

## Into the Woods by Ariel Hindre

My grandparents raised me. I was a Pawpaw's girl while Nan was at work and on her day(s) off, we were thick as thieves. She is the one who inspired my love for the outdoors, nature and the respect one should have for it. Although Nan loves being outside, she doesn't travel far from the house. When I ask her why, she says, "It's hard to tell what's waiting on you out there."

I have always had itchy feet. The kind that wants to carry you places you haven't ever been. I have constant curiosity when it comes to the woods surrounding our property. I just want to explore what's out there. I get called crazy for it by my entire family, including Nan. I understand the dangers that come with walking into unknown territory but I have this innate desire to go where I'm told I shouldn't and if those aren't famous last words, I don't know what is.

When Nana found out I was hiking by myself in Pipestem State Park, she had a conniption fit. I don't think I have ever been given so many bad, what-if scenarios even to this day. I was preparing myself, physically, before I shipped off to basic training for the Army.

I remember the first time I drove to Pipestem to hike. I had a backpack full of water (for hydration and for weight). I wasn't too concerned with bringing anything else. It was a state park, nothing bad hardly ever happens in those, right? Besides, I had my phone and could call if something happened.

What comes to mind when you are out in the woods? Do you worry about Bigfoot or the Mothman stalking you? How about something a little more mundane and believable? Like a coyote or a mountain lion. What if I told you that there is only a small probability that something is stalking or watching you? Do the hairs on the back of your neck rise? They might, which means you should be alert and cautious when walking among the trees.

I didn't do any research about any of the trails within the park, I drove through and parked in a small lot off the side of the road. There was a horse trail along the hill below the lot on the left-hand side that caught my attention. I figured it'd be well-worn and frequently traveled seeing as the pastures were open for the guided tour business.

I started down the hill and I don't know if it was the adrenaline of being out on my own for the first time or the nervousness of the fact that the park was part of a protected forest. With wildlife.... With bears in particular. Whatever it was, I haven't felt the same feeling since that day. Because that feeling didn't fade the entire time I was out there.

My inner Nan was jumping up and down, telling me to turn around and go home but I did what I always do, I didn't listen. The more I walked, the more I became aware of my surroundings, the more each sound resonated through the forest. The high-pitched whistle of the Cedar Wax-wings alerting the other creatures of my presence to the hum of the gnats flying around my eyes, trying to quench their thirst. Everything around me was alive and I could feel it.

Flora littered the forest floor. There was beauty in everything. From the Ostrich Ferns and Rhododendrons to the Trilliums and Showy Orchids.

I felt on top of the world though I knew I was at the very bottom in comparison. I felt exalted, maybe even a little rebellious that I made this pursuit. Everything around me seemed to be vibrating with as much intensity as my excitement in that moment.

As I turned the corner a deer crossed the trail, she stopped, turned and took a long, questioning look at me as if asking did I mean her any harm. I had stopped to admire her and dipped my head slightly, avoiding eye contact, letting her know I was just a temporary disturbance. She snorted and continued across the trail, disappearing into the thicket of bushes and small trees.

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As I continued walking, I witnessed squirrels scampering along the branches of trees, chipmunks playing among the roots and a rabbit sitting on a stump. The most peculiar was a black crow perching in a pine.

The bird seemed out of place. A black speck surrounded by vibrant greens and yellows. An omen of foreboding tainting the liveliest of venues.

I kept going, ignoring that feeling you get before you know better.

The sun shone through the trees, illuminating the path ahead. Beckoning me to go farther. I obliged. I walked until I came across a break in the trees and saw a small lake. Wild ducks flew and landed, causing the water to ripple and splash, distorting the image of its surroundings. The opening in the treeline along the lake allowed me to see the sun was setting. And my exhilaration with it.

I had not planned to be out in the dark. I had no flashlight except the sad excuse of one on my phone.

I turned and started heading back the way I came. I had no idea how far I traveled, what trail I was on nor had I taken the time beforehand to see if I had phone service. You'd think if I was going to make it a point to not listen and go off on a whim, I'd be smart and do it safely.

As the light faded, so did the liveliness of the forest and all the creatures within it. I was no longer accompanied by the happy trill of birds or the buzzing of insects, I was alone with only the sound of crickets and my feet meeting the ground.

When the crickets stopped cricketing, I started panicking. I was always led to believe that when the forest goes quiet, a predator is near. What happened to the noise?

You don't pay attention to how loud you're breathing until it's the only sound you hear. You don't feel the intense beat of your heart until you're fighting to keep from running.

I was almost back to the beginning. I was on the part of the road with tire tracks signaling I had just a half a mile or so left.

I started to hear things. Not like the happy, lively sounds when I first started walking. These were the sounds of nightmares. Screeches, tree limbs shaking and sticks breaking behind me.

I demanded my feet keep their steady pace, propelling me forward to the end of my journey. Possibly the end of me. I could barely see now and I wasn't about to turn around to look back or stop. If something was truly after me, I didn't want to see it coming.

I could finally see my car sitting at the top of the hill. The now barely visible sun produced an eerie glow across the background.

I was coming up to the final clearing that would put just about fifty yards between me and my car when I felt a breeze wrap around my shoulders as if trying to pull me back. As I kept walking, it got stronger the farther away I got from the trees.

I made it to my car and got inside, looking down the entire time. I only looked up when I pulled out onto the road. It felt forbidden to glance back. To challenge the invisible force that tried to keep me within the trees.

On my drive out, there was another crow sitting on top of a speed limit sign, eyeing me as I passed by. I just knew it was the same one.

As I drove home, I thought about how my little independent trek almost turned into me literally becoming one with nature and so I learned several valuable things that evening: if you're out in the woods and it goes quiet, get out but don't run; if you hear something, no you didn't, if you feel like you're being watched, you are and probably the most important one, don't look back.