

Lost

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My brother and I trudged through the swamp, covered in grime and innumerable spider webs. The scraggly branches of black-haw viburnums created a dense tangle over our heads. Hazy green tree tops stretched into the distance for as far as I could see, giving the impression of unshakable sameness. A drop of sweat slid down my neck.

Earlier that morning, we had helped our family carry stuff from the moving van into our new house at the end of Bland Wade Lane in Nelson County. One of the biggest reasons we moved from the city was to give my brother Theo and me woods to explore. Our new home had seventeen acres of forest and a slice of river.

After a couple hours moving boxes, Theo and I decided to explore the river. We knew roughly where it was, having walked to it once before with our parents. We thought that if we hiked straight across the floodplain from our house, we would reach it. We found our binoculars and machetes and walked down the slope below our house into the woods. We carried the machetes to hack at the few species of invasive plants that had set up colonies in our woods.

Tulip poplars grew densely in the canopy, and the ground was dry and flat. The ground got wetter, until we emerged into an almost open clearing. Tall red maples grew at large intervals, sunlight filtering through their leaves to create intricate patterns on the ground. Patches of shallow standing water were scattered here and there, and many were covered in lush stands of water hemlock in full bloom.

There we were, standing in a world of dark mud and green vegetation. I realized that if we'd gone in a straight line, we'd be

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at the river by now. Theo had been worrying that we were lost for the last half-hour. When I admitted that I had no idea where we were, he moaned, “We’re lost.” I did my best to reassure him, but I felt nervous. The landscape began to change, and we walked up a hill out of the floodplain. I’d never been there before, and I didn’t recognize it. The ground was dry and grassy, the canopy dominated by oaks and hickories. When we came out of the woods at the top of a hill, I saw an unfamiliar road. Now I really began to worry. How were we supposed to get back to our house if we didn’t even know where we were?

I knew I could ask for help but didn’t want to, as I feared talking to strangers and worried about their reactions. I also realized how funny we must’ve looked, two dirty, mud-caked kids with machetes as long as our legs.

Theo whispered, “oh no, oh no” under his breath, making it difficult to think. I realized I had to knock on someone’s door and ask where we were. As I approached a single-story home, I saw the inside was dark except for the flickering light of a large television showing a golf game. I paused, my hand raised in midair, wondering who would come out. I forced myself to bring my hand down and knocked. A hulking figure rose off the couch in the dark interior. As he lumbered towards the door, I saw that he was shirtless, revealing a large belly that spilled over his belted shorts. “I’m Ed, how may I help you?” he said in a loud voice. I asked him if this was Bland Wade. He responded, “Yes, it is, sonny.” What a relief! I thanked him, and we tried to leave, but he wanted to drive us back to our house. He insisted, so I gave in. Theo whispered, “But we’re not supposed to get into strangers’ cars.” I shushed him, and soon we were driving down the steep gravel driveway to our house, where our family was still unloading the moving van.

Theo and I have spent many more days in our woods over the last five years, but we’ve never gotten lost again. I don’t think it would have been a problem if we had, as now I knew my fear of asking strangers for help had been unfounded. We saw Ed many more times — almost

always with his shirt off — riding around his lawn on his tractor or just sitting and sunning himself. To this day, I have no idea where we went in the swamp the day we got lost, or where on Bland Wade Lane we emerged. I doubt I'll ever find out.

