

Friday Snippets: From the Ghost Files

written by Holly

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By Holly Lisle

I'm at a point where I really can't post any more of the Moonroads book, at least not for a while. But I still want to do Friday Snippets. So I figured for your amusement and edification, I'd post snippets from the stuff I've had rejected but that I still intend to keep trying to sell, albeit perhaps in a different genre or in a highly revised version.

This picks up right where last Friday's Snippet left off.

This stuff may NEVER see print. I hope it does, but I acknowledge that you may be reading ghosts. However, in case I ever can find the right market for these stories, please don't repost, quote or copy the following excerpt. It is copyrighted and not yet abandoned. Hope remains.

BLACK DOG

(...Chapter One continued...)

She could see clearly on the other side of the stream. She could see everything over there. Bare-branch underbrush, unbroken snow, good light from nearly overhead that did not leave any dark puddles where something might lurk.

No big moving bulky skulking thing.

Natalie took a step backward and realized that she was shaking. She was not a nervous person. Didn't jump at noises in her apartment, didn't fear living alone, didn't have a bit of trouble falling asleep at night. She was imaginative – in her line of work, she had to be – but she'd never had the problem of feeling her imagination trying to push its way into her reality. She was a practical person; this was something that had always been a point of pride with her.

And yet she could look at that empty bank and still be dead certain that she had seen something.

She retraced her steps, stood facing the same way, walked forward slowly, trying to duplicate the flash of red that had caught her attention. Trash on the other side of the woods might have caused the sudden brilliant glow of red; a kid's bicycle reflector or broken glass from an automobile taillight might make such a flash if illuminated for just a moment by a stray beam of sunlight. It would make sense. But she couldn't get the flash again.

But just because she couldn't duplicate it, that didn't mean that wasn't what it had been.

Just some trash. Nothing scary.

And yet, inside her, primitive hindbrain instinct was screaming, "Run. Go back. Get away from here."

Behind her lay the safety of her lovely rented log cabin and the idyllic lake. Ahead lay the siren lure of a mysterious waterfall, the sound of thundering water sweet to Natalie's ears, the possibility of something wonderful drawing her forward. Not just because she needed pictures for the team. Not just for the future of some as-yet intangible project. But for her, because something inside of her was hungry for wild water and solitude and places that no one else had ever seen.

So she caged the small, nervous creature at the back of her mind. That timorous, trembling prey that feared the shadow of the hawk and the gliding step of the wolf would keep itself where it belonged – well-hidden, where its fears could not control her.

She could no longer find calm within herself; the feeling of being watched, silly thought it was, had driven her self-assuredness from her. But Natalie wanted mystery and beauty, wildness and adventure, even if it was the mundane adventure of locating a hidden waterfall. So she kept walking.

The terrain got rougher. The ground began to rise sharply, and the stream and the valley both took a sharp jog to the right.

She climbed on, stopping for a few minutes at a time to catch her breath. Finally, she reached a sort of plateau, and found herself faced by a rusted chain hanging over the stream between two old fence posts jammed into the earth. And hanging on the center of the chain, a battered, pitted faded metal sign.

NO TRESPASSING

Black with pale yellow letters that had surely once been bright and commanding. But not anymore – nor did Natalie have any interest in being commanded. She'd put too much effort into getting where she was to meekly turn around and go back.

She gave the sign's warning only a moment's consideration, and then climbed over the chain, and walked on. She was very near the waterfall; she couldn't see it yet, but its music was rising to a thundering crescendo, and she could just imagine how beautiful it would be.

Past the chain, the ground again rose steeply. Natalie lost herself in the sheer physical effort of the next leg of her journey, as what had seemed like a path became, briefly,

almost vertical.

And then she got where she was going.

She came over the top of the rise, and stopped, blinking, certain for a moment that the altitude or exertion were playing tricks on her mind. She rubbed her eyes, certain she couldn't be seeing what her brain insisted she saw. Looked behind her, down the steep slope, over at the short run of whitewater as the stream shot down the narrows, and then back to the impossible scene in front of her.

To vivid green plants, to drifts of flowers in gold and periwinkle and crimson, pink and amber and lavender and royal purple, to young trees fully leafed out and set with unripe fruit, and behind this paradise, a shimmering rainbow-wreathed waterfall in the background and a deep, sapphire pool at its base that reflected the gem tones of the flowers around it.

Garden of Eden, she thought, afraid to breathe for fear that a single exhalation might erase the vision before her.

"God," she whispered. The starts of tears blurred her vision; she found herself swallowing around a lump in her throat.

She'd come yearning for beauty and a mystery, and she'd found a miracle.

I'll post continuing excerpts from this for the next few weeks.

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