

## A Son in His Father's Forest

Norbert Kovacs

USA

*norbertk@att.net*



The father was sixty-five and a widower. He had winter-white hair, a full beard, and a sturdy body when he moved into the old colonial near the woods' edge. While his health lasted, the old man had walked daily in the five acres of woodland that he owned by his home and the forest beyond it. He went as far as a set of great hills and streams that he knew of miles from the house. He talked about the trips when his son came to visit. The son, who was thirty and in good health, had hiked with his father when younger and still did by himself. He had lived near the man in the same Connecticut town his whole life, until his parent had decided to move to the colonial in the far off hamlet. The old man had visited the woods by it only once with a friend who had since died, but it had decided him to stay. "The place has so much for me," the man had explained to his son. "All of this nature." The father had hiked the land by his new home often, even when he became ill. He said getting the fresh air built up his strength. He hiked it up to the day he fell struggling to rise from bed. Though impaired with sclerosis, the father never said a word to his son to suggest he regretted living by the forest on a long, lonely road far from any people in a town.

Soon, the old man could venture only to the end of his five acres before he had to stop, the illness making it too hard for him to go on. He saw no more of the forest now than he did from his living room window. The son, when he heard about the man's debility, suggested that he might move into a nursing home before his sclerosis caused him any serious injury. "Maybe somewhere closer our old town so I could visit you easier?" he said to lead him. The father laughed, shaking, and said no. "I can't leave the woods now. The thought of them is what keeps me going. They give me a sort of vigor I wouldn't choose giving up." The son had not imagined his father's attachment to the land might be like this. He relented on the idea of the convalescent home.

The son made regular visits to the homebound man, whose back twisted worse by the month. During these visits, his parent talked of the places he had seen in the nearby forest the last few years. Once he related the trip where he discovered a basin of land green with ferns. Tall trees had lined the heights above where he stood surveying it. "I was closed off from the world there," he said, his eyes focusing in the distance. "The place was like my own realm. I loved it." He told his son another time about coming to an open spot in the wood with few trees. He encountered several red maples near its borders. "I had to stop and look at them," he explained, excited. "They were just like a fire." Of all the places that he encountered, the father seemed best to like the mountain that lay several miles to the west. He had hiked there often. "The view there took in everything, the woods, the town, all in one. The sky overhead when it was clear held

more than I could see." The father had sketched for his son how to go to the mountain. It had been a long but easy hike west, he said, through the open forest then to a level height; he had followed this until the earth grew uneven and led him to the small mountain with the view. "The idea of that mountain view has kept me on this land," he said leaning importantly toward his son. "Once visiting it I felt I was bound here. I had to walk to it when I could. Now I can't, I feel I should keep as close by the place as I can. One doesn't get to live by places like those just anywhere."

The son, listening, imagined the land the old man had crossed and thought that some day he might hike the same forest and see the same things. However, more immediate events claimed and prevented him then and in the next years. He had to take his kids to weekend baseball games, go on trips into town with his wife, repair broken items of his house. The hike in the forest near his father's always was pushed ahead until he forgot about it.

Then the father, age seventy, died from his long illness. The son came to see to the man's house soon after. When he had gone through the rooms and packed several of their items, he went onto the land that his father owned and walked it. The birches on it were yellow and the maples red with autumn and the son strolled amid them. He recalled his idea for the view hike as he came to the end of his father's property and met the forest. The son pictured his father crossing into the wood on its yellowed, browning mat of leaves. He spotted maples far in the forest and looked long on their hard, wrinkled forms as if he might read their bark. He moved from the woods' edge back toward his father's house for it had grown late, but the idea of the forest remained with him. He had meant to return home after reaching the house but decided now that he would do the hike. He no longer would delay: it was time now he was at the place and soon might be leaving it. He phoned his wife to tell her his plan then settled in for the night.

In the quiet of his father's living room, the man considered that he had only the casual sketch his parent had given of the way through the woods to the mountain, not the exact route. The elder had never marked his trail because his knowledge of the land had been enough to guide him. The son wondered if he could traverse the place as well as his father or even would reach the mountain view just heeding the sketch. He reminded himself, however, that he was a good hiker and had hiked with his father as a boy and an adult. He could pick the route his father must have taken and follow it. He would have something very like the man's experience of the place when he went, he told himself.

#

In the morning, the son ventured into the forest from his father's land going west at a steady pace. The going seemed easy at first. He walked over level ground. However, he came soon to a throng of young maples and birches. He walked past one tree, then another, but found several in his way. Going farther either left or right, he knew he would run into even more. He would have to weave through all of them to advance. He thought his father would not have gone on a path like this, so returned through the woods toward the house. He took a more northerly way from there. He reached open,

flat woods with maples set widely apart. The earth here was matted, pale and brown, and the trees tall, their high dark trunks lifting long branches over him. He could see much farther than he had in many parts of his father's land. The son reflected that his father would have liked to walk through this open spot. The man had felt he owned less crowded spaces. He moved easier and thought himself freer in them. The son walked north then west.

As he crossed the open forest, the son passed yellow birches and red maples. They were tall, thick but not fat with age. Their brown, cragged limbs showed pale in the autumn sunlight. He walked over the flat, browning mat of forest floor that lay free of rock or root and saw the woods stretch before him. In the treetops, he heard warblers sing, quiet, and sing again. He continued on until he reached a tall beech. The beech was larger than the other trees he had passed, its trunk thick with three dark, grey rings each five or six feet apart. Each ring was wider than his hand when he spread it. The son thought his father would have noticed the beech. The man stopped for unusual things in the woods. He would notice other things in the land that he else would not have then, asters, a wren, else too by the way for him to have cared for. The beech felt a good point to turn finally, the son thought and hiked west.

The son walked and found the open forest become less. He passed into dark, heavy shade. Inside it many mountain laurel shrubs bulked with bent, squared branches that cut off any easy view through the woods. Thin, bladelike maples crowded around. The open land had evaporated, and the son wove through many, thin trees to advance. He could find many routes through them, he knew, but none straight as earlier. He realized he would have to pick his way. He felt it a problem until he considered he could walk without a clear path if he had a good idea of where he would wind up. His father had not worried about detours in the woods either. The elder told him once that he had crossed a clearing that was not in his way just to see some wild pogonias. The father claimed that it would not have been worth walking on to miss them though he would have gone on faster. He added he had liked the flowers the more for it as well. The son continued weaving through the trees. He came to a laurel shrub whose trunk was shaped into waves; in more than one spot it strangely had bent square. The laurel's skinny leaves were dark green, close to a spruce's color. He broke off a leaf and slipped it into his breast pocket to remember his walk by later.

The son went on farther. Great gaps emerged in the cover and he was again in open forest. The son walked the flat land straight on, passing maples, then hickories, then more wooded land. The land kept level for a good half mile and he wondered if he might have passed the rise his father had said would lead toward the mountain. He walked looking for hills in the distance. He quickened his step and heard the dry leaves break and crackle under him. Around him the land rose slowly. The earth became exposed and brown and he saw many large rocks that stuck from its top. The rock was a dark blue-black, a mix of granite, basalt, and feldspar. It stood from the earth in bulges as if forced up, its top, hard and jagged. The son walked by some of the rock that jutted ledge-like from the earth, then a squat group of rocks jagged on their tops. The rocks

were well fixed at their bases in the earth. He passed them and followed the slope of land up until he reached level forest.

He walked through a small ravine and reached a second great rise. The rise, wide enough that he could not see its top, had a steep face. He started up it to a dark maple. He touched the long, vertical wrinkles in its trunk, his fingers jumping over the hard knobs and edges. In the fork of the roots, he discovered a white wood aster only an inch tall. The flower looked very small beside his boot. He went next to a brown-bodied oak. Its wrinkled skin had fissures deep enough to fit an acorn inside. Fallen twigs that resembled crooked, old fingers sat on the ground nearby amid pale leaves. Across the trunk, the son saw a deep, white gash nine or ten inches long near the height of his chest. The son thought someone must have made it; the cut was that clean and straight. He wondered if his father had. The elder had been strong enough before he quitted hiking and tall enough to reach that high. His father had carried a pocketknife that he could have used at the ready. The son tried to imagine why the man would have cut the tree. He did not suppose his father had meant to mark a trail: the man had never marked his trail anywhere as he remembered. He considered if the man might have been checking that his knife was sharp. He thought this possible but the cut more than was needed to find out. His father might have made a smaller one lower down as well and more easily. The son could not say finally why his father did it, but he thought the mark a sign the man had passed there.

He continued along the rise. The daylight showed stronger through a break in the woods ahead. The land flattened and narrowed there as it passed among high-grown shrubs. His father had favored such level places. The son remembered when the two of them had hiked a broad, rocky country to an open wood. His father had been too glad to reach the easy land and quit struggling to walk. He had smiled as they went on. The son veered left and passed through the break onto the flatter land. Past the tall bushes came a small lift in the terrain like a low hill; it stood three or four times his height. White daylight showed at the top in a short strip. He climbed the small rise of land, his eye on the light, and reached its top. He saw the terrain below him in an open sweep. In it were a few browning oaks, their lobed leaves yet to fall; beyond these, tall slender pines touched by sun, their shed needles fine, red, and orange on the earth. Patchy shrubs hugged the few spots of bare ground. The little rock was granite, low and flat. The son descended to the bottom of the land. He walked from there to a second small rise of earth that he climbed with easy, eager steps. From the height, a new sweep of forest showed to him. He saw tall, white pines and oaks spread wider than in the section of land he had left. Among the shadows, logs crumbled on the earth, their pulp spilling. At a good distance, pumpkin orange lichens crowded the grey brush. The son thought he could pass through this land without difficulty. His father had told him that if he viewed the whole of a place first, it was easier to walk in person. The son descended the hill and walked through the open tracts he had seen above. He circled a fallen pine and went through a gap in the oaks. He walked and reached a new rise. He climbed it quickly and descended a short way over yellowed needles that softened his steps. He walked toward a new height and took broad strides onto its steep face. He hiked past spruces, their

forms taller and darker, their boughs longer than he had seen elsewhere. He drew long, full breaths of the cool air. The daylight spread white high overhead. He rejoined the great rise he had branched from earlier and went west as his father had gone.

Hiking through a green stretch of the woodland, the son reached a dense thicket of thorn bushes. The twisted bushes, gray after losing their leaves, had grown high and close together. Thorns studded every loop and bend of their growth like teeth. To avoid them, the son circled the thicket and hiked for the heights above it. He passed tall black birches and brown oaks that threw a heavy shade around him. After a short distance, the son came to a new bush thicket. The thicket spread far and was denser than the earlier. He made a new, longer circle around it than the first, again met the woods, and continued his ascent. The rise in the land steepened and he drew harder breaths walking it. He climbed much in a short distance. He arrived then at a third thicket, low, dense, and gray. The son considered he could hike still higher to go around or through it but that neither choice would make for easy hiking. He already had gone a distance to avoid the first groups of bushes. In realizing it, he knew his father could not have gone here on the easy way that he had claimed. He had passed elsewhere. The son reflected on this feeling he had missed something his parent had known of the wood. He had not and, it seemed, would not have the man's experience going onward. However, the son told himself he had seen trees, rocks, birds much as his parent must have. He had hiked the open land and the forest as the old man had done. The son believed the hike good as he had taken it, too; in fact, nothing about the passage itself made him feel it any worse than his parent may have seen. He did not suppose then his father would claim he had missed anything that he, the elder, had not experienced himself. The man had said people go through things differently. There did not have to be any wrong if someone had. The son seized a bent stick from the ground. He raised it and swiped at the bunched bushes before him. The bushes' thorn-clad arms fell to his sides and he stepped through the thicket bending it down with his boots. The thorns nicked his hands and lodged in his plaid shirt and denims as he pushed forward. He emerged in an open space and hiked to a wooded plateau.

The son went a short distance and arrived at a section of woods strewn with fallen and tilted trees. They were many kinds, maple, oak, hickory; they had been very tall when they stood. A birch, choked with lichens, had leaned forward and lodged in an oak right before him. A fat maple with unraveling bark stretched on the ground between the upturned roots of the birch and the oak. The son crouched into the small space beneath the leaning birch. He raised a hand onto a lichen-spotted part of the trunk to be sure not to strike his back or his head, stepped over the maple beneath him, and cleared it. He proceeded into an opening of new bush and grass and came to a huge pine lying flat on the ground. The pine had lost its needles; its limbs, some sixty feet distant, stuck out dark and dead, more than one limb smashed when the evergreen had fallen. The son sat on the waist-high stretch of pine and swiveled his legs onto its other side. He crossed some low grass and reached a fallen hickory amid dead leaves. The once tall standing hickory had burst open with rot and spilled its pulp on the earth. He walked through the gap in the trunk where the rot had crumbled away.

Soon, the son reached a shaded wood where there was a wide stream. The stream had thigh-deep water flowing from the north. The son saw several points on it had rocks that would let someone partly or fully cross. A few yards away, a line of gray wedge-like rocks crossed the stream. These had only small gaps between them but they were too narrow for stepping. The son decided to cross by the rocks in the short cascade beside him. These were the closest and best rocks he saw. The son stepped on the rounded stone nearest him and found it shake. He crouched and balanced on it. When steady, he raised a leg toward the next rock beside him and tried to gain a foothold. The rock was angular and steep with a slit on top like a U. He inserted his foot one way then another in it, before he stepped scrambling atop it. He grasped the rock with both his hands as he brought his other leg forward onto the spot. The stream went churning white through the cascade around him and chilled his bent limbs. The water moved quickly, as if alive, jumping over the rocks ahead. He stepped carefully over these rocks and reached the far bank.

The land past the grassed stream bank was a mud field. The field spread to either side in long, earthen bulges and dips. The son stepped into the thick mud, his boot pressing through to the top of its toe. The mud caked the boot and he walked pulling hard as he went. He came to a patch of field where a tuft of tall grass grew on a clump of holding earth inches above the mud. He stepped hard to get a footing and squashed the clump so that the grass sank and did not right again. He heaved again into the mud and stalked toward a log of white birch. He reached for a bone-like branch on the dead wood to pull himself forward. He leaned too far and knocked his leg hard on it. He quickly grasped the birch wood with both hands to avoid pitching forward. Part of his shin hurt for hitting it but he had no other damage. He maneuvered over the birch wood and slogged through more of the mud. He went west toward lindens that bore still green, heart-shaped leaves beside tall, hedge-like bushes. The brown earth beneath this growth was firm and dry, and he walked onto it. Marginal ferns crowded the land there. He went on, spying the mud field from the bushes on the right. He walked until the ferns thinned and the mud field came before him again. He entered upon it once more. Brown, clouded water seeped up from the ground with his steps. The thin mud beneath the water was slippery and he crossed it, wobbling. In short order, he came to a maple trunk lying on the ground. He grasped one of its branches to pull himself ahead as he had tried with the birch wood earlier. The old, dark trunk was hollow with rot and turned as he tugged. He let go of it. The trunk made a long, low creak and settled onto a side choked with mildew. The son continued. The mud dried and hardened under him and he emerged into open forest.

The son went only a quarter mile on firm land when there came a broad steep hill on his left and he knew it for the start of the mountain that his father had climbed. He had reached it, he realized, by a different way than his father had taken. The thought made the son happy. He started up the hill that rose parallel to him. He hiked into a patch of wood into which the sun sent light shafts. When the breeze touched the maples around him, yellow and orange leaves fell twirling through the air. Soon he had reached hemlocks much darker than in the forest below. Norway spruces with dim tops and

drooping limbs towered near the sky. The very tall firs he passed stood thick with bunched boughs. The pines towered above him; their boughs shot out straight at a great height near the sun. They were majestic evergreens, great with growth, he thought. He passed in the gaps among them and hiked the land farther.

The land leveled. The son walked through tall pines darker and sturdier than he had passed. He knew he must be nearing the view but did not know where it could be. He turned to a wall of dark trees behind which a shaded thicket extended far ahead. He went there with a quickened step and crossed the place. He went head on through gaps in the hemlocks where cobwebs stretched. He walked through these and wiped them from his face. The thicket ended and he found himself at the edge of the mountain wood. A natural path under the needles hooked left and he followed it. He arrived at a small hollow before a low, wide hill. The top of the hill stood black against the wide sky. There, spruces held very still, needled fingers down in the air. The light between the spruces shone before him. He walked across the hollow and climbed the short hill. He knew there would be some view and that it must be his father's. He had nothing to prove it but knew he was right.

The son made the top of the hill and faced below. Beneath him was the side of the mountain and the town past it. Red and yellow maples colored the land. With the distance, their heads had shrunk to tufts, cut in dark, uneven breaks. The pines stood dark and thin beside them. Among their limbs were hollows and gaps that snaked like a maze to bind the scene. The forest thinned near the town and broke among the houses. Past the town were rounded hills that had the haze of distance above them. The son looked from the mountainside to the many trees to the sky and smiled. Yes, he thought, this is all I believed it would be. The trees, the stream, the rock. Father had seen it all in his time living here as I have today. I have known the wood with him today.