

Strange Encounter at a State Park

by Peter Balmaseda



a forest

Olle August from Pixabay

"What???" Rodrigo and Dwayne said at the same time.

"You heard me," Darlene replied, smiling. "Do you want to go monster hunting tomorrow?"

The three high-school classmates had just sat down to dinner at Rodrigo's house, where his mom had prepared *picadillo* (ground beef, cooked Puerto Rican style) with white rice and fried plantains.

Earlier in the day, Darlene had texted Rodrigo, saying she had some interesting news to share. When he pressed her, Darlene was unwilling to explain, so Rodrigo invited her to dinner along with their good friend Dwayne.

Now, while his mom was in another room, he and Dwayne were listening to Darlene. But at this moment he wondered *why* he was listening to her.

"OK, how hard exactly did you hit your head?" Rodrigo asked.

Darlene smiled again.

"You guys know that my dad is a deputy sheriff for the county, right? Well, I overheard him talking about how they were closing Greenville State Park because somebody found a batch of animal carcasses that were mostly eaten, but *not* by a bear or wolf. Even weirder, this hiker reported seeing a creature that was about three feet tall and looked like a lizard... except it walked like a person! The county called in an animal expert from Rutgers University, but she can't come until Friday. *We*, however, *can* go tomorrow since school is closed for the teacher's conference-and it's supposed to be nice weather for March. We can hike, bring food, and have a nice time... even if we don't see anything."

Rodrigo and Dwayne exchanged glances.

"Wait a second," Rodrigo said, "that description reminds me of something." He jumped up and hustled out of the dining room, returning a minute later with his laptop.

"Rodrigo, you are supposed to be eating, not playing on your computer," his mom called out from another room.

"We ARE eating, mom," Rodrigo loudly replied. "I just need to show them something." He sat back at the table, typed on the keyboard for a few seconds, then turned the laptop around for Darlene and Dwayne to see. On the screen was a Wikipedia entry.

"The weird thing your dad described sounded a lot like something my abuela told me about when I visited her last summer-a creature called the *chupacabra*, which supposedly has been roaming Puerto Rico for the last 30 years eating rabbits, sheep, goats... even dogs." He pointed to the screen. "See the description? Sound familiar?"

"The creature has been spotted in places other than Puerto Rico," Darlene read aloud. "But here?" she said, incredulously. "In *New Jersey*?"

"Dudes, really?" Dwayne replied, laughing. "You really want to go looking for a mythical creature tomorrow? According to every horror movie I have seen, that is a *terrible* idea." They all laughed. "Besides, this thing can't be real. It's just an urban legend."

"Then let's go tomorrow to Greenville and find out for ourselves," Darlene challenged.

"I'm in!" Rodrigo exclaimed, as he and Darlene looked expectantly at their friend.

Dwayne sighed, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "Fine. But if this three-foot lizard eats me, you two will have to explain it to my mom."

The next day, Rodrigo picked up his friends in his mom's car and drove to Greenville State Park. When he spotted a sheriff's car blocking the entrance, Rodrigo drove a half mile further and parked on the side of the road. All three got out, grabbed their backpacks, and headed into the park.

Dwayne spotted a trailhead for a hiking path and they took it east, walking toward the lake. Even though it was still officially winter, the weather was sunny and not so cold. Birds were chirping in the trees.

For the next two hours, they walked, gossiped about teachers and other students, and enjoyed themselves. They almost forgot about why they were there... but were soon reminded.

"Look at that," Rodrigo said, gesturing at the remains of an animal visible underneath a bush.

"I think this was a rabbit," Darlene confirmed.

They looked at each other.

"OK, that makes it real," Dwayne announced. "Do we continue?"

Darlene and Rodrigo exchanged a glance, then slowly nodded.

They went on walking for another half hour till they came across a second animal carcass, this one freshly killed and eaten.

"You *still* want to continue?" Dwayne asked. His friends looked much less sure of themselves now than they had in Rodrigo's kitchen.

"Guess we should head back," Rodrigo declared promptly, turning around.

"Agreed," Darlene replied.

"Wait! Do not go yet," a voice behind them called out. They looked back... and gasped. Standing nearby was a tall, leathery, lizard-like being standing on two feet... and it seemed to be smiling. "It has been so quiet around here, and it feels like ages since I actually talked to anyone."

"You can *talk*?" Rodrigo asked.

"*In English?*" added Darlene incredulously.

"Obviously," the creature replied, laughing, then wiping its sharp-toothed mouth with its arm. "Sorry. I was eating when you arrived. Do you know what I am?"

"A chupacabra," Rodrigo responded, "a mythical creature from Puerto Rico that likes to eat small mammals?"

"Wow!" The chupacabra clapped its webbed hands together. "You *do* know! Mythical! I like that."

The three friends looked nervously at each other. The chupacabra sensed their fear.

"Do not worry, I do not eat humans-too much meat all at once!" It smiled and winked at them. "Is it not a nice day to explore this park? You are having a picnic?"

"Actually, we were looking for you," Darlene stated. "And tomorrow the police will be here... also looking for you."

"That is a shame," the chupacabra sighed. "I really like this place. I suppose I will have to find another location. Or... maybe I can stay with one of you!" The creature looked at them and laughed out loud. It pointed at Dwayne, saying, "You should see your face! Ha! I am only joking. I prefer living in nature. Maybe I will leave. Maybe I will stay. I will think about this. Anyway, thank you for talking to me." In

one swift motion, it turned and quickly disappeared into the woods.

Three startled teens stared at the space where the creature had been. Then they looked at each other.

"What just happened?" Dwayne asked.

"Mythical," Darlene said. They laughed, the tension they felt suddenly gone.

The trio walked back to Rodrigo's car. They talked about the encounter they experienced and agreed not to tell anyone. After all, who would believe them? Only the chupacabra!

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is a *chupacabra*?

- A. a mythical creature said to roam Venezuela
- B. a mythical creature said to roam Puerto Rico
- C. a terrifying monster found in the ocean
- D. a mythical creature said to roam Alaska

2. How do Rodrigo, Dwayne, and Darlene feel as they find animal carcasses in the state park?

- A. They feel happy and excited.
- B. They feel more and more relieved and calm.
- C. They feel sad and upset.
- D. They feel more and more nervous and scared.

3. Read the following sentences from the text.

"They went on walking for another half hour till they came across a second animal carcass, this one freshly killed and eaten.

[...] 'Sorry. I was eating when you arrived. Do you know what I am?'

'A chupacabra,' Rodrigo responded, 'a mythical creature from Puerto Rico that likes to eat small mammals?'

'Wow!' The chupacabra clapped its webbed hands together. 'You do know! Mythical! I like that.'"

What can you conclude about the chupacabra based on this information?

- A. The chupacabra is hiding from the friends.
- B. The chupacabra only eats plants.
- C. The chupacabra has been eating small mammals in the park.
- D. The chupacabra loves to eat herbs and flowers.

4. What is the chupacabra's personality like?

- A. relaxed and funny
- B. scary and threatening
- C. scared and timid
- D. angry and upset

5. What is the main idea of this text?

- A. Darlene's parents are so worried when she goes hunting in a state park that they call the state troopers to find her.
- B. Darlene, Rodrigo, and Dwayne go monster hunting in a state park and encounter a mythical creature, the *chupacabra*.
- C. The *chupacabra* is a mythical creature in Puerto Rico, and Rodrigo's *abuela* loves telling him stories about it.
- D. The state park near Rodrigo, Dwayne, and Darlene is a place where many small mammals live.