

The Woods

There is a town in Virginia's serene Shenandoah Valley, about seven miles southwest of Harrisonburg, in the shadow of the majestic Massanutten Mountain, called Penn Laird. It's a fairly small town, one that most folks haven't heard of who aren't from there, and it has yet to feel the dreadful and icy grip of industrialization. It holds steadfast to its quaintness.

Just off the main highway through Penn Laird sits a lane aptly named Quiet. The last of five houses rests atop a hill at the end of this third-of-a-mile gravel road, where it has stood stoically for over a hundred years, since all around was farm land. The land itself is still beautiful, with softly rolling hills that wave with grass in the summer and glisten with snow in the winter, and warmly inviting woods that call out to the curious and wild heart of the boy who lives in that house on a hill on Quiet Lane.

The year is 1999, and the boy is but six. The boy knows not of wars or terrorist attacks or deadly epidemics. He only knows Quiet Lane, and his parents, and his older brother and sister, and he tries to know this God his parents have told him of, but it all seems very complicated to the boy. He does know the grass, though, and the feel of the rough gravel beneath his feet, and the trees, and the sticky sap that comes from some trees. These things he knows, and these he loves.

The first third of Quiet Lane is bordered on one side by a stretch of woods, and about halfway down this stretch is a rusty wire fence strung about six feet between two maples. Beyond the fence is a clearing full of the greenest grass the boy has ever seen, but before the fence is a sign reading "no trespassing." In all his years, though, the boy has never seen anyone tend the clearing who might lay claim to it, certainly no one who would be opposed to his exploring the incredible place. Nervously, excitedly, the boy squeezes around the trees and past the fence, and his eyes go wide with wonder as the clearing opens up before him—it is even more spectacular than he had imagined! The luscious greenery calls to him, its branches reaching out like the arms of a long-lost mother he never knew he had, beckoning him into their warm embrace.

Intoxicated with the scents of honeysuckle and wild raspberries, the boy throws all inhibitions to the wind and races into the clearing, desperate to know every inch of this surreal patch of open grass in the woods, as though it were a part of heaven that had descended to Earth and might return whence it came at any moment. He darts to the left to race around the edge, taking in the sight of the cedars, the oaks, the maples the abundant bushes of wild berries; the feel of the his feet on the unkempt grass coving the soft earth; the sound of birds and insects and of the wind gently whispering through the trees, and the enticing smells which so envelop him that his nose can scarcely keep up.

As the boy continues his expedition around the edge—it seems to go on for miles—he comes to a narrow corridor with overgrown berry bushes encroaching on one side and trees looming high over the other. The narrowness of the path gives him pause, as he fears what bugs or spiders may land on him in such close quarters, but at last he pushes through the bushes. Doing his best to avoid the various spines and needles that snag at him, he finds himself in another, smaller clearing, no bigger than his bedroom. This smaller clearing is right on the edge of the woods, and it even has a sort of window to the adjacent field, with a dense row of bushes lining the bottom and tall trees on either side. When he sticks his head out the window and to the left, the boy can even see Quiet Lane, stretching peacefully to his house at the end.

He pulls his head back into the clearing—*his* clearing—and sits quietly for a few minutes, just basking in the beauty of this place. Eventually, he stands and pushes his way back into the larger clearing and continues his trek at an easy walk, the thrill and excitement having worn off but the awe and wonder remaining. He strolls through the center of the clearing, he ambles lazily around the three trees that occupy it, and then suddenly, he stops short. Before him is another narrow path through the trees, but this one does not lead to the forest's edge; rather, it leads deeper into the woods, into darkness, into whither he cannot tell.

In a moment, his conception of this place as detached from the world and safe from danger is shattered, and he is truly afraid. He wants to explore, to know every inch of this place, but the winds have turned, carrying back to him his inhibitions. What if there's a bear in there? What if he comes across a wasp nest? What if there are wolves? What if he wanders into poison ivy? What if? *What if?* Suddenly, everywhere he looks is danger. Rather than sweet smelling, the berry bushes are crawling with dangerous insects and spiders. Rather than reaching out like the loving arms of a mother, the trees are grasping at him with gnarled claws to pull him deep into the woods where he'll never be seen again. Rather than soft and endearing, the long, unkempt grass might be full of snakes. Fear grips the boy as he dashes back to the rusty wire fence, but he squeezes around the trees just in time, and he's once again safely on Quiet Lane. Back to reality. Back to Earth.

Now, sixteen years have passed, and that boy has slowly grown into me. I returned to that clearing many times through childhood and adolescence, and as I grew in many ways, it seemed to shrink in just as many. It didn't really go on for miles; the grass wasn't really so green; the frightening path wasn't really so dark; the place itself was not really so surreal. It was and is just a clearing in the woods, a patch of grass that no one seems concerned to tend. Despite that, though, the awe and wonder that once filled my eyes have not utterly faded, so it continues to feel somewhat detached, as

though it doesn't belong in the real world, almost as though I was never really there but dreamt the whole thing.

I didn't dream it, of course. It really happened. I was really there. If I want to, I could even go there again. Part of me would rather not, though, as I fear that to see it anew with adult eyes would disillusion me, would make it little more normal and a little less ethereal. Instead, I'll allow the boy to remain there in spirit, exploring his favorite place unbound by time and space, while I move on and find new adventures to inspire me with awe.