

In the Forest of S.T. Shrew

Jackie sat down with a “humph.” “I don’t think anything lives in these woods,” she thought. “I’ve been walking around for a long time, and I haven’t seen anything except for a couple of squirrels.” Squirrels didn’t really count. She had squirrels in her front yard, and there were squirrels around school. She was supposed to be seeing all kinds of interesting, unusual animals to include in her report for school.

“Pick a place near school or home, and investigate what lives there. Then write a report about all the interesting and unusual things you find.” That was the assignment. Too bad she didn’t live near the pet shop, like Rene Navarro. Then she’d have lots to write about. But no, she had picked this patch of woods behind the playground thinking it would be loaded with animals.

“Now what am I going to do?” she wondered. She closed her eyes to think....

“So, you don’t think anything interesting lives in these woods, huh?” she heard a high-pitched voice ask.

“What was that?” she gasped as she looked around. Sitting next to her, with its head poking out from under the leaves, was a small, furry animal with big whiskers and tiny little eyes. It repeated its question.

“You don’t think anything interesting lives in these woods?”

“Well, I didn’t....” she answered. “Who are you?”

“Everyone calls me S.T.,” he answered. “I’m a shrew—a short-tailed shrew. Now, put your finger on my back.”

“What?” she asked, surprised.

“Look, you would like to know about what lives in these woods, wouldn’t you? So, c’mon. Hurry up!”

Slowly, Jackie reached out her finger and gently touched him on the back. There was a flash and she found herself standing next to S.T., looking him right in the eye. Then she realized that she was standing on four legs and was covered with

fur. She had turned into a shrew!

“There, that’s much better,” he said. “Now, follow me.”

“Where are we going?” asked Jackie.

“A lot of creatures around here are pretty upset that you don’t know they even exist. So I’ve been appointed to show you around. Besides, now that you’re my size, you’d make a tasty meal for something, so you’ll be safer if you follow me.” And with that he turned and dove down the hole he had popped up out of earlier.

As Jackie stood there wondering what to do, she looked up and saw a large bird flying overhead. “Uh-oh!” she cried and dove into the hole after S.T.

In the Ground

Jackie had never crawled through the ground before and wasn’t sure she liked it. It was dark and damp and smelled like dirt. And there were so many roots everywhere! Tiny roots were constantly brushing by her face. She and S.T. had to crawl up, over, and around larger roots over and over again. Then all of a sudden, S.T. stopped.

“Hey, everyone! We’re here!” he yelled at the dirt walls of the tunnel. At first Jackie could hear and see nothing. Then she noticed a rumbling sound that seemed to be getting louder and louder. Suddenly, heads began popping out of the tunnel wall. There were earthworms and beetles and white grubs and many other creatures Jackie couldn’t identify.

“Do you all live in the ground?” asked Jackie in awe.

“Uh-huh, and lots of others do too,” said one particularly fat earthworm.

“But how do you live?” Jackie asked. “I mean... what is there to eat down here?”

“Well, you could say I eat my way through the soil!” replied the earthworm. “I make a tunnel by eating the dirt, then separating out bits of

plants and other food from the dirt particles. It’s not for everyone, but I love it!” he ended.

“We suck juices right out of roots,” said three white grubs together. “And one day we’ll crawl up out of the ground and become adults.”

“Did you ever wonder what happens to animals that die in the woods?” interrupted a black beetle, waving its antennae back and forth. “It’s thanks to me that they’re taken care of.”

“He means, thanks to all us carion beetles,” said another black beetle. “We eat them up. Keep the forest clean.”

As Jackie thought about all this, S.T. thanked all the soil creatures for coming. Then he turned to Jackie and said, “Follow me. There’s still a lot more for you to see.”

A Rotten Place to Live

Jackie followed S.T. through the soil for a short distance; then they climbed up to the surface and ran along the ground under a cover of leaves. As they traveled, the leaves crunched and rustled. Jackie could see spiders, centipedes, and other small creatures crawling around. She wanted to stop and talk to them, but S.T. kept moving and she knew she had to keep up with him. Finally, S.T. stopped at the end of a log. S.T. ran onto the top of it and Jackie followed. Most of the top of the log was covered with a thick, green carpet of moss.

“Oooh!” cried Jackie. “It’s so soft. And look at all the other things growing up here.” Jackie ran around on top of the log. She rolled in the soft moss, touching the cool, bright orange fungi that were growing on one end of the log, and sniffing the tops of tall, red-capped lichens as though they were flowers and had a scent. There was even a tiny tree, only about three inches tall, growing out of the log.

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"Want to see the inside?" asked S.T.

"OK," answered Jackie, following S.T. back over the end of the log. She waited as he called to someone named Millie. In just a few seconds a long, dark creature with dozens of legs came crawling out of the end of the log.

"I'm a little too big to go with you on this part of the trip," S.T. told her. "You go with Millie and I'll wait for you here."

"But I'm just as big as you are," said Jackie. But just then Millie reared up and touched Jackie's head with several of her legs. Just as before, there was a flash, and Jackie turned into a millipede just like Millie.

At first Jackie found it a little difficult to move all her legs in a coordinated way. But once she and Millie got inside the log, she was too busy looking around to think about how to walk and she didn't have any trouble at all.

Millie was pointing out things and explaining them to Jackie, who was having trouble absorbing all the information. But finally, she began to get the idea she was in a kind of factory—a factory that breaks logs down into soil. Everywhere they went there were things chewing, tunneling, and boring through the wood. There were wood roaches, small white termites, and hard-shelled pill bugs that rolled into tight little balls as she and Millie went by. There were also insect-eating hunters: huge, shiny-black beetles with giant jaws and centipedes with venomous fangs. And at one point, when they'd crawled deep inside the log, they saw a salamander resting in a dark damp hole in the decaying log.

Jackie had no idea there was so much activity inside a log and was really sorry when they headed back to S.T. But after Millie turned Jackie back into a shrew, Jackie and S.T. said oodbye to Millie and scurried off.

Life at the Top

Soon Jackie and S.T. stopped at the base of a tree. Immediately, a small, black-capped bird flew down and

landed on the leaves next to them.

"I was beginning to wonder whether you were coming," said the bird. "Hello, Jackie—I'm Sitta. Ever felt like flying?" she asked, stretching one of her wings over Jackie's head. There was a flash and then Jackie slowly stretched out her own wings—she had become a nuthatch just like Sitta.

"Let's go!" cried Sitta, and she leaped into the air and flew off. "I'll wait here," S.T. called after them.

Of everything she had done that day, Jackie was sure flying was the best. First they flew up over the trees where Jackie could see many other birds flying in and out of the tree-tops. Then she and Sitta swooped into the top of one tree and darted in and out among its branches.

Jackie was amazed at all the insects she saw. There were grasshopper-like creatures and other "bugs" sitting on the leaves. There were wasps and flies buzzing around. And there were caterpillars crawling on many of the leaves. Then Sitta fluttered down and landed on the tree trunk. As Sitta led Jackie down the tree head first, Jackie looked closely at the trunk and was amazed at what she saw. There were caterpillars and ants crawling. She saw several spiders and a moth that was almost the same color as the bark—in fact, she almost missed it because it was so perfectly camouflaged against the bark. There were also pale greenish lichens and moss growing on the bark. Eventually, she and Sitta reached the bottom of the trunk.

"This tree is like an apartment building or something," said Jackie as she jumped onto the ground next to S.T. "There are different things living on it all the way from the leaves at the top to the base right here on the forest floor," she added.

"I guess I should say right down into the dirt—I shouldn't forget everyone I met underground earlier!"

"Well, it's good to hear you talking about all the things that live in and on trees," said Sitta. Then she held her wing over Jackie's head again and flew back up into the trees out of sight.

Home Again

As Jackie once more followed S.T. through the ground, she began wondering where they could be going next. It was dark and damp in the tunnel, and root hairs were brushing by her face. As they ran along, the smell of dirt filled her nose....

Suddenly, Jackie opened her eyes. She was back by the tree she'd sat down against earlier that day. Somehow she'd fallen over and was lying on the ground with her face resting on top of the leaves. Her nose was filled with the smell of dead leaves and dirt. Slowly, Jackie sat up.

Did I dream the whole thing? she wondered as she looked around. "There's a dead log over there like the one I went to with S.T. And the bark of this tree is covered with all kinds of things, just like the one I saw with Sitta," she said as she stood up. Still her adventure seemed impossible. But then Jackie looked at the ground near where she'd been sitting and reached over to the spot that seemed to be where she thought she had first seen S.T. As she carefully lifted up some of the leaves, she could see it: a small hole in the ground. Jackie laughed out loud. "Boy, do I ever have a lot to write about in my report!" she cried. Then she turned and ran all the way home.

