re up.”

Jack stares at them. Then back to the woods. Then back at them.

His brother reassures him, “Hey, this time you don’t need to carry anything.”

“If I get lost,” Jack says, “this was a bad system.”

“Noted,” his cousin replies.

Then he turns fully, facing the trees, takes a breath and enters the forest.

Jack’s uncle wasn’t happy about the idea of him entering the forest on his own, but it seemed pretty harmless since he was only going as far as the last portage. Certainly, it would only take him a quarter of an hour and return within the hour.

To pass the time, he said to the boys,

“Let’s have our lunch while we wait.”

Peter tried to focus on the sandwich in his hands, but the bugs had other plans. They didn’t just fly—they *danced* around him. Tiny black dots zipping in chaotic patterns, landing briefly on his pack, on his arms, even once daring to settle on his sandwich. Each one made him flinch, swat, mutter under his breath.

“Just... stay still,” he whispered to himself, as it might help.

He took a bite anyway. Crunch. The bread was dry, the jam sticky, the wind carrying the smell farther into the trees. The

bugs swarmed immediately. One landed on his hand. He jumped. Another buzzed near his ear. He swatted again.

“Stop!” he hissed. Not at them—they wouldn’t care—but at the universe, maybe. He tried the classic tactic: eating quickly. Bite. Chew. Swallow. Repeat. The bugs were relentless. They hovered over the food like it had a gravitational pull stronger than anything else on the lake. Jack’s grip on the sandwich tightened. He glanced at his uncle, who was eating calmly, seemingly unaware—or perhaps unbothered—by the swarm of insects.

“How...?” Peter asked, exasperated.

“Don’t think about them,” his uncle said, taking another bite. Peter tried. He really did. But every buzz, every touch of a wing against his skin, made his stomach twist. He chewed mechanically, swallowed mechanically, and reminded himself: *It’s just bugs. They’re just bugs.* He felt they were being punished for letting Jack return to the woods. Here they were eating while his brother was out there somewhere. He asked,

How long has he been?”

His uncle looked at his watch and was surprised, Oh, gee, we should see him any moment, it’s been at least an hour.

After what felt like an eternity of airborne insects and frantic attempts to eat, Peter finished the sandwich—barely. He wiped his hands on his shorts, leaving streaks of jam and mud behind.

“Next time,” he muttered, “we’re going to have lunch in the canoe away from these bugs from the shore.

“Good idea,” his cousin offered. His uncle chuckled.

“Okay, that’s been long enough; we should go and look for him,” he continued.

Peter offered to go because he felt guilty about being the older brother and sending his little brother back into the forest. His uncle agreed since he had to wait here and look after the gear.

As Peter started walking down the path, he thought it was ironic that he was now searching for his brother, who was searching for a girl, and she was searching for Sandy. Perhaps in time, someone will be searching for me. He called out for Jack. The portage was 2 km away, so his voice probably wouldn't echo that far, but he had to try. He recognised their footprints, which pointed to the portage, and now he recognised Jack's footprints, one of his own shoes that he had let him borrow at the previous portage, going in the opposite direction. He was reassured that he knew where Jack was going. Then the footprint disappeared as though Jack had been air-lifted from the path. He circled back, hoping to find where the last print was. He noticed that his footprint had gone off the path. A flicker of sound in the distance makes him stop. He listens—completely still, holding his breath. Leaves shift. A branch creaks. His eyes light up for a split second—Then the sound fades into nothing recognisable. Peter hollers Jack's name,

“Jack! Jack!” No reply. Peter was cautious. Should he follow the foot steps or not? He breathed in and stepped off the path. A shape moved between the trees. a slight hint of red colour, shifting, moving in and out of view. Not fast. Not slow. Just... deliberate. Peter's mind raced to fill in the details he couldn't see. Too tall. Too still. Watching it the way he'd imagined the trees were watching. He ran towards the figure. Branches clawed at his sleeves. Roots reached for his feet. His breath came in sharp, uneven bursts, each one louder than

the last. He didn't know where he was going—only that he was following something. Then he stopped. He wasn't sure why he stopped, but his senses made him question this pursuit. It wasn't right. He needed to return and get help, perhaps keep going to the previous portage, which would be the best start. He returned to the portage path and went toward the first portage; perhaps Jack and the girl were there.

When he arrived, there was nobody there. The portage looked familiar, reminding him of Jack losing his sandal. He went over and into the water, where he believed his sandal would be. He called out to Jack again and received no answer. He looked around the portage landing and noticed a reminder sign. It said, "Look after nature", and underneath the title line, it said, "You must take everything with you" Peter chuckled at the notice, remembering the Ranger's statement at the outfitter's store.

Peter looked down at the water where the sandal might have been and formed an epiphany,

"What if", he thought.

So he decided to try to recover it. Peter squinted at the water, knee-deep in the mud, and the sandal was swallowed by the murky surface. He carefully stepped around, kicking at the muck, staring at the ripples where the sandal had disappeared, the dark water hiding it like a secret. He bent his knees slightly, keeping his weight balanced, and spread his hands wide. He moved slowly, pressing his one hand into the soft mud, feeling its resistance, then gently shifting to plunge deeper. He needed to submerge his head to reach deeper.

"Follow the suction, don't fight it," he thought.

He takes a breath and dips his head under the water, and carefully probes the muddy mixture. He then feels the rubber sole. He tries to pull, but the mud grips it tightly, as if it doesn't want to let it go. He tries his new strategy. He kneels up to take another breath and leans down to grab it again. It wiggles slowly, letting the mud loosen its hold instead of tugging hard. He needs patience, and finally, the sandal releases. Peter's head emerges from the water, holding the sandal triumphantly, mud dripping from the edges, a ripple forming on the surface. He laughs softly, breathless, a mix of relief and pride. "Of course," he whispers to himself. "Of course it wasn't about pulling... it was about understanding the forces." For a moment, he just kneels there, holding the recovered sandal like a tiny victory over chaos. Just then, he feels the wind skirting across the lake. Not strong, not demanding, just enough to lift a strand of hair, to press lightly against his sleeves. It slipped across the lake so gently that the water rippled out like a rubber band. Peter felt like a spill had been released, a change in the air, and the ambient noise was different. Then he felt a presence.

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Jack sat still, listening. He'd found a log to rest. He'd been wandering aimlessly for hours. He was tired and cold. The light had changed; what had been warm and open before now felt dim and green, as if the forest had decided to keep the sun for itself. His hands were shaking now. He shoved them into his pockets, then pulled them out again, unsure what to do with them. The air felt colder than before, or maybe it was just him. Jack tried to remember what he'd

been told—stay calm, don't panic, breathe in and breathe out, find a landmark, but everything here looked like it had been copied and pasted a hundred times. There was no landmark. No path. No sign that anyone had ever been here before. Leaves shifted high above him. Something cracked in the distance—too sharp to be the wind, too far to understand. His breath sounded loud, uneven, like it didn't belong in the same space as everything else. He turned his head to the right, hoping to see something different but more of the same. Then he felt a change in the air, a breath of wind on his face coming from the left, and he turned.

Jack didn't believe it at first. He had been looking in that direction, searching, willing for anything that might be different, and now it was as though a door had been opened, as a curtain had risen. He could see a break in the trees, a clearing, then the blue surface of a lake. He stood up and slowly moved towards the opening.

Jack steps out onto the portage, elated. He looks taller than he should. Not physically—but in the way he carries himself. Shoulders slightly hunched, clothes dirt-streaked and mud-crusting. One pant leg is darker where it's still damp, and his shoes look like they've been through more than walking. He pauses just beyond the treeline. Like he's not entirely sure it's over. His eyes scan the open space in front of him—quick, careful movements, checking, confirming the lake. Familiar shapes that feel almost unreal after too much sameness. There's a scratch along his arm, a leaf caught in his sleeve, and his laces loose. He was tired, but he made it. He glances back once, over his shoulder, toward the trees. They look the same as always. Jack turns away and keeps walking forward

—out of the bush, carrying the experience with him, but not stuck in it anymore.

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Peter looked up, hearing the footsteps coming from the path, and he saw his brother battered and bruised as though he had been through the wringer.

“Hey, I’ve been looking for you for hours. Where the hell have you been?” asking as he walked out of the water.

Jack smiled and was excited to see his brother, although slightly confused to see him there and explained,

“I’ve been walking for hours, completely lost.” Once Jack said the word “Lost”, he started to feel emotional. He had been holding back the tension, not wanting to succumb to sadness for hours. Seeing his brother allowed him to soften and let the tears go.

Peter came over and hugged his little brother, and then tried to lighten the mood by saying,

“Well, I’m glad you’re here. Did you find the girl?”

“No”, Jack, a little shaken, forced a reply with a stutter, “No, I didn’t see her. Did she come back?”

Peter replied, “No, although I feel we were fooled. The forest talks, and I don’t think she was real. I think I know who she was,” holding up his sandal. “Do you remember the Ranger mentioning Nanabohza and that you must take everything with you?”

“Yes”, Jack sounded confused,

“I think I found Sandy.”

End

## THE AUTHOR'S THOUGHTS

Over the last 20 years, I've started to write things down; my father published many books, so there must be some interest there. I've been writing fiction as a hobby and to improve my writing skills, keeping diaries of our travels. At first, it was handwriting, and now it's in electronic form. I once attended a writing forum, and the lecturer said that to be a good writer, you either need to be extremely talented or write one million words. It's daunting, I know, but I'm not there yet. Perhaps it will be two. I'll let you be the judge.

Andrew Cheffers