

Charles Hayes
Spirit Wash

I started up the Appalachian Trail out of the New River Valley near downtown Pearisburg, Virginia at dawn. Having given up hunting a couple of years before, I didn't remember that it was deer hunting season until I topped out and came across the camp of a couple of bow hunters. Friendly young men, they told me that they had come up the same trail the day before and were amazed that I had made it up so early. In a full sweat amid the chill autumn morning, I knew what they meant. The climb had put me on all fours at times, scaling the switchbacks, even sometimes using tree roots for foot and hand holds. But I carried only a twenty pound pack. Just as surprised that they had done it with all their gear, I figured that they must be more than a little serious about going after deer the old American Native way. After a few courteous exchanges I moved on thinking that it was OK to share this place with them. I knew that regardless of their luck, once I was gone from their sight, my senses would never be called to their presence. That was one of the main reasons that I was there to begin with—to get in some quiet solitary time. No roads. No people. Only a footpath.

Circling the lip of the ridge, I came to three huge rocks rising from a little naked flat spot that created a window to the broader mountain chain coming out of the north. The view was one of the most beautiful that I have ever seen. And the utter quietness filled me. I could imagine how the American Natives must have gloried in those mountains. And how they had followed the rivers in and out of them. How they must have felt when they had to relinquish them and never come back. Like the monumental rocks I stood among, great spirits were no doubt there as well.

Cutting loose the grandeur of the river valley views, the trail plunged for many miles into the high forest of Appalachia, running ridges for miles on end, high above the misty dips between their neighboring humps.

Five miles or so in, I passed a threesome going in the opposite direction and exchanged a little conversation about the weight of packs and such. I couldn't help but delight in their reply, "about ten miles," as if it were gulf links chatter, when I ask the distance to the next forest shelter. I also learned that there was a forest access road near the shelter. Now I was sure that I was where I wanted to be. Other than the weight of my pack they asked nothing. An independent bunch traipsing around these parts it seemed, they only tolerated a brief exchange of info before hoofing on, discovery more important than foreknowledge.

Many miles on, trail heads and people afar, I rendezvoused with the deer. Apparently they were smart enough to be deep during hunting season. I had seen no people since the threesome several miles back. But in this inner sanctum of hardwoods and Mountain Laurel a small group of white tail does, followed by their attending buck, crossed my trail. The does leisurely passed on but a snapped twig underfoot froze the buck mid trail, his ears spiked and large dark eyes fixed on me. Also frozen, I

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observed for perhaps a full minute while he occasionally twitched his tail or stamped his foot, presumably trying to get me to move and break my outline against the forest backdrop. Holding that mid-stride pose until my body strained, I finally brought my feet together and uttered a greeting. Leaping forward, hind legs kicking air, his white tail starched straight up, he disappeared into the hollows below. It was a nice rendezvous, and one that I had hoped to have.

Hiking on through that fall country where the air, leaves, and sunlight were at their aged best, their aroma and color one of a greater earth, I felt the spirit of Thoreau's Walden, a place near where I used to live. A place I had visited ... just to commune with ghosts. It was exciting to carry the ghosts of Northern reaches in and around my native southern haunts.

Occasionally a grey, and more rarely, a fox squirrel, its fat cheeks crammed with an acorn, scampered over the forest floor and gathered food for the cold windswept months to come. When I would get close they would usually sidle up and around an oak, a peripheral eye watching my alien pass. But like so much these days, and those, it passed far too soon. Later that afternoon I began to see signs of more of my kind: pieces of trash, harder packed paths, National Forest amenities and the like. But even that did not prepare me for reaching the access road.

Seeing all the four wheel drive trucks and vehicles parked along the access road, I thought at first that there must be some sort of Forest Ranger reunion going on. But once I cleared the forest cover I saw that many men, their expensive guns at port or handed other ways, were meandering around talking to one another. That's when I again remembered that it was deer season. Scanning the vehicles for a harvested deer, I saw not one. Reflecting that fact, the mood of those gathered there was not good. Most of their faces showed tired frustration and disappointment.

Going down the road to exit the trailhead and complete my hike, I was more or less ignored until I was approached by what appeared to be a lone hunter. Or perhaps he was just a late arrival. About my age, between young and middle, he was holding one of the more expensive rifles. Also wearing a mask of disappointment, he said, "Did you see any deer?"

"Yes," I replied and smiled, showing that I was not put off by the crowd. But more importantly to him, I suspect, it showed that there were in fact some deer around there.

His face brightened.

"Oh Yeah? Where?"

I pointed back to where I had exited the trail and said, "About eight miles that way I saw several doe and a buck..."

Before I could finish the sentence his face fell and his lips turned down in disgust. Doing a quick about face, he stomped off leaving me standing there about to tell him how nice the deer looked. I just smiled to myself

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and proceeded on down the old forest road to another small town and a bus link back to my forty hour job. Thanking all that was greater than me for such places to wash my spirit, I hoped that they would always come to me as easily as I had come to them.