



Three Walks

by Virginia Holman

Once there was a time with no hesitation; I stepped into the woods with glee. They were all around our home: stands of old-growth white pine trees one hundred feet tall with trunks too wide for a grown man to fully embrace. These woods ran from my family's acreage up the blue-green spartina marsh line for two miles. As a child, I'd cross from property to property, my only fear a wayward dog or the scolding widow who routinely fussed at me for not minding boundaries.

I felt I belonged to these woods. Graves of my ancestors rested here. They'd owned this forest for centuries—it had been deeded to them because it had little value beyond homesteading; the gentry were deeded the property inland, which wasn't too loamy and full of salt to farm. But my ancestors crossed the Atlantic and settled what was given. Over the years they survived by raising cattle, fishing, and shipbuilding, passing down their worthless land because it was home.

One look at prices for acreage fronting the Chesapeake Bay will tell you how much times have changed. Those of us who have held on to our property laugh in amazement. We

weather the hurricanes, the reassessments, debate conservation easements and land trusts, and pray we can save the land for future generations.

I no longer live in Virginia, but on the North Carolina shore, near Wilmington. Two blocks from the ocean, a beach, and a brackish river, ours is a working-class tourist town and a half-hour's drive from my husband's job at the university and our son's school. The drive is neither a hardship nor a pleasure. Where there were once white sand dunes, virgin longleaf pine, and canopied live oak hung with Spanish moss, there is now a seemingly endless succession of strip malls. I despaired the first time I saw the clogged sprawl that lay beyond Wilmington's quaint downtown.

When my husband, son, and I relocated three years ago, we were moving from a life blown too large and frenetic. We longed for a smaller life, one lived in a place of peace. We traveled south until the mainland ended and we crossed the Intracoastal Waterway and entered Carolina Beach. We drove around the neighborhood where we now live. I knew the second I stepped out the of car—felt the wind, smelled the salt and pine, saw the nearby state park with its maritime forest—that I could make a home here. It is a living place.

Ever since I left my girlhood home, I have yearned for that piney forest, for the hours I spent as a girl, alone in the woods. But now I find myself cast out of the world I so loved—I haven't entered the woods alone in nearly two decades. When I think of entering the woods alone, a small terror takes up residence in me: my fear is not of nature, but of man's nature. Of hate and malice. I lock my door against it at night, but the fear is never exiled from my mind. I exist, and my fear exists in me. It remains unclear which of us is stronger. Sometimes this is how I think of it, as a battle, something that must be overcome, dominated, subdued, and tamed. I marvel at my fear and my rage because I despise violence, and yet I can't eliminate my impulse to imagine my anger in action. What sickens me is my own capacity to harm.

To reenter the woods alone I must face this wall of fear. And I wonder why my mind has banished me from a place that once gave me such strength, such solace. I wonder if I can ever regain access to that place again. What would it mean to reenter the woods?

Iwas never good at being a girl the way girls are meant to be good. My nine-year-old hands are grimy; small rolls of dirt curl beneath my nails and must be pried out at day's end with the tip of a pocketknife. The soles of my feet are thick and orange. My hands are callused; my knees shine with purple scars. My unruly hair is kept cropped. The cut is called a pixie, but really it's the female equivalent of a crew cut. The men at the

general store and the garage call me Sunny. This, I take it, is a form of endearment, like calling me Sweetie. When my father suggests later that I get my ears pierced, I'm puzzled. Then he waves off the idea. *It's silly*, he says. *If it doesn't bother you, it doesn't bother me.* What doesn't bother me? *That they think you're a boy. That's why they call you Sonny.*

I feel slapped. Can't they tell I'm a girl?

I spend several summer weeks trying to grow my hair and nails, but the effort is too much. It requires conscientiousness, and when I wake in the morning, I do not want to spend time taming my hair, filing a chipped nail. I want to rise. I want to eat an apple and run through the piney woods where I live. So when the sun rises, I set out alone, oblivious to the preciousness of this paradise, to the fact that here, I am free.

Once, I emerged from the forest near a garage with a workshop in it. Inside the warm room, with its corrugated metal roof, its saws and chisels and knives and delicate cedar shavings on the floor, I met a man named Vernie. He carved beautiful shapes out of red cedar branches. He made me a three-inch-high Indian head laced through with a sharp-smelling string of rawhide. I brought my cousins, and he made them necklaces too. Our parents admired them. No one expressed concern about us kids meeting a stranger and accepting his gifts. Amidst today's endless nastiness and fearmongering, the 1970s seem a simpler time, a sweet lull.

These days, I rise to go to the gym in the morning. Five thirty a.m., and the televisions are on the news channels, one to my left and one to my right, suspended just above eye level.

Nearly all the news is bad, especially in these long years since September 11. The news broadcasts images of our precarious world, documenting each disaster or near-disaster, gathering us at the vertiginous canyon's edge, where we stand, cling to one another, and marvel at the miracle of any happiness, any joy. Rubble, smoke, bloodstained walls, a child's twisted filthy foot, the rest of him covered.

Turn it off, please, I tell the sleepy young college girl behind the desk. She raises her head from a bed pillow on the computer table and looks at me, clearly puzzled. *Please*, I say, hearing my frantic tone, *please turn it off.*

I don't wish to live in a cave far from the world, but I cannot stand the constant barrage of news. I refuse to live in a glaring urgent world where I'm led to believe I have no control, no power. My act of rebellion? I turn it off. I need the news once a day at most. Anything truly catastrophic will break through the flimsy barriers I erect, but I need these barriers, if only to permit me to get out of bed and walk through my morning, turn on the coffee pot, make lunches for my husband and son, and admire the morning sky without being filled with despair.

The televisions are everywhere: in my doctor's waiting room, broadcasting prevention of cancer, of aging; in the airports. On vacation, waiting for our flight, I shepherd my son away from our seats as CNN broadcasts live from a serial killer's trial. The man describes in detail how he slowly tortured and killed a girl. I feel dizzy and hot. When I complain to the airline employees, I find that even they have no control over what is broadcast through the concourse. I stalk off to the food court with my son, my heart cringing in my chest. Maybe the people mesmerized before the televisions can't bear the sadness either, but they've gone the other way: they can make themselves not feel it. Sometimes, and bitterly, I envy them.

I get a Coke with my son and wait until the broadcast turns to subjects more palatable: celebrity divorce, plastic surgery, the safest cars to drive.

In high school, I live in the suburbs, with no woods larger than a few scattered acres for miles. However, there are woods behind my best friend's townhouse complex. She has recently relocated from Hanover, Virginia, which is still all forest and rolling farmland. We're both exiles from our country childhoods. She longs for the same thing I do: a walk in the woods. So after school, we venture into the young forested area behind her home.

We wander around in the trash pines and scrubby trees. The drone of cars fades a bit but never fully disappears. At the wood's entrance, we cross a drainage ditch, littered with shining beer cans and fast-food trash, but soon there is a moment of splendor, enough sunlight through the new spring leaves that the air itself seems green. We find a small creek just wide enough not to be mistaken for a ditch, moss-covered logs and rocks. There's that smell, fresh as well water—a clean smell of earth and stone and black topsoil. My friend is a romantic; she recites an Edna St. Vincent Millay poem. We both say how we feel like Jo in *Little Women*. But doesn't every girl? I never knew a girl to wish aloud to be Meg or Amy or Beth. Certainly no one wished to be poor beleaguered Marmee, which was the unfortunate fate all the *Little Women* came to, except Beth, of course, so brave and wise and dead.

The walk sustains us. We are happy. Here are woods to linger in. But they end abruptly, and we are on a sloping hill overlooking a parking lot and three large Dumpsters behind a Golden Corral and a McDonald's. Styrofoam boxes litter the edge of the woods, as well as more beer cans, a large mound of newly grassed clay, and a pair of damp, soiled panties, which we examine at the end of a stick. An outdoor dalliance? A rape? Something a dog or raccoon dug from the trash? We'll never know, of course, but their presence makes the woods seem simultaneously diminished and vastly ominous.

Two years later a classmate of ours named Donna, a cheerful girl, full of spirit and sass, is found dead in a similar stand of woods a few miles away. She was stabbed to death along with her boyfriend. Their killer is never found. Donna sat two seats behind me in English. She was a thin thing, a delicate wisp of a girl, with long ash-blond hair and a big smile. She gravitated to the fast kids, the partiers. She stood out, had a winning way.

That summer I see Ms. Pilkington, my senior English teacher, and we talk about how Donna was always late to class, her high heels ticking across the linoleum tiles. She would toss her rabbit-fur coat over a chair and smile as she was chided, eroding Pilk's scolding stance. We both say that it is impossible to imagine anyone killing this girl out of anger. A comfort, I suppose, this failure of imagination.

The trail goes cold. Someone killed Donna, took her life, stole it from her in the woods—and then walked out, back among us.

Is this the origin of my fear of being a woman alone in the woods? Now, at my new home, the woods call to me. So far, I enter only with a companion. Large swaths of forest are set aside nearby, both at the state park and in the blast zone for Sunny Point, the munitions depot located across the river. Such a cheery name for a place rumored to handle nuclear weapons and supplies for our wars. Yet I find myself less scared of Sunny Point than of encountering the wrong human in the woods, someone with a heart full of grief or hate or rage that demands an action that will lead to my destruction.

When my family walks the paths in the state park with me, I don't feel as if I'm really walking in the woods, not the way I did when I was a girl. Maybe the small criminal in me wants to trespass. I want no park ranger to guide me, no well-tended footpaths to lead me along. The woods I want aren't some roadside attraction, cordoned off like an exotic pet. The woods I want are untamed, snarled with vines.

As a girl, I thought the woods would protect me from the world. Now I know different. The woods and I are both precarious and threatened. When has it not been this way? At last, carrying this knowledge, I decide to enter them again. Alone. I choose the unruly blast zone forest, riddled with No Trespassing signs. There is no trail other than the one I make. Briars seize my jacket; my hands rip through the tangles of wild grapevines; my heart stamps in my throat; spider webs crackle like flames as I tear through them. No stopping, I tell myself.

Deep into the woods, the mechanical hum of the world recedes, and something like quiet descends. The tree frogs plonk and the cicadas shirr and I hear a snake race through the tall grass. Out here I can hear each step I take. Here is a place where fox litter the path to their dens with half-gnawed rabbit bones, luring those looking for an unearned feast toward wet teeth. Here the canopy of longleaf pine and live oak grows thick enough to block the Carolina sun. Morning's damp coolness lingers even toward noon. The first waxy stalks of Indian pipe rise from the pine tags, pale as fog. I sit on the forest floor and breathe. The air smells sweet and pure. I stretch out on the ground, watching the pine needles glisten, watching the sky moving slowly beyond them, until I feel I belong here, until I feel small, and my fear, so individual, is claimed by something more vast and powerful than any human. In its place I feel myself filled with longing, with joy, with my satisfaction at being simply three things at once: a woman, alone, in the woods. •