



Woods (Marion)

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When I was fourteen I met Marion, a girl my own age, and she was a mystery. This mystery lingered, not forgotten, even sixteen years later. The mystery: how she vanished in the shallow woods behind the house I grew up in.

What I did forget was my effort at fourteen and fifteen years-of-age to make sense of the mystery by writing it out as a story. I only remember now because of a cache of my own writing I uncovered shortly after moving back in with my parents (divorce, new job).

I wrote a lot when I was fourteen, filling college-ruled notebooks with splotchy, blue-ink cursive, a neat hand for a line or two, then ever-expanding loops and near-illegible dotted peaks. I suppose I gave up on writing during college, after I met people my age who were better writers, after I started dating and going out. The time to write wasn't easy to make, except when a paper was due, and that writing was bitter, forced and bad.

The writings I uncovered are in a blue folder with the label "Carolyn": twelve drafts of a single short story. The first of these drafts is called "Annie." I don't know why Annie. Carolyn, the name I gave to all subsequent drafts, makes sense to me. Carolyn being the name of a long-ago crush of mine. This is not important, though it was nice remembering Carolyn. She'd been nice to me, a once-figure of pleasant anxiety. Her simple hair style, smile. As I reread my stories—that one story revised twelve times—I saw the real Carolyn in each. In some drafts I wrote: She had straight, long blond hair, reaching just below her shoulders. The cold had a very nice effect on

her face, it had become pale, except for her cheeks, which had become rosy. I varied this description, a little: The cold had a very nice effect on her face, it was a pale white, save for her cheeks, which had been made rosy. In two drafts Carolyn's hair was "shocking red." A combination of another crush, I imagine—Sarah had red hair. So did Vanessa. Back then I was often wildly attracted to people without knowing anything about them and my imagination was quick to invent on their person an ideal personality—i.e., someone who shared my interests, who took me seriously and who loved me.

My parents' home, my home (again), is dangerous, housing memories. So easy for me to drift into nostalgia. A dense fog, a heavy spirit. I'll tell you now the story my "Carolyn" drafts attempted to tell as fiction. If what I wrote when I was fourteen and fifteen will serve, I'll use those words—they are closer to the event, they have about them something sacred, an archival aura—specifically, they are the words of a person I can only dimly recall. I won't put myself in quotes or italics. Too pompous, the

former; tedious to read, the latter. Determining what is new and what is old doesn't matter, anyhow. (However) I'll start with words I wrote when I was fourteen:

I pulled my hat down a bit further over my ears and stomped my feet on the cement subway platform. I wished that I had chosen warmer shoes. I wish I'd chosen warmer everything! I looked down at my watch. Eight o'clock! Even later than I had thought. If only the train would hurry. The station was dark, except for the dim lights above. I looked back and saw a bench. I sat down, tired from a long day. The bench was cold. Everything was cold! Now I wished that I had gone home earlier. I'd be warm by now, and I'd have someone to talk with. I can't stand being alone.

Here's another beginning, from another draft: It was cold at the subway station, as it so often was. Tears from the cold wind streamed down my face. No one was at the station, and there was complete silence. Once every ten or fifteen minutes a train would rumble in, a crowd of people would walk past me and go out of the station

and get into their cars. I sat there, alone with myself. My hands rammed into my pockets for warmth, and my collar turned up. Another: The temperature had not yet gone below freezing, but the wind made up for that. I sat on a cold wooden bench, my hands crammed deep into my pockets, my collar as high as it would go, wishing that I had remembered a hat and gloves. Every once in a while I would build up enough courage to take my right hand out of my pocket so I could look at the time.

In one draft, those dim lights flickered. In one I had a hat but was still cold. I niggled over the details quite a bit. A cement roof and the cement platforms were near-white frames for black night, dark shrubs and wrought-iron fences. At the edge of the tracks ran a painted bright yellow band. The electrified third rail shone where the trains made contact. As my eyes watered, the station blurred. I was partially shielded from the steady wind by a large map of the subway, which I leaned against, tilted my head back against, exhausted. High school wasn't going well. From middle school, where I thought of myself as

a good student (though I was actually only average), I'd gone to an all boys private college-prep school. This was, ridiculously, my own choice, a matter of hubris. I was not without friends, but—as I was to understand later—the friends I'd made were only friends of necessity, guys I could rely on to protect me from bullying, who saved me a seat, who shared pocket change and the answers to homework assignments. We never spent time together when the school day was over. As none of us had cars, the physical distances between us were great, but we were also so different, except for our needs, that we would not have known what to do in each other's company without the oppression of class and classmates.

After school, I'd gotten in the habit of walking to a nearby college library, a tall building with a view of the bay, and reading (writing, too, I suppose). Rarely homework. I left homework to be done in study hall, or minutes before class, just outside the classroom, my buddies passing answers, eyeing the hall for the teacher. I would linger in that college library until I had to go

home. During the worst months of school the sky was always dark when I left the library. Ten miles east: the white-pink haze in the air above the city, produced by the city itself.

I sat on a bench in the open-air station, underdressed and cold, anxious for the train to come, the train late by a few minutes, delayed for some inexplicable reason down the line. Trains had come, going toward the city. No one stood on the platform with me.

For a brief moment my mind wandered from the subject of misery; my mind drifted, my eyes pricked by a soft glint from somewhere beyond the wrought iron fence. I stared at the little light, and my body relaxed, and the cold seemed to dissipate. I heard leather heels grind against the cement platform—off to my left, close by—someone waiting for the train, previously hidden from me by a pillar?

In every draft of my story, I came up with some semi-plausible ice-breaker for me and the girl who had appeared from (I presumed) the far end of the platform.

She asks, “Do you know when the next train to Braintree is due?” or “Is this where I wait for the train to Braintree?” In the earliest draft I make her sound as if she’s from London: “I’m not sure about the trains, first time for me and all, which one takes me to Braintree?” First time for me and all? Reading that over for the first time in sixteen years made me laugh—a step outside of myself—and I try to remember exactly how it was Marion (Carolyn) really did introduce herself. I know I never would have spoken to her, an attractive girl my age, I would have been paralyzed by the thought as I worked over and over how I might say something, anything, so that I could know this pretty girl, any girl, a girl, and maybe achieve the great grail of my high school life: a girlfriend. No, I did not introduce myself, that, at least is honest in the fictions I wrote. Marion spoke to me first. What she said, what she said... I do remember, and it was a little odd—but of course she could have said anything at all—even something cruel—and I would not have rebuffed her.

I don’t know, now, if she was ordinary in appearance

or not. When I look at photographs of girls I dated or just knew in high school now, girls I thought were gorgeous, they mostly seem ordinary, or, at most, like girls who will one day be attractive women—even beautiful women—but who lacked the confidence to be truly beautiful then. Yet, in my memory, I see those girls as I saw them then. Mysterious and lovely, graceful and painfully desirable. There is no photograph of Marion. Yet, it seems likely to me that she was extraordinary. In part because she was confident, but also because she was truly mysterious—not, as those other girls were, unknowable only because of my own awkwardness. Those descriptions I gave of Marion in my stories—as Carolyn—were meant to mask Marion. To keep her a secret for me alone.

My memory of Marion’s appearance is only a thumbnail and centers more on what she wore than on actual features. Perhaps—since it was cold—only her face was exposed. And that face is a bright face-shape in my memory. There is no detail that remains striking.

She wore—unlike most high school girls, afraid to

muss their absurd hair—a hat, a knit hat which was adorable. Shaped like a slumped, soft mushroom, bright blue with a haze of fuzz all over it. Her topcoat was blue, too, though a different shade, darker. A scarf (green? striped?), a pleated skirt (the hem of which appeared just below the hem of her coat), white stockings and boots, puffy boots with wool around the top. Nothing she wore was stylish, exactly, but it had a second-hand quality, which was just becoming stylish, and how she wore it, hands dipped into her coat pockets, shoulders back—how she had made what she wore look right.

She said, “You look comfortable.”

Of course I made no suave reply, and I didn’t understand how she could have thought I was comfortable, because it was very cold, and I was underdressed (the result of a misguided, adolescent sense of what was cool—oh, yes, was it that winter that I wore only a navy blue rain coat, found in my grandfather’s garage, the one with the cigarette-scorched hole on the arm?). I said, “It’s very cold.”

I did have the sense to shift a little on the bench, a simple signal for this girl to join me if she pleased, if she would please like me, because it would mean so much to me if she did. And she did. She said, “It’s warm here where you’ve been sitting.”

I was embarrassed by this, I suppose because indirectly she was talking about my rear end. My embarrassment left me and was replaced with another feeling, close to nausea but wonderful, when her shoulder touched mine; she did not draw away, this was no accidental contact. I said, “What train are you waiting for?”

The dialogue I put down in my fictionalized accounts wasn’t completely made up, though dumbed-down, I don’t know why, maybe because I wasn’t a good writer or because my memory in that regard wasn’t excellent. In one draft, our exchange was portrayed thusly:

“Hello?” She spoke softly. “Do you know when the next train is coming?”

“I don’t. I was just wondering that myself.”

At that she looked away, down the length of the track.

“Well, as long as we have to wait here, we might as well talk. My name’s Carolyn.”

“Mine’s Adam. Good to meet you.”

“So, Adam, where are you going?”

“To Braintree Station. I catch a bus there.”

“What a coincidence. I’m going to Braintree and I’m catching a bus too.”

“So, why are you getting home from school so late?” I asked.

“I went to see a movie.”

“What did you see?”

“*C’est La Vie*.”

“How did you like it? I haven’t had a chance to see it yet.”

“It was good if you don’t mind subtitles.”

“I don’t mind as long as the movie’s good.”

There was a slight pause in the conversation, and we both stared in different directions. Then Carolyn turned back to me and continued.

“So what do you do besides go to movies?”

And on I went, making up things she might have said had she been a fantasy girl and not a real person. And I should make true some of the fiction in that dialogue. Her name, as you know, was Marion. My name is not Adam, it’s John. She didn’t say she’d been to a movie. Marion never directly told me where she’d come from, even though I asked, several times. She did tell me she’d seen a movie, but it wasn’t *C’est La Vie* (a French film by Diane Kurys) but *Das Schreckliche Mädchen* (a German film by Michael Verhoeven). So strange, the details I chose to modify. Change the names, sure, but why the film title? My fourteen and fifteen year-old self is inscrutable to me now.

No matter. Marion and I talked a little bit about the movies. This was something I was very interested in (am still) and she knew a lot—much more than I did. I recall, in those days, studying the entertainment section of the paper, reading reviews and timetables like some men follow stocks, watching the ads change and clipping those that seemed important to me. Where I lived—where I

live—most of those films were unavailable to me. If I find those clippings, perhaps I'll rent those films. A simple fulfillment.

The train came, the Braintree train. Sometimes, the train cars are empty, and this car was. I was glad. The warmth hit me and I shivered in it; Marion rubbed my arm with her hands and said, "We're warm now." As she did this I remember thinking about what she might have meant when she'd said I'd looked comfortable. She had appeared during the moment I was staring at the little light I saw in the parking lot. I had been—for lack of a better expression—staring into space. My eyes and my mind momentarily unfocused. Perhaps, I thought, I had looked comfortable. But not happy—the way I was sitting on a warm train with a pretty girl who was affectionate and smart.

Now at this point in my fictionalized telling of this story, I wrote a scene that did not really occur. My theory for why I might have done so has to do with what became of Marion, her disappearance, and since I've already

spoiled the ending (that she disappeared), I'll tell you my theory. First, the scene:

When the train stopped at North Quincy, several girls got on. One of them I knew, not very well, but well enough so that she recognized me.

"Hey, Adam, right? How ya doing?"

She almost leapt across to the seat next to me, and as she did, Carolyn was gone.

I was sitting there trying to remember this girl's name, and then it hit me.

"Kathy. It's been a while. I'm doing fine. How about you?"

"Great, Adam. These are some of my friends. That's Jen and Marianne. This is Adam. He wrote some great stories for the school magazine."

"I know somebody who writes stories!" said Marianne.

"Really?" I said. "That's great."

Then it was Jen's turn. "I read a story once."

Oh my God, this was getting to be too much! Still,

Kathy was being very nice, and I was enjoying their company.

Soon the train arrived at Quincy Center, and the three girls got off. For a moment I was alone, but soon enough, Carolyn was at my side.

So, in this scene Carolyn—Marion—vanishes when the three girls get on the train. To be exact, when Kathy sits next to Adam/me, Marion vanishes. My theory as to why I wrote this scene was to suggest that Marion was imagined. A waking dream, dreamed because I was a lonely boy. I might even have believed that lie, that Marion was only a fantasy, at least half-believed it. Such an idea at least explained her real vanishing.

And that's the problem with that scene and with that idea. To declare Marion a figment of my imagination is a cop-out. A kind of deal I must have made with myself to deny the likelihood that our senses are a narrow band and Marion was not a dream but like something seen out of the corner of an eye.

From the guest room window I have a view of the

backyard. The lawn is partially covered by snow—this winter has been a mild winter, half-hearted, disappointing. The wind, however, is very strong. Bare trees wobble. The thorny shrubs my parents often talked about removing shook out the dead leaves they'd caught during the Fall. The backyard ended at a farmer's wall—over a hundred years old, built when there was no suburban neighborhood, when our property and our neighbors' was still dairy farm and woods, deep woods. The woods now—even the woods when I was a boy—are thin.

Animals seem to have moved back. During my childhood I was unlikely to see more than a raccoon; recently I've seen deer and wild turkey travel through the wood. This does not seem to me to be a good sign, but, rather, an indication that wild animals have nowhere left to go but through our backyards, sipping from swimming pools and nibbling at trash. Trash blows across the yard. A piece of cardboard from the bottom of a Chinese take-out bag flings itself over the muddy

patches and snow. Marion and I rode the train together. That ride went by too quickly. We didn't talk the whole time. We rode shoulder to shoulder. Our shoes shifted on the gritty-dirty floor. Our reflections faced us in the oval window across from where we sat. The aluminum poles for standing riders gleamed in the same dull way as the third rail.

At the end of the line, where I caught a bus that took me close to my house, Marion asked, "Which direction do you go in?"

She—obviously—took the same bus. And so we waited in another cold train station on another hard bench and the time went by too quickly. I wanted to ask about her parents, I wanted to tell her that I thought her shoes were nice, etc., etc., but the bus arrived and instead we scrambled for change. The scene in my drafts, where Kathy boarded the train and Carolyn/Marion vanished would have had to have been repeated on the bus, because unlike the train, we were not the only passengers. The bus driver, of course, who tilted his hat at Marion as we

stepped up onto the bus; the fat man who always rode up front and chatted with the driver; women in skirt suits and New Balance sneakers, men in suits with their collars unbuttoned, sullen teenagers, older than me, possibly done with high school. Marion and I sat together and the bus ride, normally so dreary, normally the cause of a mild motion-sickness, was pleasurable and good.

I asked where she lived as the bus approached my stop. She answered with a question: "How well do you know your neighborhood?"

My answer was as pedestrian as everything I'd said to Marion that evening. "I know it very well, I've lived here since I was seven." All that kept me from boring Marion with the story of the Big Move, as my parents and I had always called it, was my upcoming stop. I said, "My stop."

And you know that she said, "This is my stop also." And you know that when we got off the bus and I said, "I go this way," she said, "Me too."

I was happy about that until I got to my street, and told

her that this was my street, and she said it was her street too. How could that be possible, I thought. For all my joy at being with a girl who seemed to take an interest in me, Marion's odd aspect finally troubled me—if only a little. So, at the top of my street, a dull, pot-holed street that I imagined I would leave for good once I was through with high school, I stopped and said, "I can't believe I've never seen you before if you live on this street."

If she'd slapped me or shot me or spontaneously combusted, I would not have been as surprised as I was when she put her hands on my shoulders, stood on her toes, and kissed me. Her lips were soft and warm, maybe even a little hot—though my memory might be playing tricks. In my fictionalized version of this story, I again insisted that Marion was nothing more than a hallucination brought on by lonely self-pity. I wrote, at age fifteen, in the last draft of "Carolyn":

We walked along Union Street. We walked up to my door and I unlocked it. We stepped in, and as soon as we did, she disappeared. I was alone for a moment, until

my father walked into the room, and asked me how my day had been. Carolyn was gone, but I didn't need her for now. End.

End. I wrote that. At the bottom of every draft I wrote that word.

Marion was a being who knew exactly the effect she had on me.

She kissed me and she led the way down my street.

She was a small girl, I thought, petit maybe the better word. At fourteen we have no idea how small we still are and so to recognize it in a peer was startling. I even thought: I am so young. I was. Now I see myself tipping toward old, my body beginning to dissolve. But I'm only thirty.

Marion stepped off the street and we crossed my next-door neighbor's front yard, down a slight hill into my own backyard, across the frozen ground (the dirt crunched beneath my feet) toward the woods. I followed I followed I followed. Marion skipped onto the wobbly farmer's wall, hopped easily over a thorny bush and

onto mulching, springy leaves. I followed, with less grace, not quite keeping my balance on the farmer's wall, catching my pants on thorns. "How well do you know your neighborhood?" she'd asked. Very, very well, I thought. The woods, too, I knew the paths, the short cuts, I knew about the little lean-to someone had built, about the bright yellow and red shotgun shells, about the empty bottles of vodka and bourbon (that exploded so satisfactorily when thrown against a big rock) and about the rust colored stream that originated at a drain pipe big enough you could walk into it, under a road, to an oily pond littered with car parts, cans and a shopping cart.

So when she stepped out of sight, behind a tree, and then didn't emerge, I was dumbfounded. What hole in the ground had she slipped into, what abandoned well, what tree hollow—none, none at all. I looked. I looked that night until the cold hurt my face and I looked the next day when the sun was setting and then on the weekend, all weekend. As the days passed I became unsure what tree it had been she'd stepped behind, and so my search

widened. A month later, I wrote the story "Annie." Then I wrote "Carolyn." By the time I wrote draft twelve of "Carolyn" I was a year older, and the whole event was unreal to me. A fiction.

My car won't turn over. I'm still new at the office, this is only my third week, and so I take a cab, which costs a fortune, rather than call to tell the office I'll be late. One of my co-production managers, Brian, enters into an argument with me soon after I arrive: I didn't approve a job that he okayed.

I say, "Her overall project was to create a new set of coupons, not to merely edit old coupons and reissue them."

Brian says, "Where did you get that information?" Brian's voice is already raised—we are standing in a corridor made of cubicles; our voices must carry to everyone's desk. I indicate that we should move our discussion into my office, which has a door (another source of irritation to Brian—whose office has no door,

in spite of his seniority). He won't budge.

I say, "From Barbara." Barbara is our superior, as I understand the order of this office—and this is where I'm at a disadvantage—Brian knows the pecking order with a subtlety I don't yet.

"Okay, he says. That's wrong. Look," he stabs the proofs with his pen, leaving potentially misleading marks behind. "When she crosses out these numbers I know the only thing I need from her is a new set of numbers."

"Brian," I say, trying to forget about my car, the cab fare, to remain calm, "I think we're on the same page. This is what we're supposed to be using as backup, correct?"

"No, we have to pull all of that info."

"Then what is this?" I point to the backup. In spite of Brian's seniority I know I'm more fully qualified, have more experience, and somehow this serves to depress me further. More experience working for uninspired corporations flogging the world with mediocre products.

Brian is a little unsure of himself, and his boyish,

freckled face betrays pure, dumb anger. Betrays his need to win this battle, especially since he's made it public. I know he'll be talking about this argument all day and with anyone who'll listen. Already—only three weeks—and the new-job sheen is all gone, my future appears bleak. And presumably I'm supposed to be dating again. Some women in the office have already made suggestions and advances. Brian says, "I'm saying the backup we're supposed to check is wrong. Barbara is wrong. We've always marked the numbers like this," another stab at the proofs.

I remind him of a meeting held last week, in which the procedure was changed.

"I wasn't in that meeting," he says. "I never would have agreed to that."

He'd been in the meeting. Whispering like a high school student as the PowerPoint show blinked from chart to chart. "Oh, well, then." I smile because he's lost the argument, and he is gradually seeing that's the case—I read this on his irritating face. I tell him what the new

procedure is, what the proof marks mean, and generally bore him with all the information he didn't pay attention to during last week's meeting.

In an effort to reclaim some superior ground, he says, "Barbara's creating a problem." His new mistake occurs to him: he should not have criticized Barbara publicly. To soften his criticism he adds, "Not on purpose, I'm sure."

I say, "Brian, I'm sure you'll see that Barbara's plan works in everyone's favor," and I clap Brian on the shoulder, as if we're good buddies. If this had been a high school encounter, Brian would have been able to establish dominance by beating me up in the hall. Since, unlike during high school, I don't have friends here in the office, he would have won. Here, however, in the supposedly grown-up world of the office, Brian will only be able to back-stab. I'm weary of this already—in advance.

A more helpful co-worker explains to me where I can catch a bus that will take me home, and so I stand under a bus shelter at seven PM, having worked late, wishing I'd worn a hat, wind blowing in and around the

shelter almost as if there is no shelter at all. As I wait, I'm joined by a man my own age. His face is remarkably odd yet not ugly. A broad, flat nose, large lips, pale but not white skin. When he speaks, which he does as soon as he joins me in the shelter, he does so with such precision, it's unnatural. His words feel fitted together, as if by a machine—the meaning of each word is correct, but the words don't mesh.

"When I put my eyes to that publicity image," he says, "I see the science that stood behind it." He's talking about a billboard for Chivas Regal, brilliant under floodlights. Indeed, this ad is the most brilliant sight on the dark road where we wait for the bus. The man dissects the ad, but—other than his wording—not in an especially interesting way. He's repeating something he's heard elsewhere. I remain polite, nodding, uh-huh-ing, though only half listening. When the bus arrives, I assume his speech will end, or will be transferred to some other hapless passenger.

There are no other passengers. The man sits near me,

and continues to talk.

“What do you think happens when people physically confront?” he asks.

I let a handful of seconds pass before I realize that he’s waiting for an answer. I say, “People get tired of fighting? People get hurt.”

He looks at me with wide eyes, as if I’ve said something wonderful. “That’s exactly the right phrasing. Fighting destroys people. Fighting is destructive to people’s lives. When I was a boy—I lived in a tough neighborhood—not to be perverse but I remember seeing pools of blood on the sidewalk in front of my house. These pools of blood were so thick you could almost peel them up, they congealed into a plastic-like substance. You could roll the blood up into a rubbery sheet. Like a bathmat. When I was a boy there was a group of older boys—adolescents—who worked on the mind of another boy—my own age—they worked on his mind and convinced him that he needed to beat me up—to prove himself, so he could be in that gang. I did what I had to do. I beat his ass—pardon my

French—I beat his butt. Then—and this is key—I sought that boy out and showed him the power of kindness. I became that boy’s friend. You see, I ended the cycle of violence. I knew that if the violence between me and that boy was ever going to end, I had to take steps.”

The man rifles through his pockets—his hands move from one pocket, to another, to another, then back to the first. He finds a banana and peels it.

“I don’t wish to be rude. Would you care for some banana?” He offers.

I decline. He removes a napkin, looks at it and says, “Nasty.” He opens his bag and finds a clean napkin—he has a stack, pulled possibly from a restaurant dispenser—and he wraps the peel carefully. “I wouldn’t want to leave this for anyone to slip on.” He laughs at his joke as he puts the wrapped peel into a pocket.

His non-stop talking—with occasional questions (why is it important to teach children? Why is the knowledge of the ancients still useful?)—passes the time; my bus stop comes up.

“This is my stop,” I say, standing.

“Where are we?” he asks.

I tell him.

“Well this is my stop too.”

Is it, I wonder, and I wonder, how long is this guy going to follow me and, should I be alarmed? Not out here, surely, in this little suburb? But no place is safe anymore, even if Mom and Dad live down the street. All I can do is get off the bus with my new friend. As we walk—the only sound the sound of the bus leaving—he says, “I’ve seen you before.”

Close, now, to the street my parents/I live on, I say, “This is my street. It was pleasure. Have a good night.”

“Are you kidding me?” He says. “This is my street. I’ve lived here all my life.”

“That’s not possible,” I say. “I would have noticed you.”

And he says, “How well do you know your neighborhood?”

He might as well have kissed me, or slapped me,

or shot me, etc. I can’t figure out the trick. There can’t be a trick. There can be no connection between this man—this mildly crazy man—and a night sixteen years ago. He passes me, and I follow. We cut across my next-door neighbor’s front yard, down the slope into my own backyard.

The woods behind my parents’ house have been thinned out—a house now stands where once there was a field. The paths and the rust-colored stream are gone, plowed over, filled in. That the tree Marion slipped behind might in fact be gone occurs to me for the first time. And maybe the joke will be on me, maybe the man I’m following will walk to the house that wasn’t there when I was fourteen and unlock the front door and bid me goodnight.

When I was seven, or so, The woods were forbidden and for a time I was too frightened by the dark they made, even during the day, to disobey. But disobey I did, little by little. Small forays from my back yard that began with

the farmer's wall, climbing along the top, learning which rocks were sturdy and which would wobble. My mother coming out of the house from the kitchen where she had a clear view of the backyard to urge me to be careful. Mom standing in the yard, nervously ringing a dish towel, finally asking me to stop altogether.

Eventually, I hopped the wall, crouched against it, inhaled the smell of wet dirt and leaves, poked at leeches, tried an army crawl ("How did you get so filthy?"—not a complaint, Mom was good about dirt, and when I hear that question in my head I hear something like pride in her voice). I found paths, which I followed as far as there was sun. I didn't go far.

At night, in my bed, before I went to sleep, I would think about those paths, try to push myself to go down the dark trails. I thought about the stream, too, that rust-colored, unwholesome stream, with its unwholesome denizens, muddy frogs and long-legged, water hopping insects that made me itch to look at them. One path opened out into a field. The grass there was scorched and grew together

in knots sturdy enough to support my weight. Cattails swayed in the slightest breeze; their microphone-shaped heads exploded white when thwacked against a tree.

I'd heard stories about the woods. A story about hunters who shot a boy by accident and the lean-to they built to hide the corpse; about a hyena that fed on rabbits and squirrels but had and would eat people (a hyena?); about the toxicity of the stream water (it'll burn your skin and blind you—a few years later a friend of mine drank some of the stream water to prove me wrong and though he was not burned or blinded, he became horribly ill); about drunks and dogs and rusted, abandoned cars that still worked. These were stories from an adult world, encroaching on my world. Encroaching on the woods that frightened me but also were my joy at that age, at a time when I'd just moved to a new neighborhood, just transferred to a new school, and was nostalgic for my last home (was this the beginning of my nostalgia?).

The woods were not like the great forests of the Northwest. Men did not lose their way and freeze to

death. The woods were a few miles of scrim between one neighborhood and another. As a boy, though, the woods were deep enough and utterly mysterious.

The man I follow across my backyard into the thin woods doesn't head toward the house that stands where once was a field framed by trees. A woods no deeper than a few feet, not even a woods, not really, not anymore, but still woods enough. The man is obscured by a tree for a moment. Only. And then no longer obscured but disappeared.

Sixteen years really isn't that many. I look around. A dog's bark startles me, but the dog is somewhere else, its voice carried with nothing to absorb the sound. I am unsatisfied. Will even these trees be taken down, cleared away for just one more house to be put up, another family crammed into this neighborhood? A wind blows cold—my eyes tear up, and my vision wavers, as if I were looking through thick glass. I see a shape that could be

a person. My face stings hot and raw. My own house is at my back. Warmth, food, bed, an alarm clock set to alert me to the coming of another day. These trees will be removed. They're here now; and: it is possible to disappear.