

The  
Souls  
of  
Lost  
Lake

**JAIME JO WRIGHT**

Christy Award-Winning Author

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To Cap'n Hook  
This story is yours.  
You murderously minded, marvelous man.

And to Momma  
You're with the Master Story-Teller.  
But oh, how I miss you.

## CAMPFIRE TALES

Campfires were meant to be places of shadows. In between the flickering light of orange-and-blue hues, raging white centers, and filmy smoke tendrils lingered the dark places. In these places hid the stories that flavored the tongue of every storyteller, tightened the chest of every listener, and perked the ears of the most afraid.

“This is the tale of Ava Coons,” the story begins.

A marshmallow catches fire, flames into a gorge of sticky mess, and falls into the flame, consumed by the raw heat that shows mercy to none.

“In the days of prohibition, before the Depression was at its worst, and before Hitler became a household enemy, there lived in the Northwoods, in a place near Tempter’s Creek, a backward family of questionable origin. Few in Tempter’s Creek truly knew who the Coons family was, and the fact that they lived deep in the forest once inhabited by the Chippewa made them even more of a mystery. But they were a mystery few cared about, and few gave any thought to. Until that morning, the morning of July seven-teenth, when a girl emerged from the woods, her flour-sack dress stained with the blood of her family.”

A gasp follows.

A camper flicks on a flashlight for safety.

An adult waves it back into darkness.

Two girls huddle closer together.

The storyteller scans his listeners, identifying them all by the flickering glows against their faces. Their eyes whiter as they widen with fear.

“She limped forward, her right hand gripping the thick handle of a logger’s ax, which she dragged behind her because of its weight. When she approached, the townsfolk noted the ax was bloodied, darkening the wood of the grip, dried to the tip of its blade.”

The storyteller pauses.

The fire cracks its regrets and its conviction that the story has much yet to be told.

“It was murder. All of Tempter’s Creek knew it. The Coons family’s only daughter had brought the weapon to their doorsteps. Ava Coons, a thin, dirty backwoods girl, vowed she knew nothing of what had happened to her family. *Vanished* was the word Tempter’s Creek applied to the Coonses. To the father, the mother, the two older boys, and even the family dog. A search party gathered, and into the woods they traipsed. Calling, looking, and very much afraid of the carnage they would uncover.”

An owl warbles its night cry.

A camper yelps at the eerie sound.

The storyteller waits until all the attention is back on him, riveted to his next words.

“There was a lake hidden miles into the forest. Surrounded by oak and aspen. A haven for water birds like the wood duck, the loon, and a hiding place for the black bear, coyote, and the raccoon. Few knew of this lake, but that day the search party stumbled on it. Lost in the wilderness, they found its shoreline, and set away in the woods they uncovered its horror.”

“What was it?” A camper breaks into the story.

The storyteller is not perturbed. Instead, he smiles. That sneaky, knowing smile that the story is only going to instill more delicious campfire fear.

“The Coons cabin was burned to the ground. Its charred remains left only a portion of its southern wall. There was no blood. There were no bodies. The only clues left behind from the horrific scene were a lone shoe that had dropped halfway between the cabin and the lake, and on the shoreline, long rivets in the wet earth, as though someone’s fingers had raked into the soil trying to save their life before being swallowed by the lake itself.”

Silence meets the storyteller.

The campers, enthralled and terrified, are exactly where the storyteller wishes them to be.

“And Ava Coons grew up with no memories. They called her the ‘Wood Nymph’ of Lost Lake. Until one day, years later, when she wandered back into the woods and vanished. Just as her family had. The only object she left behind was the logger’s ax, leaning against the house that had given her shelter as an orphaned child. Bloodied once more with the stains of her guardian. Knowing she was a murderess, the town of Tempter’s Creek argued over how a girl could wield a logger’s ax and dispose of her entire family to the depths of Lost Lake. They argued how, years later, she could have hypnotized them all into believing her to be an innocent, only to be starved for more bloodlust. Assuaged now, Ava Coons was out there. In the woods. She wandered there. She wanders there still. Ava Coons and the souls she has buried there, and the souls she still takes from time to time. The souls of Lost Lake.”

*Ava Coons*

**JULY 1930**

If someone had asked what her earliest memory was—and if she had been truthful—Ava Coons would have described the metallic scent lingering in the air, a blackbird eyeing the grisly scene from its perch on a crooked fence post, and her bare toes curling into a pool of blood on the front porch of her family’s cabin.

That was most of what she could remember. Odd, how a small memory could wipe all others from a person’s mind. She’d been thirteen when they found her wandering the outskirts of the small logging town in northern Wisconsin. The “Wood Nymph,” they’d called her—she supposed it was because she’d come from the woods. Deep in the woods. In the places where, hundreds of years ago, only the Indians knew how to maneuver through them, and now few white men bothered to inhabit. The forest was good for logging, and that was about it. There were even rumors that it was in danger of limitation because of a new government movement to turn the woods into national forestry. Habitation this far north was for the hardy, not the cultured—especially during these troubled times when the economy had gone bust and work in these parts was scarcer than a tick on the back of a coon dog.

Ava dangled her legs as she perched on a wood barrel, topped

and sealed with its tin binding. Inside, the contents boasted a sort of liquid prohibitionists would be appalled to see out in the open. But again, this was up north. No one here cared about laws and rights, or anything American other than the freedom to exist. To remember. But she didn't even have that. It had been six years since they'd found her, covered head to toe in dried blood that wasn't her own. They said she'd kept muttering something about "they're all dead, they're all dead." Yet they never found anyone. No bodies. No family. Nothing. Except for blood, and an ax.

Even now, blades intrigued Ava, and she couldn't rightly explain why. But that ax had been heavy. A logger's ax. Too heavy for a slip of a girl to wield over her head and incite that much inferred carnage. Still, she was the only survivor. Assuming anyone was actually dead. Without bodies, there was no case, no broken laws, no ghastly crime scene. There was just Ava Coons, the Wood Nymph, and her empty memories. Her parents—her brothers? They were shadow people in her memory, or who she saw from time to time out of the corner of her eye. When she looked directly at them, they vanished. It was their thing, she supposed, the vanishing. Vanishing left the questions, and the questions, if Ava thought too long about them, made her think she was going crazy.

"Here." Ned Hampton jabbed a peppermint stick in her direction. When she took it, he left a dirty fingerprint on its sticky side.

Ava stuck it in the corner of her mouth anyway. Like a cigar. She'd admired men who smoked cigars. It made them look like one of them Chicago gangsters minus the Tommy gun.

"I'm not a kid, Ned. Don't need candy." She mouthed the peppermint stick. It was delicious, but she wasn't going to admit that to Ned.

The older man, who had to have twenty or so years on her, assessed her for a moment. It had been six years, after all. She was nineteen now—and she wasn't married or nothin'. She was still living with the Widower Frisk and his wife by common-law marriage, Jipsy. Funny how most girls her age had at least married with

a kid on the way, but she was stuck. Stuck at age thirteen when time began and yet never progressed.

Ned spit on the ground, a long stream of yellow tobacco. “I know that. But your teeth need brushed.”

“Don’t got me a toothbrush.” Ava slurped around the peppermint. She hiked a foot up on top of the barrel, her boot busting at the side seam, and her overalls leg lifting to reveal a sockless ankle.

“I can see that.” Ned rolled his eyes, and his eyebrows, connected in the middle to make one long caterpillar, lifted. “What’s with Jipsy anyway? She ain’t never been no mama to you, that’s for sure.”

Ava gave Ned a crooked smile and a wave of her hand. “Frisk borrows me his from time to time. I’m fine.”

Ned eyed her for a long second. “You sure?”

There was something gentlemanly about the logger. Ava knew if she gave him half a nod, he’d hoist her over his shoulder and haul her off to be his own common-law bride. And there was a preacher in town now! So there was no excuse for “loose livin’,” as Jipsy called it—even though she was faithfully committed to Frisk with no intention of being anything but his wife, even if the state said it wasn’t legal.

“Just goin’ to sit there all day?” Ned asked. He seemed reluctant to take his leave, even though he’d finished his purchases in the small general store.

“On this delightful thing?” Ava patted the side of the barrel. “Someone’s got to guard the moonshine, Ned, you know that.”

He snickered so intensely it should have cleared out his sinuses altogether. “Ava Coons, you’d best figger out your life. It ain’t pausin’ for you.”

She didn’t allow Ned to see his comment spear into her soul and draw blood. Instead, she waved him off. “One of these days.”

“Sure. Sure.” He finally started off toward the camp, a burlap sack filled with goods slung over his shoulder. “One of these days,” he repeated.

Ava watched him go, lanky, familiar, yet so superficial. He didn’t

really know her. She didn't really know him. But they'd known each other since the day she'd first wandered into Tempter's Creek. Still. Knowin' and *knowin'* weren't the same thing. And if she didn't know herself, well, how could anyone else figure out who she was? She had a name. She had a vague memory. A bloody one at that.

A blackbird cawed from across the dirt road, and Ava looked up to meet its beady black eye and caress its brilliant feathery coat of black.

Bloody memories weren't worth dredging up.

So here she sat. On a barrel of whiskey. Not even known to herself.

*Arwen Blythe*

## PRESENT DAY

Even in sleep, the missing haunted her. Trailed behind her as if she'd somehow run out ahead of them and forgotten to wait up. It was these uninvited dreams—visions maybe?—that kept Arwen with questions lingering in the recesses of her mind. Why her? Why the missing? Why did they visit her, dead or alive, real or imagined, in her sleep? Sleep was meant to be peaceful. Restful. Renewing. Instead, since she was a child, sleep had played Russian roulette with her dreams. And like tonight, her dreams became real enough to be memories of something that never happened—or had it?

Even in her slumber, Arwen knew she was seeing something not tangible and yet it was remarkably real. The depths of the forest were like an unending grave, stretching for miles in shades of green that taunted the shadows with the hope of life, only to suffocate because of the heavy drapery of foliage. Her hiking boots crunched on the undergrowth. Undergrowth that didn't really exist, although in her vision she still heard the sticks snap. Leaves argued against

the weight of her. A headlamp's ray bobbed in the far distance to her left, and an echo undulated through the night, laced with desperation.

“Jasmine!”

The call faded as the forest swallowed the sound waves. An echo, and nothing else, of a man's voice, followed by a woman's, and then another man's. The search party.

*Jasmine.*

Or was it in her mind, in her head? One of the moments when life became surreal and she questioned what was and what wasn't?

Arwen could hear her breath in her ears. Her heartbeat thrummed like a rhythmic pounding of hands on a cajón.

The night air, crisp for it being early summer, infiltrated her senses and put them on edge. She was alive. This was real. She was alive. This was real. Or so her mind tried to convince herself while her heart fought against it.

Another *snap!* as her foot crunched on a dry stick, this time sending a chip into a nearby tree trunk.

Arwen could smell something metallic. Ironlike. She'd smelled it before when she had helped her cousin butcher a deer during hunting season. It was the smell of death but with life still pulsating through the vessels, attempting to accomplish what the body had already decided against.

Her own headlamp swept the darkness in front of her. God help her if the scent lingering in the air was from a child. Six-year-old Jasmine Riviera had gone missing. The search party was refusing to give up, even though it was well past midnight. Somehow, Arwen had found herself separated from the searchers. Deviating from the search grid. Instinct—or maybe something else—taking her into the deeper places yet to be mapped. The deeper places of her mind.

*Lost Lake's back in there somewhere. It's Ava Coons's place. The place where she wanders.*

Arwen could hear the campfire storyteller's scratchy voice as he entertained with tales of the forest. Her hiking boot slipped off

a rock buried beneath wet leaves. Arwen took another step, this time the voice growing louder in her mind, and the shouting for Jasmine elusive and far away.

*“Ava Coons still haunts it—if you can find it. But anyone who gets near it disappears. Poof! Like a vanishing act. No one ever sees them again. Man went missing in 1967. Some hunters found his body in ’93. Bones. That’s all that was left. People say a soul loses their senses in these woods. They become turned around and they hear things. Drives them mad until . . . well, until all that’s left of them are bones.”*

They were meant to scare, the stories, told around campfires during the summer. With s’mores. With hot cocoa. Exaggerated tales of the murderess Ava Coons and all the gory elements that came after them.

Arwen paused, realizing her breathing was coming so fast and so hard that her chest heaved as if she’d been sprinting. She palmed the rough bark of a tree, leaning against it. *Feeling* it. She shouldn’t *feel* it. Not in a dream. Not in a vision. But her senses were sparked, as always, disguising reality.

Her headlamp flickered.

No. No, no no.

It went out.

The forest became a silent coffin, closing in around Arwen. Be it the memories of stories, the truth of the disorienting nature of the forest, or something else—something altogether different—Arwen didn’t know. She didn’t understand.

A child’s giggle filtered through the pitch-black night and floated away across the leaves.

“Jasmine!” Arwen’s voice was loud. An interruption in the unforgiving stillness.

Little girl missing. Only six. They’d been searching for hours now. Hours.

Could she hear the ticking of a clock?

Arwen closed her eyes, and when she opened them, it was there. In front of her. A lake pooling out of the darkness, fog floating

above its lily pads. Several yards from shore was a dilapidated cabin. Its roof was half sunken, revealing a gaping hole. The front door-frame was empty, an open, doorless smile into unknown ruins.

The tree she leaned against grew cold beneath her touch. Arwen snatched her hand back, looking down at her palm. She could see its whiteness against the blue-black of the forest floor.

“Wren?” The voice was whisper-like. It drifted toward her just as another set of girlish giggles chimed behind her.

Arwen squinted into the darkness toward the lake, so strangely illuminated. Toward the cabin, so oddly juxtaposed with the serenity of the scene.

“Wren?” The voice came from the cabin.

Arwen could hear herself breathing.

“Wren?”

Her head snapped up at the voice by her shoulder. A branch from the tree snagged the stocking cap that covered her hair. She scrambled to free herself.

There was no one.

Arwen squeezed her eyes shut and then opened them again.

There she was.

The little girl.

Jasmine.

She lay on the cold shoreline of the lake. Lost Lake. White. Cold. Unmoving.

Arwen’s scream sucked the last breath from her already horrified body, and then more than the forest went dark.