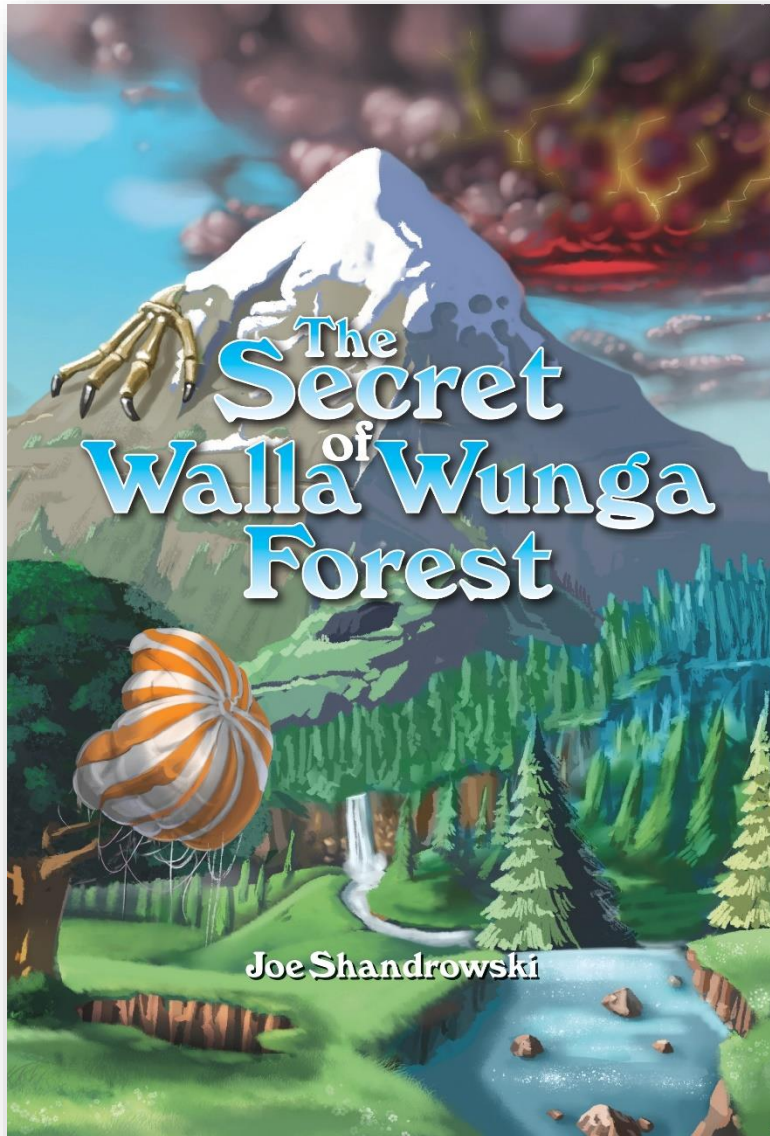


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The Secret of Walla Walla Wunga

By Joe Shandrowski



Adventure - Humor - Suspense - Conservation

The animals of Walla Wunga Forest, with the help of a Woodland Spirit, set forth on a seemingly impossible journey to save an injured ranger (who has done everything in his power to protect and preserve the environment for them) before an evil red-eyed dragon silences the forest forevermore.

The mission is called, "Operation Friendship."

In order to accomplish the mission the animals must reveal the secret of the forest and use their individual "set of skills" to survive dangerous mountain ranges, swamp creature, phantoms, raging rivers, and many other dangers.

CHAPTER 1

The Wind Dragon

It wasn't your typical summer day in Walla Wunga Forest. Usually the animals would be wandering around, playing in the trees, having a snack or enjoying a nap. This day, however, they were scurrying about with panic in their step. There was good reason for them to be spooked: Word had spread across the forest that a wicked storm was on its way, the likes of which the forest had not seen in one hundred years. In fact, today marked the anniversary of that first storm.

Scientists believe animals are born with a sixth sense that allows them to foresee dangerous weather. Nevertheless, the animals of Walla Wunga Forest depended upon a more feathery approach to forecasting. Their method was a "hoot," some would say: They received their daily weather from a grumpy old owl named Wetherbee. Simply put, the grumpier he was, the worse the weather would be.

Yesterday, at the crack of dawn, he had stepped onto the ledge of his tree trunk, let out a simple grunt, and stepped back inside. Except for a few clouds, it turned out to be a beautiful day.

Today, however, was a far different story. From the second his eyes popped open, Wetherbee was on the grump. "Stop running up and down my tree, you nut-headed squirrels!" He yelled as he swatted away a butterfly. "OUCH!" He followed with a shout. "You made me throw my back out."

The grumpiness didn't end there. He complained about buzzing bees, his wobbling knees, and a bad case of gas that could peel the bark off a tree.

It was Wetherbee's great-great-grandfather, Mortimer, who had predicted the last storm that occurred one hundred years ago. "I have a bad feeling about this," Ricky the Raccoon said. Ricky lived in a hollowed-out oak tree next door to Wetherbee the Owl.

Just hours after Mortimer had made his weather prediction one hundred years ago, the beautiful morning skies had turned pitch black, as if it were the dead of night. Out of the dark and menacing clouds appeared a funnel of wind as powerful as a thousand tornadoes. In the funnel was a red-eyed Wind Dragon, fire dripping from its razor-sharp fangs, wings charged with bolts of lightning, a serpent's tail and skin so thin you could see right through to its rotting bones.

The Wind Dragon had twisted through the forest with lightning speed and destroyed everything in its path. Even the 200-year-old oak trees didn't stand a chance against its powerful force. They were ripped from their roots as if they were mere twigs, tossed high into the air, and swallowed up by the black clouds. When the storm had ended, a chipmunk popped his head out of a hole and summed up what he saw: "Yikity Yikes."

With the land in ruins, the animals had packed up their belongings and made the long journey to the other side of Mount Chubaluba. They knew they could never go home again. And there was a good reason why.

Today, a hundred years after the Wind Dragon rocked the forest, not a single tree, flower, or blade of grass has ever grown back. In fact, the land remains shadowed in a dark and eerie mist.

The animals call it Samp Mortar Swamp, home to the creepiest and most evil creatures of the forest, including trees with claw-like branches and mutated insects ten times their normal size. No animal has ever gone near, let alone stepped into the swamp, out of fear they would simply vanish into the ghostly mist.

To show their defiance, the animals of Walla Wunga Forest gave the Wind Dragon a nickname, Bubbles. It was their way of showing the Wind Dragon they weren't intimidated by its wrath. Rumor had it the Wind Dragon didn't take too kindly to the name: It vowed to return and seek its revenge or, in its own words, "Silence the forest forevermore."

Since today was the one-hundredth anniversary of its last visit, and Wetherbee was grumping like there was no tomorrow, the animals feared the Wind Dragon was about to rise again.

"Where is my coffee mug? Yuck! I think I just swallowed a bug." Wetherbee's whining was nonstop.

"I think you're right," said Ricky's best friend, Shelby the Squirrel. "This is going to be really, really bad."

CHAPTER 2

The Rescue

As Wetherbee predicted, the edge of the storm quickly consumed the skies over Walla Wunga Forest. Only a patch of the blue sky remained. The animals picked up their pace, figuring the Wind Dragon could not be far behind.

“We’d better hurry,” said Ricky the Raccoon.

“Cripes! You can say that again,” said his Grandpa Paulie.

“There’s no telling what the Wind Dragon has planned.”

“What’s all that scurrying about? You’re giving me a headache,” Wetherbee said with a typical snarl.

“Sorry, Mr. Owl. We’ll try to be quieter,” Ricky replied.

“Don’t waste your time with Mr. Sunshine,” Grandpa Paulie snapped back.

At that moment, the animals stopped what they were doing and looked up. A very familiar sound echoed across the sky. It was Ranger Mike Crawford’s airplane. Like clockwork, Ranger Mike flew over the forest twice a day to make sure all remained calm and quiet.

Mike was the Walla Wunga Forest head ranger, but in the eyes of the animals he was a superhero. It was his job to protect the forest and all its many creatures, and he took his job very seriously.

The animals watched for a little while and then continued on with the task of securing their homes. A few minutes later they heard another noise. This noise was not familiar.

Ranger Mike’s airplane began to flutter and sputter overhead.

“Oh no!” Said Shelby as she stepped alongside Ricky. “Something is wrong, Ricky.”

“I’m afraid you’re right, Shelby,” Ricky replied.

A bright light then flashed from the front of the plane, and the engine shut down.

Shelby, Ricky and all the other animals watched in horror as the plane twirled from the sky and disappeared over the mountainside, leaving behind only a trail of smoke. A faint “thump” could be heard in the distance.

Just then, out of the smoke appeared a mysterious object flopping in the wind. It was falling fast and heading right toward the oldest oak tree in the forest – 3,455 years old to be exact – known as the Mighty Moses.

“What is that?” Asked Shelby’s little sister, Katina, as she squinted to get a better look.

“I don’t know,” Shelby replied. “I can barely tell through all the smoke, but it looks a lot like a giant picnic blanket.”

“Hmmm . . . kinda,” Ricky said. “I remember seeing something like it before.”

The closer the object fell to earth, the more nervous the animals became. Not knowing what the object was made them all jittery. To be safe, they quickly took cover.

While hiding behind a tree stump, Ricky remembered where he had seen the unusual object. “Wait! That’s it!” Ricky said.

He scampered to his bedroom and over to an old weather-beaten book he’d found at a burnt-out campsite many years before. The book was so bulky it took his father, grandfather, and three brothers to carry it from the campsite up into his bedroom.

Ricky quickly swept away the leaves that covered the book. The word ENCYCLOPEDIA was written across the top in faded black letters. An encyclopedia was a book of knowledge used by humans to find information on everything from presidents to pirates to space aliens to dinosaurs.

“It’s in here somewhere; I just know it,” he said as he yanked open the cover and quickly flipped through the pages. “Yes. Found it. A parachute. A rescue device that slows one’s fall from the sky.” Ricky looked up. “Oh no! Ranger Mike must be underneath! We have to help – and fast!”

What made Ricky nervous was the fact that the parachute was not falling slowly, and it wasn’t puffy like the one in the book; it was all tangled up.

Ricky scooted from his bedroom, but it was too late. The parachute had landed over a sinkhole right alongside the Mighty Moses.

One by one, the animals came out of hiding and gathered around the mysterious object. Ricky quickly explained to the animals what it was.

“I’m afraid Ranger Mike is underneath the parachute,” he said. The animals did not hesitate. They each grabbed an edge of the parachute and lifted it away. Ricky was right. Ranger Mike was indeed under the parachute, and pretty banged up. His face was all red, his right leg was twisted, and he had a big old lump on his head. He tried to speak, but the pain was so severe all he could do was moan and groan.

“Pssst . . . everybody, follow me,” whispered Ricky.

The animals backed away gently and huddled a short distance from the hole.

“Ranger Mike is hurt really badly and in need of our help,” Ricky said. “You’re right, Ricky,” a beaver named Bart agreed, “but what can we do?”

“Well, we have to do something,” Ricky said as the faint sound of thunder was heard in the distance. “We can’t leave him here!”

“Yeah, Ricky’s right. If we don’t help him, he will never make it through the night! The Wind Dragon will get him for sure!” Shelby said.

Suddenly, a loud menacing growl echoed across the forest. The animals cringed and slowly turned toward Mount Chubaluba. Was it the Wind Dragon? Some would say it was worse.

Prowling on the edge of his lair, some 200 feet up the mountainside, appeared the most feared animal in Walla Wunga Forest: a mountain lion named Tombstone.

“This is bad with a capital B,” Ricky said with a lump in his throat. He had good reason to be concerned.

There was nothing more horrifying to the animals in Walla Wunga Forest than the thought of Tombstone’s bloodstained fangs flashing before their eyes.

Any unlucky fool that ventured into Tombstone’s path would fall victim to his hungry belly. “An invitation to dinner,” Tombstone would say, “my dinner.”

“Sorry, but I’m outta here,” said Mongo the Muskrat. “Me too,” said Lola the Lizard. “Me three,” everyone else agreed.

“I hate to say it, but they’re right,” said Bart. “The risk is too great. We have our families to think about.”

All the animals turned to leave.

“No, wait! We can’t run and hide! Come on, guys, this is Ranger Mike,” Ricky pleaded, “He has spent his whole life making sure the forest stays clean and free so we can have fresh air to breathe and pure water to drink. It’s time we pay him back for all the good he’s done. We’re his only hope, guys. And besides, we made a promise.”

The animals stopped dead in their tracks.

“Ricky is right. We made a promise,” Shelby said.

“What promise is that?” Asked Julia the Mouse.

“How old are you, Julia?” Shelby asked.

“I’m one month old,” she replied.

“You see, Julia,” Shelby said as all the young animals gathered around to listen, “many, many years ago, a massive fire spread across Walla Wunga Forest. The fire destroyed much of the forest, including Walla Wunga Castle.”

“Wow! There was a castle?” Julia asked. “Where?” The youngsters spun their heads in all directions.

“Well, that remains a mystery. Some say it stood at the very top of Mount Chubaluba. Others say it was right here where we are standing.”

“What did the castle look like?”

“It was a magical place. The castle stood as high as the eye could see. It was made of diamonds and pearls with a beautiful rainbow passing over its peak. The rainbow was home to a blessing of unicorns.”

“Unicorns? That is so awesome!” Said Julia.

“Yes, it was.” Shelby said. “However, the magic didn’t end there. The lawn in front of the castle was just as enchanting. It was lined with the brightest and most colorful flowers you could ever imagine, and there were giant palm trees swaying in the breeze. But most amazing of all was a magnificent waterfall made of silver and gold.”

“Wow!” Said the youngsters.

“Double wow!” Bart the Beaver agreed. He was just as mesmerized by Shelby’s words as the youngsters were.

“What made Walla Wunga Castle even more special was the fact that the gates to the castle were never closed. Animals and humans were free to roam, as if the castle with all its splendor were their very own.”

“Who lived in the castle? Was it a princess?”

Shelby smiled. “Actually, the castle was home to a Woodland Spirit named Nia. After the fire, Nia vowed to protect us animals and humans and do everything she could to make sure a disaster like that would never happen again.”

“Truly a tale of wonder,” said Merlin the Owl as he floated over to Shelby and landed on a boulder bulging from the ground.

Merlin lived in a tree trunk across the dirt path from Wetherbee. Unlike Wetherbee, everyone loved Merlin. He was considered the “grandpa” of Walla Wunga Forest. If you had a problem, he always had a few words of wisdom to make you feel better. In fact, have you heard of the saying “wise old owl”? It was created because of Merlin.

“But make no mistake, my children,” Merlin continued. “This tale isn’t a legend or a dream; it is as true as the day is long. Nia was very real. And like Ranger Mike is to all of us today, Nia was a hero in the eyes of your great-great

great-great-grandfathers. Her spirit has remained within the boundaries of Walla Wunga Forest ever since.

“Sometimes she would appear to us, in our time of need, on the wings of a soft summer breeze. All she ever asked in return was for us animals to make a simple promise: that we would take care of the forest and, most importantly, take care of one another as if we are all family.”

Shelby looked into the faces of all the animals that had gathered around. “Ranger Mike may not have fur or whiskers or four paws, but he is part of our family. If we walk away, we’ll not only break our promise to Nia, but we’ll break his heart.”

The animals looked at one another and shook their heads in agreement. Though it might cost them in the end, they all knew Shelby was right. They couldn’t turn their backs on Ranger Mike.

“Well, does anyone have an idea?” Asked Satch the Copperhead Snake. Everyone went silent. No one had a clue.

“I know,” Ricky said, stepping forward. “We can ask Ranger Mike to write a note, and we can race to the Ranger Station to get help.”

“Wait a minute, Ricky, are you nuts?” Said Bart’s twin brother Barry the Beaver. “That would mean we would have to break the forest animals’ Code of Silence. If the humans knew that we could speak, do you know what they would do?”

“No, what?” Asked a rabbit named Clyde.

“They would round us up and put us in a zoo,” Barry answered.

“A zoo? What’s that?” Asked Mongo the Muskrat.

“It’s not a pretty place, I’ll tell you that,” Bart said. “The humans lock you up behind these iron bars, and they stare and take pictures as if you were some sort of a two-headed monster from Mars.”

“Yeah, and speaking of nuts,” Waldo the Weasel said, “little kids stroll by and throw peanuts at your head as if you’re some kind of furry bull’s-eye.”

“Well, unless someone else has an idea, I think we have no choice. We can trust Ranger Mike with our secret. I know we can!” Ricky exclaimed.

All the animals mumbled in agreement. They stepped back over to the hole and looked down. “Hello there,” Ricky said. Ranger Mike slowly lifted his head. He expected to see another ranger, and boy, was he surprised when he saw this pack of furry creatures staring back at him with their beady little eyes!

“Wow, I must have whacked my head something awful,” he said to himself, rubbing his hand gently over the bump. “That must be it, sure, I’m seeing and hearing things.”

He blinked five times, shook his head, and looked up again. He expected the vision to disappear, but instead things turned even odder. The animals had smiles on their faces, and they were waving at him.

He tried to get up by using a root from the Mighty Moses as a crutch, but the pain in his leg was too great. “Ouch!” He screamed and fell back down.

“You better just lie there and try to rest,” Shelby said.

“This is crazy! You’re animals and animals can’t talk,” he replied.

“Don’t worry about that now,” Ricky said. “You just stay put and we’ll go get some help.”
“But how?” Ranger Mike asked. “Wait a minute – my cell phone. I can use my cell phone to call for help.” He patted down his pockets, but it was nowhere to be found. “It must have fallen out when I jumped from the plane.”

Ranger Mike looked at the animals. They were staring back at him, puzzled. He could tell they had no idea what he was talking about.

“Sorry. A cell phone,” he explained, “is a small, rectangular gadget that lights up. You can talk to someone on the other side of the forest.”

“Oh, okay. We will try our best to find it,” Ricky said. “In the meantime, we thought you could write a note explaining where you are, and we would race through the forest to the Ranger Station. We would do it,” Ricky said as he raised his paw, “but as you can see, we have no thumbs.”

“I don’t have anything to write with. The plane engine lit on fire. I dumped out the remaining gasoline so the plane wouldn’t explode when it crashed and then bailed out. I simply didn’t have time to retrieve my survival kit,” Ranger Mike replied. “No problem at all,” said Bart the Beaver. “One writing tool coming up!”

Walla Wunga Forest, like many forests, was rich in minerals, including copper, silver, gold, and, most important of all, coal. Bart dug up a piece of coal and started to grind it down with his chisel-like front teeth.

“That ought to do the trick,” Bart said, and placed it into Satch the Copperhead Snake’s mouth. Satch slithered down into the hole and gave Ranger Mike the pencil made of coal. Ranger Mike knew the forest like he knew the back of his hand. He didn’t need to see out of the hole to know where he was.

There was one problem. They had nothing to write the note on. “Wait. I know,” Ranger Mike said, and ripped the pocket off his grey ranger shirt. He placed the piece of fabric on his thigh and scribbled down these words: **HELP! CRASH LANDED - MIGHTY MOSES - MIKE**

Mike folded the fabric and placed it in Satch’s mouth, and Satch hurriedly squirmed out of the hole. “Just rest your head and we’ll be back with help in no time,” Ricky said.

Ranger Mike did just that. “Thank you,” he said, “I think.”

He was still quite confused by the whole scene, but he was even woozier from the fall. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.