

The Wishing Tree

by Renee Carter Hall

He was the oldest raccoon in the backwoods, and he not only knew every trick, he'd invented half of them himself. He'd seen the leaves change so many times that he'd lost all count of how many years he'd lived, but though his gray-brown fur had gone silvery white in places, he was still as spry and limber a coon as any hound had ever chased. He had no name, not even one he called himself, but when anyone in the woods talked about him, everyone understood who they meant.

He was curled up in a cozy hollow that day, dozing as afternoon settled into dusk, when he heard the hounds baying.

He recognized their voices. One of the hounds was young and green. The other one—wasn't. And he hadn't lived so many years without learning to respect at least a few of his enemies.

So he hauled himself out of the tree and set about his usual course, adding in bits as the opportunity arose: a few leaps from one branch to another, a quick splash in the stream, a doubling-back here and a figure eight there.

And it was almost enough.

But he hadn't been counting on that rotten branch to give way, sending him tumbling nose over tail in a most undignified manner, down to the ground just as the hounds found his trail.

They were close. He could smell their hot breath—what *did* that hunter feed them, anyway?—and he had just enough time to bolt up the nearest tree, which happened to be a tall oak newly dressed in its autumn bronze. An instant later, the hounds burst through the underbrush, raced to the base of the tree, and bawled.

The raccoon closed his eyes briefly. Treed. By the blessed Lady Moon, he hadn't been treed since these dogs' sires were suckling pups. It was clear enough there'd be no doubling back this time. This was going to take some fast thinking and some faster talking. Fortunately, he was a master at both.

He cleared his throat. "Good evening, gentlemen."

The hounds looked at each other. The younger one, Buddy, was a bluetick barely more than a pup,

all wiggle and wag, eager to get even a pat on the head for a job well done. The older hound, Red, was a battle-worn redbone. His coat was snarled with burrs and etched with ragged scars, and a spark of hellfire blazed in each eye. His teeth—the raccoon noted—were yellow, but they were still sharp.

"Is he talking to us?" Buddy asked Red.

Red snarled. "Of course he's talking to us. Who else is here?" He called up the tree's thick trunk. "And good evening to you too, mister. I hope you've enjoyed it, because I haven't seen food all day, and I'm figuring on getting the tender parts as soon as you hit the ground."

Buddy yelped laughter. "That's a good one."

"Well," the raccoon replied calmly, "if you can't see farther than your belly, I suppose that's your loss. Still, I'd have thought a... a *sophisticated* canine like yourself would know the legend if anyone did."

The hounds exchanged another glance. "What legend?" Red asked.

The raccoon feigned surprise. "Then you don't know about this tree?"

Red looked the trunk up and down. "What about it?"

"It's the Wishing Tree. I thought everyone in these woods knew about the Wishing Tree."

"What's a wishing tree?" Buddy piped up.

"Shut up, you," Red snapped. He looked back up at the raccoon. "What's a wishing tree?"

"A magic tree that gets you whatever you want most," the raccoon explained. "Of course, you have to climb it and get an acorn from up here to wish on, and I don't think those nails of yours are up to it."

Buddy was already scrabbling at the bark with his front paws, trying to grab hold. "Stop it," Red said with a growl. "Everyone knows dogs can't climb trees."

"Yes, that's true," the raccoon said. "Of course... I could make your wishes for you."

Buddy's tail wagged so hard it stirred up dead leaves in the underbrush. "Really?"

"Don't see why not. There are plenty of acorns up here. I can reach two right—from—here. Now,"

the raccoon said, "after we make your wishes, you have to close your eyes, turn around seven times, and run home. And you can't open your eyes until you get there, or your wish won't come true."

Buddy looked at Red. "But how're we gonna get home if we can't see?"

Red rolled his eyes. "Use your nose, stupid. Are you a hunting dog or not?"

The raccoon heard rustling, and the shifting breeze carried the oily scent of human. "Better make those wishes quick. How about the little one first?"

"Well..." Buddy lowered his head in a canine blush. "It's sorta..."

"Out with it," Red snapped, "or we won't have time for mine! The master's coming!"

"Well, there's a... a lady down the road. She's..."

"Pretty?" the raccoon prompted.

"Oh, yes. But we're always tied up, so..."

Red rolled his eyes again. "You wouldn't know a bitch's backside from a woodchuck hole."

"Say no more," the raccoon said, clutching the acorn and closing his eyes. "Okay. Now what about you?"

"Steak," Red said dreamily, licking his lips. "Had it once when I was a pup. Back when the master was different." He sighed. "Long time ago."

"All you think about is food," Buddy said.

"Yeah, well, someday you'll learn what's *really* important in life. And it's not a little show dog with more scent than sense."

The raccoon held the second acorn, closed his eyes, and opened them again. "Done!" he said, and as soon as the hounds' eyes closed, he hauled himself down the tree and as far away as he could get while still being in the woods.

A minute later, the hunter arrived—and nearly got barreled down by his two hounds, their eyes still shut tight, galloping full-speed all the way home.

Red stretched and settled, trying to find a position that would accommodate his swollen belly. It had been a good night.

He chuckled to himself, remembering. It had started just after sundown, when they'd woken up from a long nap. Buddy had started up his lovesick howling again—*he* called it singing—and then broke off in surprise when he found he didn't have a rope around his neck anymore. It lay in the dirt like a dead snake. Wasn't chewed through, and wasn't cut. And when Red turned his head to look closer, he realized his was gone too.

But before he'd been able to investigate, the master had come out, yelling for Buddy to shut up if he knew what was good for him. Buddy was young, but he had enough sense to take his chance, and when the master saw his prize bluetick coonhound take off down the hill and down the road, he went chasing after.

And he left the cabin door open.

Red had enough sense to take his chance, too. That open door was all the invitation he needed, and inside, his nose led him right to the dinner his master had left behind: a gorgeous raw steak, deep pink and marbled, waiting to be slapped into the cast-iron skillet. He grabbed it, turned to run, and then paused.

He remembered this cabin. He remembered curling up by that woodstove in the corner, feeling the fire's warmth washing over him like his mother's tongue, back from when he was too little to know anything except touch. He remembered getting tidbits of master's dinner, remembered pats on the head and scratches behind the ears.

He glanced back at the kitchen table. One of the bottles was there, too, right next to the skillet. His hackles went up, and he growled around the dripping meat.

The bottles had started everything. Once they showed up, the bad times started and never stopped. Not being able to wake the master. Being shut inside all day, all night, and then hit when he did what he had to do on the floor. Pain that made him want to bite, and worse pain if he did. Once, his master's own rifle aimed at him. And then the halfhearted doghouse, and the rope tied tight.

But there was no rope around his neck now.

He held the steak firmly in his teeth—those lovely salt-sweet juices pooling on his tongue—and decided.

On his way out, he paused at the master's chair. Once it had smelled good, as the master did, but now it smelled only of the bottles. As the master did.

His bladder was conveniently full. He lifted his leg to the worn upholstery and, when finished, trotted off into the night. Nothing in his life had ever tasted so good as a fine steak eaten in the shelter of a hollow log, and nothing had ever felt so good as falling asleep afterward with the night woods singing around him.

* * *

Nudge.

"Hey."

Nudge.

"Hey."

Red woke, looking bleary-eyed at the log overhead and the woods beyond. Buddy was standing next to him. What were they... Then he felt the faint breeze against the ring on his neck where the rope had chafed the fur away, and he remembered.

He yawned until he squeaked, then looked at Buddy. "How'd you get here?"

"Tracked you. I'm a hunting dog, aren't I?"

"I guess so." Red stretched. "Did you find her?"

"Oh, yes." Buddy rolled onto his back and sighed blissfully. "It was wonderful."

"Hmph."

"So what do we do now?" Buddy asked.

"I'm not going back."

"We could find a new master."

Red laid his head on his paws. "Done with masters."

"Come on. A little one. The little ones are fun. I had one when I was a pup."

"You're *still* a pup," Red grumbled, but his ears came up a little, considering it. "And how are we supposed to find one?"

Buddy thought a moment, scratched an itch behind his left ear, chased his tail, then sat down and thought some more. "We could wish for one!" he declared finally.

"*Wish* for..." Red trailed off. After all, the taste of steak still lingered in his mouth, and Buddy reeked of that show dog down the road. "Well... Couldn't hurt, I guess."

* * *

The raccoon watched the two hounds approach from his perch on the oak tree. They weren't baying, and his curiosity won out enough that he came out and let them see him. "On the hunt again, boys?"

"Nope," Buddy said, tail wagging. "We want to make another wish."

The raccoon blinked. *Well, now you've started something...* "Another wish?"

"Just one," Buddy continued. "For both of us."

The raccoon shrugged and plucked an acorn. "All right. What is it?"

"We want a new master. A little one."

"And no bottles, ever," Red added.

"Okay, why not." The raccoon closed his eyes. "There you go. Enjoy."

"And..." Red started.

The raccoon peered down at him. "You said *one* wish."

The old hound looked embarrassed. "And one for you. Whatever you want. You know, to thank you, for the other ones."

What were they putting in dog food these days? "Why not," he repeated. He grabbed another acorn and closed his eyes—*and no hunters anymore, ever.*

The hounds turned around seven times and ran. The raccoon chuckled, turned around seven times just to see what it felt like, got dizzy, and nearly fell off the branch. His front paws still ached a

little from untying those ropes, but if it made for two less hounds in the woods, it was worth it.

And then, just because he was curious and had nothing better to do, he followed the hounds. Their trail was easy to follow, what with all the trampled underbrush and broken branches, and it led down to the road.

He stopped in a tree at the edge of the woods—and winced when he heard the screech of brakes. The hounds, their eyes still closed, had run right into the path of a navy-blue minivan. Buddy, he saw, had been knocked off his feet, but he still looked to be breathing well enough. Red stood over him and growled when the driver got out.

"Dad!" A boy leapt out of the back.

"Stay back," the man warned. "They might bite if they're hurt." He edged closer.

Red sized him up. He smelled good, as the old master had long ago. A bit of woodsmoke, clean human skin with a little sweat, and the scent of others mingled with his. The scent of family.

And no bottles, either, not a hint. It was good. Red looked up, searching the man's eyes, and wagged his tail once, then twice.

"Hey, buddy," the man said softly. "Easy now, that's a good boy. Just want a look at your friend here..."

The old hound backed up and sat. Buddy whined as the man came close, then relaxed.

From the tree, the raccoon watched as the man took out a cell phone and made a call. The boy brought a blanket from the car, and they carried the little hound carefully inside. Red hesitated just an instant, then jumped in, and the minivan drove away.

Well, that's two less hounds for sure, the raccoon thought. Still... it *was* a little odd. He'd made that Wishing Tree up in the time it took a leaf to fall... but what were the chances...?

He turned to head back into the woods—and stopped. There was something new on this tree. He looked down at the trunk. A yellow sign, bright and fresh, was nailed there. He couldn't read it, but he knew what it meant, and there was one on nearly every tree that bordered the road, as far as he could see: POSTED. NO HUNTING.

No hunters anymore.

Well.

The raccoon hurried back to the oak, clambered up, and clutched an acorn tightly in both paws.

"Crawdads without pinchers," he whispered, and closed his eyes.

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