

Joe Barbieri

Merkner

Creative Writing

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Lost in the Woods

Prologue

August 4th, 2018—4 UC Boulder Girls Declared Missing by Family

After missing their timeframe to return from a camping trip in the Pinewood National forest, 4 young women have been declared missing by their families and the Boulder Police Department. Ashley Stone, Rebecca Winters, Josie Torres, and Michelle Baker went on a summer vacation camping trip July 27th and were set to return on the 31st. After missing their return frame by three days, administrators were called to the campsite and found the 4 tents empty. Though an official press conference is still pending, a spokesperson at the Boulder Police Department has said that, “foul play is not being ruled out yet.” More news on this developing story is pending, but if anyone has seen or heard from any of the four missing girls, they are encouraged to call the number below, or call the Boulder Police Department.

This was just one of many articles pinned on my board. The edges were unevenly torn, and part of an ad for allergy medication could still be seen on the side of the page. The hum of my old computer was the only sound in the dark recesses of the office; its low tones mirrored the dull droning in my head. It was hard to piece this all together... Especially now that *he* had

shown up. I took a long drink from my Styrofoam cup. The water was warm and old tasting, but I didn't care much. My gaze shifted to the map laid out on my desk. The old lamp that usually lit the desk was beginning to die, but I was still able to read the map in its dimming light.

Not that reading this crumpled piece of paper would change anything. I'd read the map enough times to become a hiking guide in the Pinewood area, and I didn't even live in Colorado. I traced my finger along the pathways of the forests and campsites. The first red mark I'd made signified the highway where Rebecca Winters had been found. The next few were red question marks; areas Rebecca often spoke about, but seemingly didn't hold any meaning to the investigations of the local police and search parties. This coupled with Rebecca's stream of nonsensical dialogue didn't paint a good picture for her. Surely, she'd play the insanity card if brought to court, and she'd probably get away with it after the time spent here.

Angry mobs were forming online, and a witch hunt was being planned, but there was only one witch, and she was under heavy surveillance at all times. Her 6 by 8 foot padded cell kept her quite secure, but I was worried about her hallucinations. The meds weren't helping—or she wasn't taking them. With the things she would tell me in our private meetings... I tried not to think of the public reaction. The police certainly didn't like what I told them, but I was simply the messenger; I had no control over what she told me. In the public eye, Rebecca Winters is a murderer, and time was slipping away very quickly for her to prove them wrong.

I looked once more to the board that I'd borrowed from one of our labs. Its wheels were broken and thus I had to lean the frame and board against the back wall. I looked over some of the police files I'd been given permission to see. Despite being a doctor in an off the road mental hospital, I was very much a part of this investigation. It had consumed me, taken control of all my waking hours. Alas, even as I slept images of Rebecca swam around my tired mind.

The clothing Rebecca had been found in had gone through multiple lab tests. She'd been severely injured—her only saving grace thus far—and was found covered in blood and nurturing a broken arm. Unfortunately, the blood of Josie Torres and Michelle Baker had also been found on Rebecca. She claimed to not know where they were, and she supposedly never saw any of her friends after they got lost in the woods.

Lost in the woods... She kept saying that. In all of our sessions and meetings, Rebecca would take my hand, her eyes bloodshot and frantic, and she'd say, "I'm still lost in the woods, aren't I?"

Most days she refused to believe that the hospital was real... That anything she was seeing was real. It made my work extremely difficult. The police were getting more impatient by the day, and all I had to give them were the wild stories Rebecca would share with me.

"So Rebecca, tell me again: did you, or did you not kill someone in Pinewood National Forest?" I asked. Rebecca looked away, tears forming in her eyes.

"I already told you, I killed that man... But he came back! He always comes back..."

"Now Rebecca, you have to work with me here. What do you mean he came back? You're a smart girl, I know that, we both know that people don't come back from being killed."

"You didn't see what I saw doctor, you can't understand," a pause, "I'm still lost in the woods, aren't I?"

The conversation played like a record in my head. I stopped the record and tried to focus on her movements in my mind's eye. She was like a lost animal: desperate, scared, and aggressive all at once. It made reading her troublesome. Sometimes her eyes would go wild, and

she'd stare at things that weren't there. Her hands would clasp together beneath the table...

Almost as if she were holding a gun of some sort. I would stay silent, hoping some sliver of information could be seized in her moments of madness.

I leaned forward in my leather office chair and switched my monitor on. On it was a section of a recent press conference I'd saved. I dragged the mouse over and hit the replay button. There was a short moment of silence as the video loaded up. It started with a blue suited man taking a long and purposeful drink from a small unmarked bottle of water. The man was handsome and strong looking, dark skin and short black hair with a flair of gray. He gripped the podium he was standing at and looked to the crowd of journalists, many of which were snapping pictures or scrambling to keep notes on their laptop computers. Around him stood several police officers, and a few agents who wore their FBI IDs proudly on their Kevlar covered chests. All had unreadable expressions plastered on their faces, even the local police chief, a pockmarked old man who often chose to wear a cowboy hat.

"Although reports are still coming in and evidence is still being, uh, being looked at, we can safely say that Rebecca Winters remains our primary suspect in this investigation," the suited man said, his voice deep, calm, and cool sounding. A crowd of voices erupted with questions and comments, sounding very much like squawking birds, the suited spokesman politely raised his hands for silence, and chose someone from the crowd to ask a question.

"Hi, I'm Eric Crane from the Pinewood Local, and I want to ask, why do the police department and FBI still think Winters is guilty, and have her parents been spoken to?" this man, Eric, had a squirrely look to him, and even his professional get up couldn't save him from looking like a bit of a fool.

“Again, until further evidence is given, we cannot share details of the investigation at this moment, we are working to make sure that these girls are found. Ms. Winters is currently being held with some experts in a police hospital, and she is being questioned. It is not our place to share whether or not the family has been spoken to, we ask that you respect their privacy though,” the suited man replied. The babble of the crowd again, followed by silence, and then a question.

“Are there any new developments on the whereabouts of Ashley Stone, Josie Torres, or Michelle Baker?”

“At this time there is not, but our people are working with members of the camp staff and members of the community to find the missing girls as soon as possible,” the suited man paused to take another drink, and then looked directly into the camera closest to him before saying, “as of now, they are still lost in the woods.”

The inane shouting of the crowd began again just as the video ended. I put my fist up to my mouth and replayed the video. Everything the spokesman said was so professional—so calculated. Until the end. Lost in the woods was a weird way of saying “they’re still missing.” It didn’t make sense to me, but it also didn’t have to. The language choice of a nameless spokesman was the least of my concerns now. I checked the time on my computer and saw it was nearly 3 AM. It was late... Too late to return home tonight. I’d simply shower here in the hospital before my meeting with Rebecca. I intended to review her testimony before the meeting, just to try and piece together her story one more time. I knew I’d only find myself stuck right here in my dark office tomorrow evening.

Rebecca Winters, a Dean's Lister and aspiring stock broker was mentally insane. Just a mere month or so back, she'd been in the car with friends looking forward to a relaxing camp. Now she was locked here, whispering to herself at night, crying out in her sleep, and trying to force me into believing that a man wearing a pig mask had killed her friends in the Pinewood National Forest, and that she too was still lost in the woods.

Part 1-Rebecca Winters

Name: Winters, Rebecca

Gender: Female

Hair: Blonde

Eyes: Brown

Height: 5 feet 7 inches

Weight: Currently- less than 90 lbs

Bio: Rebecca Winters, daughter to Amelia House and Edward Winters is a 20-year-old CU Boulder student who recently received honors for excellent academics in her program. She is a business major who seeks to become a stock broker in Wall Street. Rebecca has younger brothers who she often had to look after when her parents were away at work. They are John and Niles Winters. Rebecca has had extreme pressure and weight from her family on her shoulders all her life, and she has responded with flying colors. She graduated top of her class in High School and has found much of the same success in college.

Growing up, Rebecca had to be tough and resourceful to deal with her brothers. This same mindset has done well for her in her endeavors with the college debate team and her position as a swimming instructor for young kids. Currently, Rebecca is not dating according to other friends at college. She was always “too busy”. Before now, Rebecca had never received any therapy of any kind, and there is absolutely no evidence in her psyche files to support the police’s claims that she murdered her friends in the Pinewood National Forest.

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“Hello Rebecca. It’s me, Doctor Abrams. We spoke briefly before, but you were only semi-conscious. I’ve been assigned as your primary doctor,” I said, offering my hand. She moved away from it with a look of fear written across her feeble features.

I retracted my hand and took a seat across the table from her. Though the medical staff said she was fit for questioning now, she certainly didn’t look it. Her right arm was bound in a bland gray cast, and from the marks I could see past her sleeve, it’d been crushed under something heavy. Her face was sunken and sallow, covered in gashes and bruises—it was horrible. This was not the smiling girl I’d been shown a picture of. This person looked more like someone who’d escaped a war camp. Her once beautiful shoulder length blonde hair was matted and knotted, even after it had been washed. I’d been told that she had stitches all over her body, and to be careful not to enrage her, should she tear away the stitching.

“Rebecca... Do you know what day it is?” I asked. The cold gray and white tones of the questioning room weren’t going to make this easy. I forced myself to remember that we were being videotaped. Without moving, I glanced at the top right corner of the bland boxy room. The camera was there, even if I didn’t see it.

Rebecca sort of shook her head, but it was hard for me to know what she meant. It could've been a nod, but that question didn't really matter now. There was a soft clicking sound and cold air began to flow through the vents. Rebecca wrapped her teal gown close around her skeletal body and began to shake. Trying my best to stay level with her, I gently removed my lab coat and offered it across the table, the small buttons making a slight scratch against the metal table. She eyed the coat with distrust, and once again went to looking down at her shivering arms.

"You've been missing for nearly a month. It's lucky we found you, and now we're going to do everything in our power to make you better, okay? You can tell me anything you want when we're in here. Anything at all... It's just you and me," I said slowly, hating myself more and more with each word that came out. All of it was a lie; I was here to get information to the police. I'd been assigned Rebecca as a patient for a very specific reason two days ago, and it was hardly because they cared for her mental health.

There were several moments of silence shared between us, the cold droning of the AC doing its best to fill the dead air. I adjusted my glasses and leaned back in my seat. Rebecca watched me closely, looking more and more like a cornered animal. The fingers on her good hand picked at her cast idly. I noticed she was scanning the room now. Funny—she was being very careful about it. Perhaps she didn't want me to notice? Or did she too know we were being filmed? No, that was impossible.

"You know, back when I was just a kid in New Jersey, I used to go into the woods behind my house and build forts with my friends. Tree forts usually, but sometimes we'd build stick forts on the ground. This one time," I paused, letting the memory overtake my senses, "... This one

time, I fell out of a tree. Landed smack dab on a rock, first time I ever broke a bone. My arm as a matter of fact.”

Rebecca looked up at me. Instead of a look of connection in her eyes like I’d hoped for, she had a very ugly look across her face. Violent. Scared. Trapped.

“Get me out of here,” she whispered, her hoarse voice barely understandable. I leaned forward in my seat, but this too was a mistake.

“OUT! I WANT OUT!” she screamed. Before I knew what was happening, her good arm flew out and connected with my cheek. I flinched back, my hand finding a small scratch where her nails had hit me. Before I even had time to say anything, doctors and guards alike were swarming the room. Rebecca was screaming and clawing at them, but one sedative shot later, she was limp in the arms of a female nurse.

“Are you alright Adrian?” one of the doctors asked. My hand still held at my cheek, I looked up at him.

“This isn’t going to be easy,” I said back.

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The sky wore a dreary gray look today. I glanced at it as I walked through the mostly empty halls of Hodges Mental Hospital. I saw nurses helping patients here and there and passed by the communal area where many of the patients were chatting and playing cards with one another. Odd... So many of them seemed just like us. The human mind remains the most complex machine in the world. Despite all of humanity’s great feats of technology and engineering, none of it came close to Mother Nature’s computer. These people—their

computers—they just had some software problems. If only fixing them was as simple as fixing a computer.

I can still save her. The thought rang around my mind as I passed more nurses. One—a young redhead named Heather—waved at me. I smiled in return but didn't stop to talk. She and I had shared something once, but that was a long time ago. My days of sleeping with nurses were long behind me. I had matured professionally and personally, but I couldn't deny that the adventures of youth still called out to me.

Rebecca Winters' youth was ruined though. Her life... Everything she ever had was ruined now. Why? What really happened in the Pinewood National Forest. And how did it connect with *him*? Patient 2, as some of the staff had come to calling him, was set to be my next patient. He—like Rebecca—was impossible to communicate with and didn't think what was happening to him was real. His mind, Rebecca's mind... Both destroyed. And with them, their lives were gone.

"Excuse me Doctor Abrams, a minute please?" someone called. I nearly crashed into a janitor as I whipped around to see who had said my name.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you, I just want a few words."

Standing near some of the 3rd floor bathrooms was the lead detective on the Winters Case. Stanley Rimes was young for a detective, but I'd heard he was brilliant. He'd been a great addition to the detective staff in the Nebraska state police forces. He was working directly with the Colorado police on this case and had always been friendly with me.

Stanley was a lanky fellow with stringy brown hair. He was always clean shaven, and sometimes chose to wear an unmarked baseball cap with his brown jacket and plain looking slacks. He waved at me with a small smile, but I could see it was forced. Bad news?

“Ah, Detective. I uh, I didn’t see you there,” I said, moving past a doctor carrying a box to get to Stanley.

“How close are you to a confession?” Stanley asked. He kept his voice casual, almost as if he were asking about how my wife was doing, or what my thoughts were on the local little league team’s last big win. It was disturbing and fascinating all at once. Did the cops really think my job was that easy?

“About as close as you are to ending all crime in America,” I replied sourly. He chuckled a bit and pulled his phone from the rightmost pocket of his jacket.

“We’re nearly out of time,” he said, his voice as smooth and charming as ever.

“I need more time if you guys want the right thing to happen,” I replied stiffly.

“That isn’t going to happen Doctor. Chances are she’ll end up right back here once she’s convicted anyway.”

“Unless they kill her,” I retorted. Another chuckle from Stanley.

“You really think they’d give her the death sentence? Even if they do, all that means is a life sentence with added benefits. Death sentence don’t mean shit now Doctor.” I shifted uncomfortably.

“Look, tell them that I’m meeting with her today. I think I’m onto something... Not a confession, but something big. Important. Look, just tell the suits to fuck off for a week. Medicine doesn’t happen overnight.”

“But murder does Doctor, murder does,” Stanley sighed. He dialed a number and gave me a short nod before walking off to the nearest elevator.

Truly I wasn’t closer to anything with Rebecca today than I was last week. She and I could speak normally now, for the most part, but she showed few signs of improvement. Her testimony was always the same, and unfortunately for her, no one was going to believe that testimony except for Hollywood, and all they wanted was a new idea for a good slasher flick. I glanced at my dad’s old watch; I had five minutes. *Okay... Just breathe. You can still save her. Something about this case stinks, and you know it. Let’s get to work.*

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Room 12. It had all begun here weeks ago when Rebecca had scratched my face in a fit of fear. Thinking about it made my hand jump to the place she’d gotten me. It had long since healed, but I could still feel it as if it had happened yesterday. Room 12 on the other hand, hadn’t changed a bit. I was greeted by the same gray walls, the same metal table, and the same feeling of tension that seemed to magnify in this place. As of now, the small cube was silent, but soon the AC unit would kick in gifting us with its infamous cold hum. I opened the folder I’d brought with me for the session. In it were notes I’d taken, drawings from the maddened mind of Rebecca, pictures of the Pinewood National Forest, and an assortment of other files that teased me every night. On top of the stack was a report given to me earlier today. It had a blunt look to it, and the headline read,

**ASHLEY STONE, JOSIE TORRES, MICHELLE BAKER STILL MISSING. NO
BODIES FOUND.**

The door opened behind me and I glanced back to see two nurses leading a much healthier looking Rebecca Winters into the room. She gave me a feeble smile, one which I returned.

“Did you get a haircut Adrian?” she asked after the nurses had tenderly placed her in the seat across from me. I poked at my glasses and pulled the open folder closer to myself.

“Yes, as a matter of fact I did. You’re the first one to notice it all day,” I replied. I found a clean sheet in the folder and retrieved my pen from my breast pocket. As if on cue, the AC switched on. I looked over for any signs, but Rebecca seemed quite content. She sported only two signatures on her bland gray cast—those of her mother and father. Many others in the hospital shunned her and feared her; she was a killer to them after all.

“Rebecca, you seem to be in a fine mood today! That’s good, very good, tell me, has anything new happened since our last meeting?” I asked cheerfully. Rebecca’s dark brown eyes looked tired, but she was otherwise more responsive and happier than before.

“Well, I don’t know if I can tell you Adrian. It might upset you,” she replied, her smile faltering just a touch.

“Tell me what? You know our deal; all of your secrets are safe with me.”

Rebecca’s eyes flashed to her left for just a second, as if she knew we were being filmed. Once again, the fact that she might know this made me extremely uncomfortable. It only made me look like the bad guy here, especially since she’d know I’d been lying to her for weeks.

“Well. I guess, I guess I’m just not afraid anymore,” she said. I could tell that she was choosing her words carefully. Interesting, she seemed to be moving past the childlike way of speaking she usually fell back to. What changed?

“Not afraid of what? The hospital? Me? Let me tell you, with my ugly mug, you should definitely be afraid of me,” I said, hoping my jests might loosen her up more.

She leaned back in her chair, a dreamy sort of look on her face. With the healed wounds, clean hair, and causal looking attire, she could be a student of mine in college, talking about her worries. If I ignored the room and the thought of it all, I would never know she’d been through hell and back just by looking at her now. This was more like the Rebecca I’d read about that fateful first day.

“I don’t fear death anymore. I guess, that’s the best way I can put it,” she said, keeping her gaze away from me. My breath caught in my chest, and the hand scribbling notes down froze with it.

“What do you mean Rebecca?” I asked, my voice weaker than I intended it to be. Was she having suicidal thoughts? Despite all she’d been through, not once had she tried to hurt herself. This wasn’t good... It was almost as if I were talking to a different person entirely.

“Come on Doc, you know what I mean. *They* know what I mean,” she said, jerking her good hand to where the camera was, “everyone thinks I’m the one who killed my own friends. They think that I fucking *murdered* my own friends! None of you believe the truth, so I’ve accepted it, I guess. They’ll kill me for this, I know it.”

My hand couldn't keep up with my now confused brain. Rebecca was a *lot* more self-aware than I thought. She was much more cognizant to what was going on outside than she should've been. I felt sweat forming at my brow.

"Rebecca..." I couldn't seem to find the words to say.

"I'm not dumb, Adrian. All of this... The hospital, the meetings, the armed guards, it all makes sense now. Sort of. If I'm really here and this isn't a dream, the people outside think I killed my friends. Why else would I be monitored by police all the time? None of this seems real... For God's sake, you really think I KILLED my own friends?" Rebecca cried. To my surprise, no tears followed the outburst.

"Rebecca listen—"

"NO, you listen for once Adrian! I'm tired of repeating the same shit to you every week! I'm finished, no one can save me, not you, not the police, no one!"

"I'm TRYING to save you Rebecca!" I shouted, my temper flaring faster than it should've. I felt heat coming off my face in angry waves, and my hand had clenched around the pen. Rebecca looked at me for a moment, a look of concern in her eyes. It's true, she'd never seen me like this. Hell, I'd never seen me like this.

"Does the name Hector Ramirez mean anything to you?" I said, trying to steady my voice. Rebecca silently shook her head.

"Does," I stopped to take a breath, "does your family have any ties with the Federal Bureau of Investigation? Any friends there? Family?"

"Not that I know of," Rebecca said, her voice much smaller now than before.

“This picture, what does it mean to you? What do you feel?” I asked hotly, shoving a picture of a hog over the table. Rebecca immediately shrunk away from it, her hand moving to the cast just like always, as if she were holding a gun. Her mouth moved, but no sound came out.

“Answer the question Rebecca! We’re out of time, and if I don’t get the full story right now, you and I are finished! Do you understand that?” I said.

“No... Not... The pig... Away, please, get it away,” she whispered. Without thinking, I slammed my hand on the table causing the folder and its contents to jump. Rebecca yelped and forced the chair away from the table, her back now against the wall.

“Again Rebecca... I need the full story again. Spare no detail, no matter how much pain it brings you. I don’t care if you’ve given up because I haven’t! What happened after you missed the deadline to return home back in August?” No response.

“You, Ashley Stone, Michelle Baker, and Josie Torres were camping in the Pinewood National Forest. There were no signs of a struggle in the camp, no footprints leading into the forest, nothing. Tell me what happened out there, that month, what the hell happened?” I demanded. Never before had I lost my temper with her, but we were out of time. I was desperate... Perhaps more than Rebecca.

“Doctor, you already know, please don’t make me say it again...”

“I don’t care if I already know, I want the story again. I need to *think*, and in order to put it all together, we need to go through your experience together. How did you go from camping with friends to crawling onto a major road with a broken arm, covered in the blood of your friends?”

“What will you gain from this? Asking me again, and again?”

“I don’t know yet, that’s why I’m asking!”

A deep breath.

“A-alright. If you insist... I’ll say it again. You’ll only say I was imagining it all, or that I’m *mentally insane*, but none of you know what really happened out there, and no one believes me! Fine... It all began with the lake... That goddamn lake.”