

# INTO THE WOODS

The woods are not always friendly. Those around my house seemed friendly enough. I lived in a hilly neighborhood in Pittsburgh. The houses across the street had backyards that bordered Sheraden Park, a long ravine that eventually reached the Ohio River. The trees close to my house were far from the river. They lined the houses along my street and provided great places for playing Cowboys and Indians. Many of the trees were good for climbing. Animal life had long since fled, escaping the hordes of kids coming to play.

The woods I came to fear were in Raccoon Creek Park, a state park on the western edge of Pennsylvania. To get there we traveled the Steubenville Pike, a road lined with hilly farms at the time of this story. My brothers and I sat in the back of our 1948 Forde coupe. They, being older, sat by the windows. My place was in the middle. On the way to the park, my brothers played a game counting cows they saw along the road. Under the rules of the game, your cows got buried if you passed a cemetery on your side of the road. As a result, there was always a competition for the passenger side window because we passed a church and cemetery on the driver's side.

In the 1950's, the trip took close to an hour on the two lane roads through the western hills. The park, itself, was just as hilly. The picnic area was at the top of one of the hills and the swimming area was at the bottom of a long wooded trail. At the time, the long wooded path was the only access to the swimming area.

The path seemed very long to my five year old legs. My memory is that the walk down took fifteen to twenty minutes but five year olds have a funny sense of time. At the bottom of the path were rustic dressing rooms - split log walls with no ceilings. Women went into one building and men into the other. Beside the men's was a refreshment hut selling sodas and ice cream.

Below the dressing rooms and refreshment hut was the beach. It was mostly grass with a twenty foot stretch of sand next to the water. After an afternoon of playing in the sand and water, it was time to ascend the long wooded path for our picnic dinner.

On this day, for a reason I have forgotten or never known, the sun had reached the trees before we left the beach. Tall trees are very adept at blocking the rays of the setting sun and the long wooded path was uncommonly dark. As my five year old legs made their way up that path, my five year old ears began hearing unfamiliar sounds. The sounds seemed to grow louder as the woods grew darker. My five year old

imagination populated those woods with unfriendly animals and I held on tight to my mother's hand.

It took forever to reach the picnic area, an open hillside that was not nearly as dark as the woods. The trees, however, were uncomfortably close and the animals they hid seemed just as loud. Our picnic dinner, fortunately, was short and sweet - hot dogs, potato chips, and lemonade. Back inside the car, the sounds of the woods disappeared. It was too dark to count cows but my brothers and I were soon asleep, so there was no one to count them if they could be seen.

Even today, darkened woods are a source of worry. Getting lost has replaced the old fear of unfriendly animals. Familiar paths go into hiding with the setting of the sun. The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but only if you know where you are going and are confident of arriving soon.