

Iliana and the Green



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Art by Jack Dettmer

Now

I'm sixteen when they find me in the north of the woods, unkempt and tattered, but with a smile. Not the remainder of my family or whoever's left looking for me—no. The trees. They found me probably long before I noticed.

Time out here feels like a blink—a breath—it's easy and simple with no responsibilities but keeping yourself alive. I'm glad I left. Why should I even go back?

It's been days now spent tracking the animal that shed the big mossy antler I found, not sure how long out here overall. Hopefully soon I'll find more evident signs of life. And maybe something for food or, at the least, a fresh water source.

Dad taught me, "To survive you've got to get straight to a river, lake, or pond; make a purifier with a container, stones, and cloth if needed, and stay hydrated *before* your supplies run out."

Most importantly, in his gristly voice he'd say, "Keep alert. Be open-minded to the unexpected elemental forces of nature, kiddo."

I knew all this by the time I could walk, joining him in tree stands on hunts and identifying edible plants on our bush walks. We usually stayed out a couple nights, no matter the weather. I liked going out in the dead of winter because Dad dug deep into the ground and somehow, seemingly with a hint of magic, it'd be massively warmer once we set our sleeping bags down for



the night. Our magic snow hut wrapped around us, centered with a toasty fire that Dad sparked right up with a couple oiled cotton balls. Then he'd whip out aluminum wrapped snacks—cheeses, dried meats and berries, and most importantly, wieners and marshmallows for the fire.

Dad was my top and only survivalist partner pick in life; he did it all the right and natural way. He gave his thanks to the fish, the bunnies, the bears, using up his meats with the respect city dwellers give bars of gold. I watched his eyes glisten and bounce light right back on evening lakes, always happy to be out there on the water or up in the trees. I think he must've passed on that natural instinct to me. At least... I hope I can follow in his footsteps.

I haven't been to these woods since he died, and even then, I've never traversed this far past the cliff outlook. Couldn't really tell you what to expect out here.

I don't think anyone could ever truly predict what can come from spending the night under a sacred forest's canopy.



It feels like a miracle stumbling into part of the land that still feels lush for this time of year, green entangled in the colours of autumn foliage. Through the brush I find what looks like an old folklore Faerie Pond—enchanting blue, rimmed with stones and growing mushrooms of all sorts. Old oaks tower over the water and twinkle reflections like a dance for an audience. I feel lucky to be the one bearing witness to their charm.



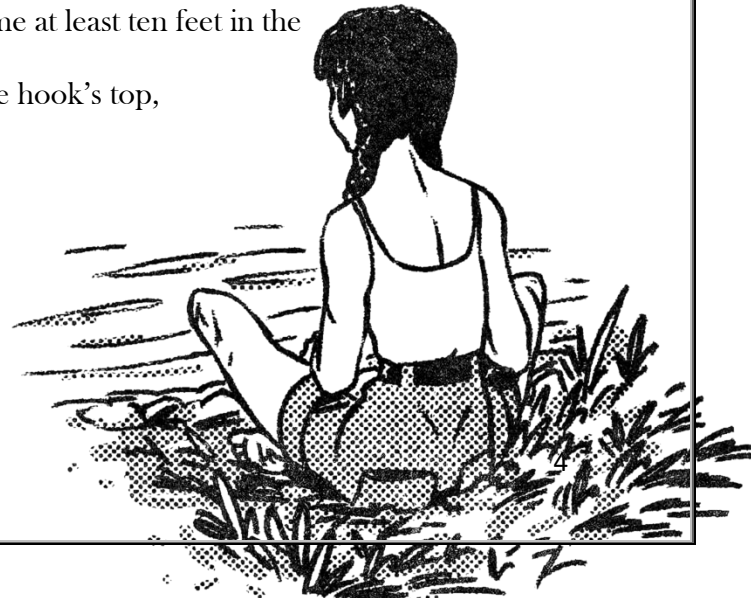
Sitting in front of the water and seeing my dirty reflection makes me feel a sensation I can't quite explain; a mix of sadness, loss, curiosity, and wonder whirl around the clouds in my head. It's like I'm not here, my body's just moving for me. What is my goal? Is this really where I need to be? Would Dad be proud of me?

Before I let myself spiral, I splash handfuls of chilled water onto my face, shocking my senses enough to give me a couple more hours of usefulness while the sun's up. No tracks surround the pond, making the search for the antlered animal increasingly frustrating. At least—there's no tracks that I notice.



As I follow the perimeter in search of clues, I notice a leaf pile suspiciously plopped onto the ground. Knowing better, I check it out.

Instantaneously, netted mesh swoops me at least ten feet in the air, wind brushing my cheeks as I fly to the hook's top, swinging and stuck.



Then

We're standing out in the cold for about 20 minutes before they let us into the cathedral, the bishop already sitting toasty on his cedar throne.

Inside, rows of tall lit candles line each old creaking pew, my back aching at the thought of sitting still all morning. I take my time walking the centre aisle, knowing what I'll face at the end.

My eyes scan their way up the long carpet until they reach the casket, a beautiful toasty-golden mahogany fitted with puffed sheets and inside, Dad. He looks cold and stern, like our late nights in the woods when he'd let the fire dim to dying coals and his nose would be cold to the touch whenever I poked it to wake him up. He'd do this thing where his forehead furrowed even harder before opening his eyes, then his face would relax, and he'd smile at me. It always cracked me up. I thought he'd look more peaceful now in his forever sleep, but his brow is still stuck in that same furrow. Somehow, this comforts me.

I don't have time to react further before the doors are closing and the service begins.

I feel bad for thinking it, but when our old and wrinkled bishop talks, I don't hear much of what comes out of his mouth. It's not that I want to ignore his messages, especially not today, but my mind goes elsewhere every time.

I don't even know if Dad believed in God. I'm sure he did. He'd want to roam the clouds or submerge deep in the ocean with an endless breath, watching the sharks and giant salmon soar past his eyes. He didn't mention much of his beliefs in our time together but exuded a fundamental sense of self-assured integrity that I took note of just the same.

He always seemed sure of his choices and was intentional with his step. Little me would jump into his footprints in the snow, mud, or whatever weather, on our hikes because he always knew the best route to take to not fall.

So, I guess it's just me who's stuck not knowing what to believe. Either way, when God promises resurrection, he never follows through. I'm still alone. Dad will never be a butterfly landing on my shoulder.

My attention floats to the top of the room, inspecting the old church for all its former glory. Living in the tiny town of Ambleside, it's one of two churches, both predating most around the country.

The outside is overtaken by green and purple vines that have begun to slip their roots into the cracks in the limestone and as everyone in town likes to say, "cause issues to the architecture," but I think it's impressive and quite beautiful.

Behind the fields of flowers and clean-cut yard, one of the country's oldest existing forests wraps around the property. I wish I could be out there now, creating my own trails and finding a tranquil spot to be alone, away from all these people that I never see or hear from except for occasions like this.

I continue ignoring eye contact with them all by staring at the tracery of vines and leaves carved into the stone above giant wall-long windows fitted with intricate stained-glass art of their own.

Light begins to pour through in multicoloured streams as the afternoon sun rises to its peak. Though I have to squint, I'm enamoured by the tree man in the glass who seems to be a leafy-bearded knight, staff secured, ready for battle. He looks strong and wise.

It brings me comfort to look at him over the cross. Or my dad's casket sitting just a few feet in front of me. Maybe the guidance of Christ isn't what I need in my time of mourning; maybe I just need the power of grass and leaf and sap, the sky feeding me warmth—something new.

A drop of rain drips through cracks of the aging cathedral roof and lands on my forehead, rolling cold down my cheek. I wipe it with my sleeve and look around the ceiling. Small bits of water leak down the walls and down the leaf man on the window, but not enough for anyone to notice or stop paying attention to the service.



At the burial site, I hit my breaking point. Seeing Dad lowered into the ground, soon to be reduced to bones, just isn't right. He was here one minute, gone the next. I never got my goodbye.

When I sneak backwards through the crowd of grieving family and friends, only my aunt turns and asks where I'm headed. I tell her the bathroom and we both know it's a lie. I hurry my pace before she can reply.

"Iliana!" She sounds worried.

I don't turn around. "Finish up the funeral. I'll be fine!" A bolder lie.

Back in the church where everyone left their things, I snoop through belongings hoping no one else notices me here. I spot a good size black purse with a long strap, empty the useless wallet and keys, and stuff it full of funeral foods, water bottles, napkins, and a butcher's knife I sneak out from the unoccupied kitchen. I leave out the back door and run toward the forest leading out of town.


While scavenging for some of the season's leftover berries to snack on along my long walk to nowhere, I spot something in the underbrush. This isn't the first time I'm making a discovery like this, but it's definitely the most impressive. I lay the purse on the ground, put my hair in a bun, and army crawl under pointy thick bushes to retrieve a single antler—the biggest I've ever seen. It's been here awhile, covered in moss and dirt, but the thought of finding this majestic animal takes over my thoughts for the next half hour.

I guess it's the hunter's daughter in me, but I decide to track down the beast missing an antler.



Now


I'm still gripping the antler, now tighter than ever, as I swing back and forth in the air. Disoriented, I shake my head like a cartoon character trying to come back to reality. Hair covers my face and I spit strands free from my mouth to better see what's going on.




“Oh, Dan. Look what we've caught here!” Two men appear from the west, seemingly out of nowhere. They must've left their quads all the way back at the tree line and hiked in, as stealthy hunters should.

As my vision straightens out, I recognize them as our down-the-lane neighbours. They're older guys, greying hair, the typical farmers you'd see with their flannel and wellies on. They've always been kinda quiet and weird when they pass by our place in their beat-up truck; Dad would wave, they wouldn't. I watched. And now, for some reason, they're laughing at me.

“This is a first! Maybe we can do something with this one!” They laugh again. Greg, I think his name might be, gives me a creepy smile.



“Yeah... get me down.” I'm not amused. And I don't have a good feeling about them by the way they're watching me hang up here.



“Sure thing, kiddo. What's your name, anyways? Why you all the way out here interfering with our game traps?”

I stay silent, staring.

“Alright, say no more. We'll go grab a ladder and get you out of there.”

They give each other a look. “Poor thing.”



In that instant, like a cosmic trick, rain pours. Heavy. If anything, at least the weather god is on my side.



The guys look at me, then back at each other, shrugging before shouting out something about being back for me soon when the rain gives, yada yada—like I'd even stick around long enough for that to happen. I count the seconds it takes for their crunchy steps to fade into the distance.

Forty-seven.

In less than a minute I'm using a sharp edge of the antler to saw my way out of this thick cedar-woven death trap. It takes some extra arm strength that I don't really have to spare, but there's also no time.

Once I'm out, I ignore my fear of heights, not looking down as I bear hug the tree and scale to the bottom.



What was a few minutes up there felt like an eternity, and I'm wobbling remembering how my legs should work on ground. I stumble behind the thickest, tallest tree I can find and take cover opposite the direction they left in. I slide down the backside for a moment to rest and catch my breath. The rain already lets up a bit, giving me more hope that I won't be electrocuted by lightning as I traverse through packed trees in the storm.



Ahead, I see something; it's just far enough in the distance for me to make out that it's a structure of some kind, but it looks small. After what just happened, I don't want to imagine who could live there.

Still, I start walking in its direction for cover from the weather.





The hut is well-fashioned and natural, even more spacious up close. It's classic in shape, fitted with a hay thatched roof and all. The only guess that comes to mind is that a wise old wizard lives here, making potions and casting spells while the moon is high.



"OH—GIVE ME SHELTER, MUD AND TWIG,

PROBLEMS NOW SHAN'T SEEM SO BIG,

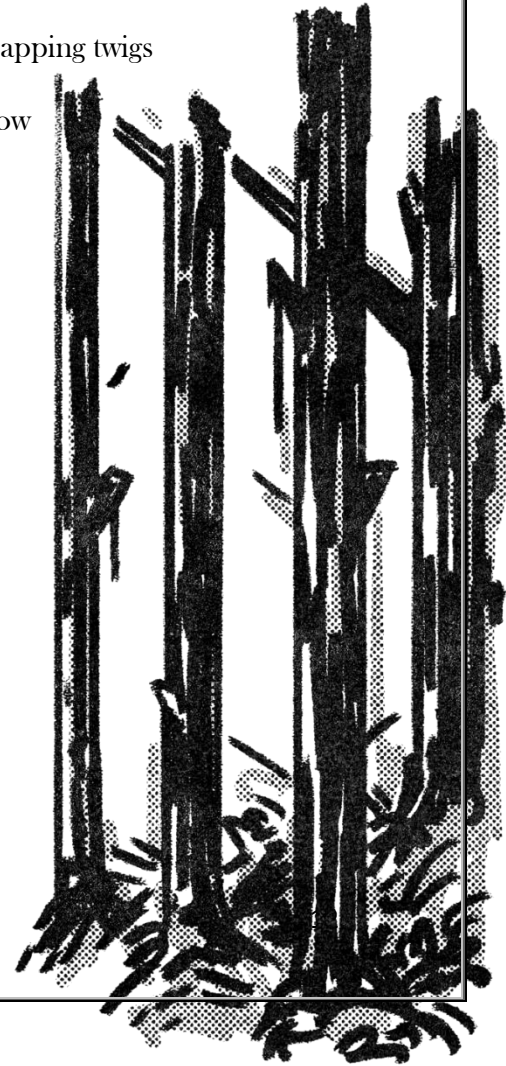
FEEL NO WEATHER, FACE NO SIN

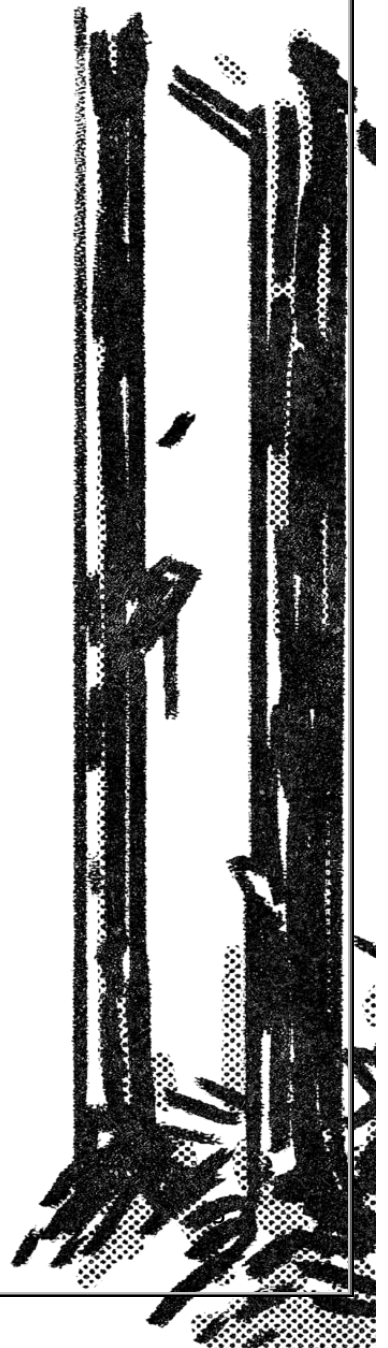
THIS HUT BRINGS SOLACE TO MY SOUL WITHIN."

I chuckle at my improv spell, secretly hoping it works. Peeking into the dark empty hut, I creak open the log door and head in for a short rest.

I don't realize I've fallen asleep until I'm woken up by snapping twigs outside. Through shedding branches, I see it. At first a shadow shifting in and out of sunspots in the trees, then all at once.

My eyes must be tricking me.







The creature floats towards the hut, suddenly making no noise as it crosses the leaves. It holds up its arm like it's trying to motion something to me, but I can't think straight enough to figure it out.



Before I have time to panic, I'm stuck wide-eyed and infatuated by the being in front of me. It's tall, standing on two bark legs that sprout up higher than a lot of the surrounding trees. If it has been here all along, it's clearly a master of camouflage. But right now, it's hard to miss.



The feature I'm stuck on is the single giant mossy antler fixed snugly on its crown. But... it's not an animal. It looks more like a tree. Or... a man.



Is this the thing I've been tracking this whole time?



When it gets to the hut and crouches to look inside the door, I realize I haven't moved or even made a sound. I'm frozen. Suddenly, my mouth blurts out a yelpy,

"Please, don't. I—I just don't want them to find me. These hunters, they're—"



Before I can finish my plea, the being swishes viny fingers together, making sure I can see, and in that moment, it starts to rain like before. The tree man's expression shifts from stern into a relaxed state, somehow calming me too. I'm stuck in awe and wonder. Did he help me back there? Was the storm to save me?

He takes his time appreciating the raindrops, giving me the extra time to assess his physique up close. The torso looks like a split old log, thick and sturdy and sprouting with lively vegetation in the divots. He bears a human head, complete with round golden eyes. Uniquely, a strong crown of oak



leads into the mighty remaining antler that lives on his head, making it clear he's not a human at all. The entirety of the body is covered in moss, mushrooms, and small creatures and insects roaming across and within. It's like he is a living ecosystem of his own. A beard of leaves hangs from his chin, and when he purses his lips bits of soil spill from his mouth. He really is, from what I see, a tree man—and probably something more, seeing how he turned the rain on like that.



I step outside the hut and shut the thick log door behind me. I look up—way up—at the leafy green man who watches me back with an intensity that makes me sweat.



From behind my back, I reveal the antler I've been carrying, holding it out to him, my head in a slight bow.


He pauses so intentionally that it makes the wind halt.

After a while, he reaches out at me, and I think he's going to hurt me. My hands shake as I lift the antler higher. I close my eyes.


All I feel around my wrist is a tight gripping sensation, the slithering of velvety vines moving across my wrist. I don't realize until now the gaping cut dripping blood down my arm; I've been too preoccupied.

The man of green cups my hand with both of his, squeezes tightly, then offers back my hand. Looking down at his, I still don't know what he's made of. If it's what I'm thinking, how is he here... alive? Trees can't—

All thoughts stop as I peer down to inspect my arm. I can't find the cut anywhere, not one big enough to cause that type of damage. Did he heal me?




Before I can ask, I'm looking all around me like a lost puppy to find him.



He's nowhere in sight.




"H-hello?"



All I get back is sun peaking through emptied rain clouds and a whistle in the breeze. I don't know what to think, what to feel, what to do.



On the ground in front of me, he left the antler. If he could heal me, wouldn't he want this back to heal himself? Now that I think of it, the man looked worn, hints of decomposition in his wooden frame. But still, life around him blooms.




All around me now, ever since he came out from the shadows, the half-dead flowers and shrubs have sparked with more life and the air smells sweeter. I hope I didn't scare him off by not saying a word. Did he want to talk to me? Why'd he leave so soon?

If you ask me how to find him, I couldn't tell you. Not even now. He was here one minute and gone the next. But I can feel him still, I have a funny sense that he's all around me. A shed antler just means he'll keep going, leaving behind trace of bone that ties him back to the physical world. But really, he's just a living spirit of the trees. I think we all are.

I look down at the healed cut on my hand, a tiny green sprout pushing gently through the scar. Without a second thought, I look to the falling leaves on the trees, to the forest ahead, but not back at where I came from.



I pick up my things, leaving the antler in the hut, and get back on my journey through the sacred woods. Now, I have the sense I'll be okay.





THE END.

Content Acknowledgements

To delve into the lore of the Green Man and better understand how this elusive figure has developed over time and across continents, I took in great knowledge from a variety of impactful sources of content. With the help of multiple books, articles, and likeminded folklore stories, I've been inspired to develop the world and characters within *Iliana and the Green*.

To ensure atmospheric accuracy, I learned from works such as: Jonathan Drori and Lucille Clerc's *Around the World in 80 Trees* (Laurence King Publishing, 2018) and Carlyne Larrington's *The Land of the Green Man: A Journey Through the Supernatural Landscapes of the British Isles* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

For historical theory on the Green Man and other nature lore: John Matthews and Will Worthington's *Spirit of Nature Oracle: Ancient Wisdom from the Green Man and the Celtic Ogam Tree Alphabet* (Eddison Books Limited, 2018), Malihe Mosleh and Zahra Riahi Zamin's "Studying Techniques of Metamorphosis in Six-Thousand-Year-Old Green Man: A Mythological Reading" (Journal of Children's Literature Studies, 2021), Lady Raglan's "The 'Green Man' in Church Architecture" (Folklore, vol. 50, 1939), and Gary R. Varner's *The Mythic Forest, the Green Man and the Spirit of Nature: The Re-Emergence of the Spirit of Nature from Ancient Times into Modern Society* (Algora, 2006).

For creative and spiritual inspiration: Dontsov et al., “The Role of Mythological Ideas in Children’s Socialization and Subjective Well-Being (European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences, 2018), Ben Okri’s *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* (Other Press, 2021), and Madame Pamita’s *Baba Yaga’s Book of Witchcraft: Slavic Magic from the Witch of the Woods* (Llewellyn Publications, 2022).

I owe much gratitude to each of these works for offering different insight into themes of nature, folklore, and even child psychology, all of which came together to inspire me to write Iliana’s journey.