

The Spirit of the Place

Paul didn't even want to go on the hike. It was an easy trail that led to a peaceful pond and cabin in the Berkshires. Nothing compared to his solo treks in the White Mountains, grueling four-thousand foot ascents where he could sink into sublime exhaustion and forget Afghanistan.

His old college roommate Charles had been yammering for weeks about wanting to spend a weekend outdoors and Paul finally acquiesced. He knew that Charles didn't have the fortitude or the conditioning to tackle anything more than an easy jaunt in the woods, so he suggested the overnight hike to Upper Goose Pond.

The men set out late on a Saturday afternoon. The waning October sun slivered through a forest of beech and oak, casting the trail in half-shadow.

Within the first five minutes of the hike, Charles had to stop and readjust his backpack three times. Crammed with gear, the pack kept slipping off his shoulders.

"Why did you bring so much?" Paul said, getting exasperated.

"I didn't want to forget anything."

"We can go back to the car if you want. You can drop off some of that stuff."

"How long did you say to the cabin? Four miles?"

"Yes."

Charles worked out some calculations and then signaled with his jaw to the trail ahead and the men pressed forward. Charles had stuffed thermal underwear, a down jacket, a sleeping bag, a second pair of mittens, and a lantern into his backpack. He had decided more was better when encountering the unknown. Who knew how cold it would be in the cabin? What obstacles might arise, requiring more gear? He had packed a tent too in case Paul was wrong and the cabin was full.

Charles needed a break from the city. Three months ago, his father died, saddling him with the heavy task of settling his father's estate. His father's death coincided with a busy stretch at work. He had seen more patients this summer than he had in the previous nine months. He was accepting insurance now.

"We'll be there by five-thirty," Paul said. "We can unload our stuff, get settled, and start on dinner."

Paul had picked up two backpacking meals from REI, the kind that only required boiling water, a small pot, and a spoon.

"I have dessert," Charles offered.

"Dessert?"

"Peach cobbler from the farmstand when we stopped."

"Peach cobbler?" Paul asked.

"You were in the bathroom."

Paul smiled and tapped Charles's backpack. "No wonder this is falling off your shoulder. You shoved a peach cobbler in there."

The trail to Upper Goose Pond was muddy, caking their boots and making footing more treacherous. It had rained hard the previous day and the sloppy trail kept other hikers away. Whatever hikers there'd be this time of year. It was a short section of the Appalachian Trail that received heavy foot traffic in September when thru-hikers came through on their journey to Katahdin, but now those hikers were long gone. The men plodded along in solitude.

"When's the last time you hiked?" Paul asked.

"Going on three years."

"You'll be ready for the Presidential traverse after this one."

Both men laughed.

“Grab my water for me?” Charles asked. “I don’t want to take this off again. I finally got it secure.”

Paul unzipped the top pocket on Charles’s backpack and pulled out the canteen. “You’re not going to make me hold it up to your mouth, are you?” he said.

As Charles drank, Paul marveled at the peacefulness of the woods. He heard the breeze flit through branches, shaking fecund leaves of gold and vermilion, clinging for life. He watched a squirrel hop on the trail and dart into the brush, clasping an acorn in its tiny claws. The air was crisp, cool, reminding him of the fall harvest, pumpkin patches, apple cider doughnuts and childhood. Why couldn’t these autumn days last forever? Why did winter have to come? Immature thoughts, he knew, and he discarded them.

“I’d like to take a trip before the snow comes,” Charles said.

“What do you mean a trip? Like a vacation?”

“I’m thinking Costa Rica.”

“Costa Rica? What’s there? I mean, why Costa Rica?”

“There are these cloud forests that look amazing,” Charles began to speak in the dreamy tone that always irked Paul. Charles had been booking trips in his mind since their freshman year in college. While Paul was up at dawn doing ROTC drills and calisthenics, Charles was skipping class and daydreaming in their dorm room about New Zealand or South Africa or Alaska. “I was looking at all these photos of rainforests. And beaches. It’s like a different world.”

Paul had nothing to add to the topic, had very little interest in exotic travel, and didn’t want to indulge Charles. He nodded in silence and picked up the pace. He focused instead on the

sound of their boots crunching on the fallen leaves. The rest would fall in a week, maybe two, stripping trees bare. Nothing could stop the change. A starkness would settle over the land.

Up ahead, the trail widened into a small glade. “The cabin should be right up ahead,” Paul predicted. He pointed to a side trail that snaked off to the right. “Down there’s a tent platform.”

He felt a tinge of nostalgia creep in as the surroundings came back to him. Paul had been to the area as a child, twenty-five years before, with his father and brother. He remembered it as a serene location full of kayaking and hiking and summertime innocence. His father taught him and his brother to fish on the pond. His father was dead almost a decade now, and his brother long estranged, living somewhere in rural Oregon the last he heard.

“Will anyone be sleeping in the cabin tonight?” Charles asked.

“I doubt it. It should be free this time of year.”

Charles patted the side of his backpack. “I have a tent if I need it.”

Paul in front, the men approached the cabin nestled among a grove of tall trees. A two-floored structure, the cabin lay on trapezoidal cinder blocks and had an enclosed front porch.

“I didn’t expect it to be red,” Charles said.

“I don’t remember it being red.”

They entered the cabin and found it empty of people. Three coolers and miscellaneous gear were piled in the corner.

“Some people have been here today,” Paul said.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, that stuff must belong to someone. They’re probably out on a hike.”

The men laid down their backpacks near the entrance to explore. The cabin had a small galley kitchen off to the side and no running water. A logbook sat on a stand against the back wall. Paul considered flipping through to take an inventory to see who had been to the cabin recently, how many thru-hikers, how many people in total, but decided first things first.

“The bunkroom is upstairs,” he said. He led the way up the rickety staircase and Charles followed him. “We have our pick,” he added, looking at two rows of unclaimed platforms, about twenty beds in total.

“Yes indeed,” Charles said with a nod and a smile. “Are you getting hungry?”

“Yeah, let’s get out our food and start dinner.”

They climbed back down. Paul foraged in his backpack and dug out two packets of backpacker food, a small saucepot, and his one-burner stove.

As Paul fiddled with his stove, Charles found a book on local wildflowers and sat at the picnic table. He began leafing through the book and calling out names. “*Rubus flagellaris*. *Bidens aristosa*. *Monarda fistulosa*. Know any of these?”

“Any of them? I know all of them,” Paul said with a smirk, looking up from his stove. “Who doesn’t know the *Monarda fistulosa*?”

Charles rocked his head back and let out a boisterous laugh. Paul’s deadpan could cut right through him.

Charles was about to call out a fourth local wildflower, when he heard the sound of distant voices. “Hear that?” he asked.

Paul straightened up and squinted out the window. “It’s a group of men.”

Charles got up and walked over to the window. Four men with rifles in gray and olive green fatigues approached the cabin. “We’ve got company,” he said, and then added, wistfully, “Maybe they’re just passing through.”

Paul pointed to the collection of gear. “I don’t think so. That must be their stuff.”

A few seconds later, the door flung open and the first man stepped in. “Good afternoon boys,” he said in a resonant baritone that could carry a radio program. Behind him, three other men poured in, greeting Paul and Charles with cheerful howdies and nods. The first man walked over and extended his hand. “I’m Jerry, the caretaker this weekend. You fellas staying here tonight?”

“That’s the plan,” said Paul.

Jerry wore a John Deere mesh baseball hat and a tan barn jacket that gave him the look of a backwoodsman. But the purplish skin and cratered nose that sprouted on his wasted face told a different story, one that hadn’t been all chopping wood and rustic living.

“It’ll just be us and you most likely,” Jerry added. “Don’t expect any stragglers to come through at this hour, especially this time of year.”

The hunters stacked their guns in the corner and took seats around the picnic table. One of them opened the cooler and slid Bud Lights across the table to open hands.

“You guys want a beer?” Jerry said. “Help yourself.”

“No thanks,” said Paul.

“Same,” said Charles.

“Okey dokey, we got three cases here if you change your mind.”

The men drank quickly in long sustained gulps. With clenched fists, they smashed the cans against the picnic table and tossed them into the corner.

“Guys, this ain’t a pig sty,” Jerry said with a smile, his teeth nicotine brown and crooked.

“Oh we’ll get them later, Jerry. Don’t worry your pretty face one bit,” the skinny man in the group said, his voice shrill, almost prepubescent.

“My pretty face?” Jerry replied in an effeminate whisper, trotting out a faux Southern accent. Hands on his hips, he thrust his pelvic bone forward and batted his eyelashes. “Thank you, sir. Why ain’t you a Gentleman Jim.”

“Hey Jerry, I think Bianchi wants to blow you,” another hunter said.

“Does he now?” Jerry said, poking his pinky into his cheek dimple and keeping up the voice. “Well, I might have to say yes then. A mouth *is* a mouth.” A second later, Jerry snapped out of his routine, cupped his hands like a wide-receiver, and said in his baritone, “Lob me a strike, Bianchi.”

The skinny man underhanded a beer to Jerry who in one motion caught the can in his right hand, cracked it open with his long mustard fingers, and took a swig.

Meanwhile, Paul finally got his stove to light and poured water into the saucepan. When the water reached a slow boil, he cut the two packets of dehydrated mash with his Swiss Army knife, and dumped them into the pan.

Jerry walked over and peered down. “What are you making there? Rabbit food?”

“A backpacker mix,” Paul said.

“Looks like rabbit food. You’re not a rabbit, are you?” He turned his head sideways and tried to make eye contact with Paul, wearing the face of a stupefied dunce, his mouth drooping hangdog. “You a rabbit, boy?” He wrapped his mustard fingers around Paul’s upper arm, shook it lightly, and erupted into laughter. “You fellas ought to join us. Benny’s gonna fire up the grill soon. We have burgers, venison. Plenty to go around.”

Paul shook Jerry's hand off his arm and kept his eyes fixed on his cookware. A desire to throttle the man came over him, but he took a breath and forced himself to calm down. He couldn't let his temper get the best of him again. Not here. Not in the woods.

When the mash softened, Paul brought out his lightweight camping utensils and bowls and divvied it into two equal portions. He and Charles stood in the kitchen eating their mash in silence.

The hunters went outside and sat in a semicircle around the fire pit to await their meal. They told stories, swore, cackled, hollered.

Charles looked over at Paul and said, "It's going to be a long night, I'm afraid." Paul nodded with a grimace.

When they finished eating the mash, Charles took out the peach cobbler and with Paul's Swiss Army knife outlined a piece before slicing through. "Big enough?" he asked Paul. "Bigger?"

"That's fine," Paul said. "I don't want too much."

Charles dug out the piece and plopped it into Paul's bowl and then did the same for himself.

"Very fresh," said Paul.

Both men ate with gusto.

"Should we see if they want the rest?" Charles motioned outside toward the men.

"No, they have their fill. They brought enough food for an army. Plus, we can eat the rest tomorrow on the way home."

"Good idea."

After eating their pie, Paul and Charles sat in the two rocking chairs inside the cabin. Charles took out his journal and wrote about the cabin at Upper Goose Pond, before delving into his feelings about the outdoors as a restorative force and being on his first overnight hiking trip. Then he went deeper and reflected back on the past few months since his father's death.

Paul took out his *New York Times* crossword puzzle book. He loved puzzles, the challenge they presented, loved how there was one, and only one, solution and that through the force of his brainpower he could find it. It appealed to his inner pragmatist, his desire for completion. He worked the puzzle from top left to bottom right, his Alaska to Florida system, in ruthless efficiency. He whizzed through the top left quadrant and was about to attack the middle of the puzzle, the meat of it all, when the cabin door flung open and slammed against the wall. In stepped Jerry, naked except for the John Deere hat, holding a Bud Light can. His stomach swelled over spindly legs corrugated with varicose veins, his breasts drooped like deflating balloons.

"Well, hello fellas," he said to Paul and Charles with a nod, as if he were just being a friendly neighbor, and cracked open the beer. The other hunters formed a tight phalanx behind him and crowded around the entrance with gleeful grins.

Jerry tilted back his head, his Adam's apple protruded like an engorged chestnut, and began chugging. The other hunters whelped in delight, "You got it Jerry! C'mon, one gulp, Jerry, you can do it! Chug! Chug! Chug!"

Jerry righted his head, flipped the can over to show it was empty, and smiled at Charles and Paul. "I just won a hundred bucks, boys."

Charles wore a blank stare. His mouth was open so wide, a cricket could have hopped in.

“Wow,” Paul finally mustered, and then with a baffled shake of his head added, “That’s really impressive.”

“Just having some fun, fellas,” Jerry said with a chuckle. “Want to come out and join us for a beer?”

Both Paul and Charles shook their head, and Jerry and the hunters went back outside to the fire pit.

After the door closed, Paul said with disgust in his voice, “I’m going to read upstairs,” and climbed the stairs to the bunkroom.

Fearful that the hunters would keep him awake, Charles unpacked his sleeping bag and tent and went to sleep on the platform a hundred yards from the cabin.

Paul lay in bed with his headlamp and a book of Hemingway’s short stories. Nine o’clock was too early for sleep. He hadn’t read any Hemingway since high school. His English teacher introduced the class to Hemingway’s short fiction, stories like “Hills Like White Elephants” and “The Snows of Kilimanjaro.” The language was too sparse and the symbolism too obscure for Paul to grasp and he discarded Hemingway as an author he didn’t like.

The previous weekend, however, he was browsing at a bookstore and saw a used copy of Hemingway’s collected short stories. The book jutted out an inch on the shelf and seemed to call to him. On a whim, he purchased it. Perhaps as an adult, he would appreciate the stories more.

He was right. The Nick Adams stories resonated this time. Paul understood Nick’s need to escape to the river. He understood all of it, the trout, the grasshoppers, the swamp.

At midnight, the hunters moved their party into the cabin. Paul had long since stopped reading but still hadn’t fallen asleep. He lay there in rage. The men continue to play cards, pounding their fists on the picnic table, whooping and bellowing.

Paul's head thrummed. He flipped aggressively from side to side. The thin amorphous pillow provided no support, the stiffy and lumpy twin mattress worse than concrete. He wanted to climb down the stairs and shout at them to shut the hell up, grab them by the collars, each and every one of them, slam them against the wall until their tongues lolled out and they begged for mercy.

He didn't know these men but they were fools. Fools who knew nothing of hardness. Nothing of despair. Nothing of death.

Yet he knew a confrontation would be pointless. The adrenaline would course through him for hours regardless of whether they complied. He would replay the scene over in his mind on an endless loop.

Around four o'clock, the men came upstairs, moving loudly in the dark, grunting and groaning. Someone belched, eliciting a cackle. Paul still hadn't fallen asleep. He remained still. He didn't want to give the men the satisfaction that he was still awake, that they had affected him.

Over the next hour, the men's deep and guttural snores rattled like machine-gun fire through the bunkroom. Paul's thoughts moved to Charles. His best friend since eighteen. Paul felt a rush of anger toward him now too. Charles was weak and needed support. Everyone needed support but Charles seemed to need more. Paul had lost track of the times he had propped up Charles during his depressive states. Going all the way back to freshman year. The two of them would lie awake on their twin beds, and Charles would ramble on about all his problems—classes, family, money, romance, friends—as Paul listened. The patterned continued over the years, with Paul acting against his own interests because he knew Charles needed him.

How much longer could he serve in this role? His forbearance was waning. He had his own problems.

His mind drifted between consciousness and sleep and in his imaginings, he and Charles were hiking back to their car in the early morning. Charles was complaining of his own harrowing night—the rustle in the woods that was a dangerous wild animal, likely a bear, which threatened to shrivel his flimsy canvas tent and disembowel him. The hard and unforgiving platform that dug into his back, a back already wrecked from too many hours hunched over his laptop, entering patient records.

“It’s just not in the spirit of the place!” Paul shouted. “It’s not that kind of place to pound beers, walk around naked, like it’s a frat house.”

“I know!” Charles said.

Paul envisioned the cabin as it should be in its natural state—a tranquil oasis, a refuge for those seeking solitude and restoration. “I have half a mind to do something about it,” he said.

“Should we go back and give those guys a piece of our mind?” Charles asked cautiously.

“No,” he said, feeling a terrible disgust, as if Charles could give anyone a piece of his mind. “I’m going to write a letter.”

“A letter? A letter to whom?”

“To whom?” he sneered. “Who do you think, Charles? To the Appalachian Mountain Club. They manage the cabin. I’m going to find the right name and write to that person.”

“I mean, what are you going to write?”

“I’m going to tell them about that caretaker, Jerry, how he invited those assholes to the cabin, how they showed no respect for the sanctity of the experience, and how they—.” He felt his face twisting in concentration, his eyes narrowing, as he waited for the perfect phrase to leap

into his tired mind. “How they violated the spirit of the place!” he yelled. “As soon as we get back, I’m going to write that fucking letter.” He ripped a frail beech leaf from a low branch, crunched it up hard in his hand, and flung it. The leaf scattered into pieces before tumbling to the ground.

“I’ll sign that letter,” Charles’s voice rose again to match Paul’s. “I’ll sign it right next to your name.”

“Those guys won’t get away with acting like that,” he said. That sentiment sounded too soft, so he tried again, “Those guys are going to fucking pay.”

“I’ll sign that letter, Paul. You won’t have to ask me twice.” Charles wore a hopeful look, child-like, his eyes warm and light brown, peach cobbler residue around his mouth. His backpack sloped ridiculously off his left shoulder and the tent poles dangled halfway out of the unzipped opening.

Paul shook his head. He alone was going to write the letter and he alone was going to sign it.

Then Charles vanished from his thoughts, and Paul tried to craft the letter. He strove for eloquence, but could summon nothing more than the same triteness: how these men, these loud, obstreperous men, violated the spirit of the place. That refrain circled around in his mind like a muted chant—the spirit of the place, the spirit of the place, the spirit of the place—until it lost all meaning and faded away and a calmness came over him.

He wasn’t going to write any letter.

Paul rolled over onto his side and pushed himself to his feet. He reached down and grabbed his backpack, swung it over his shoulder, and climbed down the stairs in the dark. He

walked across the cabin to the door where Jerry had burst in naked several hours earlier and pushed it open.

The brisk autumn air engulfed him. He was in the same hiking pants and snug long-sleeve shirt from the day before. The clothes weren't warm enough and he began to shiver.

In the night sky, the moon was luminous. A hunter's moon. He left his headlamp in his backpack and walked toward the tent platform under the palisades of light rippling through the trees. Near the platform was a picnic bench. He took a seat on it and felt the dampness from the dew soak into his haunches.

From the tent came a whistling snore that Paul knew well: Charles was sound asleep. Paul remembered the pantomime he did of Charles's snoring back in college. He'd blow up his cheeks like a squirrel and emit a stream of air through puckered lips with such violent force, spit would fly out. By the end he and Charles would be undone in laughter, tears streaming down their cheeks. Paul couldn't help but chuckle at the memory. So very long ago. He felt a sudden gladness that Charles was sleeping soundly. All was at peace when men slept.

Paul remained on the bench for twenty minutes. The cold worked its way through him but he didn't fight it. The only sounds were the comforting chirps of the crickets and Charles's sibilant snores.

Eventually, he pushed himself off the bench and ambled down the path that led to the pond. The moon gleamed down on the center of the pond. There was no wind and the water lapped gently at the shoreline. His boots crunched into pebbly sand and it sounded like the earth being carved anew. A smell of ripeness came into his nostrils, a profound musk that impelled him to bend and remove his hiking boots. He peeled off the wool socks and brought his feet to the water and surrendered to the cold. He stripped off his pants and his underwear and his shirt

and bunched them into a giant ball and tossed them on the shore and waded in. First his ankles and then his knees and when the water had reached his stomach, he dove in head first and let the water take him whole. He bobbed up and down in the pond, his body on frigid fire, and he shook his wet hair around, like some sea creature born out of the earth. Shrouded in darkness, the moonlight beckoned him, like a beacon of all that was lost and could be found again, and toward it he swam.