

The Lost Woods

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A back-country road was carrying us south, carrying us through a snow-filled landscape and under the sullen gray of a December sky. Minute by minute, the long chain of the Indiana dunes receded behind us. Ahead, beyond the bobbing ears of the horses, I could catch glimpses of the blue-white, far-away ridges of the Valparaiso moraine. Our low bob-sled tilted and pitched over the frozen ruts. Beside me, my bearded grandfather clung to the black strips of the taut reins and braced himself with felt-booted feet widespread. At every lurch, my own short, six-year-old legs, dangling below the seat, gyrated wildly like the tail of an off-balance cat.



We had left Lone Oak, my grandfather's dune-country farm, that winter morning, to drive to a distant woods. In the late weeks of autumn, my grandfather had been busy there, felling trees and cutting firewood. He was going after a load of this wood and he was taking me along. At first, we drove through familiar country — past Gunder's big red barn, the weed lot and the school house. Then we swung south and crossed the right-of-way of the Pere Marquette railroad. Beyond, we journeyed into a world that was, for me, new and unexplored. The road ran on

and on. We seemed traversing vast distances while the smell of coming snow filled the air.

Eventually, I remember, we swung off the road into a kind of lane. The fences soon disappeared and we rode out into open country, onto a wide, undulating sea of whiteness with here and there the island of a bush-clump. As we progressed, a ribbon of runner-tracks and hoof-marks steadily unrolled, lengthened, and followed us across the snow.

Winter trees, gray and silent, began to rise around us. They were old trees, gnarled and twisted. We came to a frozen stream and turned to follow its bank. The

bob-sled, from time to time, would rear suddenly and then plunge downward as a front runner rode over a low stump or hidden log. Each time the sled seat soared and dropped away, I clung grimly to my place or clawed wildly at my grandfather's overcoat. He observed with a chuckle:

" 'T takes a good driver t' hit *all* th' stumps."

Then, while the snow slipped backward beneath the runners and the great trees of that somber woods closed around us, we rode on in silence. As we advanced, the trees grew steadily thicker; the woods more dark and lonely. In a small clearing, my grandfather pulled up beside a series of low, snow-covered walls. Around us were great white mounds that looked like igloos. The walls were the corded stovewood; the igloos were the snow-clad piles of discarded branches.

Wisps of steam curled up from the sides of the heated horses and my grandfather threw blankets over their backs before he bent to the work of tossing stovewood into the lumber-wagon bed of the bob-sled. The hollow thump and crash of the frozen sticks reverberated through the still woods.

I soon tired of helping and wandered about, small as an atom, among the great trees — oak and beech, hickory and ash and sycamore. An air of strangeness and mystery enveloped the dark woods. I peered timidly down gloomy aisles between the trees. Branches rubbed together in the breeze with sudden shrieks or mournful wailings and the cawing of a distant crow echoed dismally. I was at once enchanted and fearful. Each time I followed one of the corridors away from the clearing, I hurried back to be reassured by the sight of my bundled-up grandfather stooping and rising as he picked up the cordwood and tossed it into the sled.

He stopped from time to time to point out special trees. In the hollow of one great beech, he had found two quarts of shelled nuts stored away by a squirrel. In another tree, with a gaping rectangular hole chopped in its upper trunk, the owner of the woods had obtained several milk-pails full of dark honey made by a wild swarm of bees. Still another hollow tree had a story to tell. It was an immense sycamore by the stream-bank. Its interior, smoke-blackened and cavernous, was filled with a damp and acrid odor. One autumn night, there, hunters had treed and smoked out a raccoon.

There were other exciting discoveries: the holes of owls and woodpeckers; the massed brown leaves of squirrel-nests high in the bare branches; the tracks of small wild animals that wound about among the trees, that crisscrossed on the ice, that linked together the great mounds of the discarded branches. In one place, the wing-feathers of an owl had left their imprint on the snow; and there, the trail of some small animal had ended and there, on the white surface, were tiny drops of red. From the dark mouth of a burrow, under the far bank of the frozen stream, tracks led away over the ice. I longed to follow them around a distant bend in the stream. But the reaches beyond, forbidding under the still tenseness of the ominous sky, slowed my steps to a standstill. However, my mind and imagination were racing.

Behind and beyond the silence and inactivity of the woods, there was a sense of action stilled by our presence; of standing in a charmed circle where all life paused, enchanted, until we passed on. I had the feeling that animals would appear, their interrupted revels and battles would recommence, with our departure. My imagination invested the woods with a fearful and delicious atmosphere of secrecy

and wildness. It left me with an endless curiosity about this lonely tract and all of its inhabitants.

After nearly half an hour had gone by, my grandfather's long sled was full and he called me back to the seat. As we rode away, I looked back as long as I could see the trees, watching to the last this gloomy woods, under its gloomy sky, which had made such a profound impression on me. All the way home, I was silent, busy with my own speculations.

Thirty years later, I spent one whole summer's day driving my car over dirt roads of the region, searching for this old, remembered woods. But I never found it. Perhaps I took the wrong turns. Perhaps the woods had been felled and the land turned into cultivated fields. Perhaps I failed to recognize the wooded tract as seen through the eyes of a small boy. I know that, as I drove about, the great distances of childhood had greatly shrunk. How soon I came to the corners! How much smaller were the trees than I remembered them; how much lower the hills! Time seemed to have dwarfed the towering barns of boyhood and to have reduced the size of cornfields and pastures. At any rate, I never saw the ancient trees of that old woodland a second time. The Lost Woods of childhood remained lost forever.

In talking to others, I have come to believe that most of us have had some such experience — that some lonely spot, some private nook, some glen or streamside-scene impressed us so deeply that even today its memory recalls the mood of a lost enchantment. At the age of eighty, my grandmother used to recall with delight a lonely tract she called "The Beautiful Big South Woods." There, as a girl one spring day, she had seen the whole floor of the woods, acre on acre, carpeted with the blooms of bloodroot and spring beauties and blue and pink hepaticas. She had seen the woods only once but she never forgot it.

When Henry Thoreau was five, his parents, then living in the city of Boston, took him eighteen miles into the country to a woodland scene that he, too, never forgot. It was, he said, one of the earliest scenes stamped on the tablets of his memory. During succeeding years of childhood, that woodland formed the basis of his dreams. The spot to which he had been taken was Walden Pond, near Concord. Twenty-three years later, writing in his cabin on the shores of this same pond, Thoreau noted the unfading impression that "fabulous landscape" had made and how, even at that early age, he had given preference to this recess—"where almost sunshine and shadow were the only inhabitants that varied the scene" — over the tumultuous city in which he lived...

For me, the Lost Woods became a starting point and a symbol. It was a symbol of all the veiled and fascinating secrets of the out-of-doors. It was the starting point of my absorption in the world of Nature. The image of that somber woods returned a thousand times in memory. It aroused in my mind an interest in the ways and the mysteries of the wild world that a lifetime is not too long to satisfy.