

A Walk in the Woods

By Lydia Hecker
Iowa City High School

*Winner of the 2017 Glory of the Senses: Paul Engle Essay Contest
from the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature*

It's cold and wet. With every step I take, more mud sticks to the bottom of my boots. No matter how hard I try, I can't keep up with the group. They slowly fade from my sight as I'm dragged down by the weight of the earth. Soon, I'm alone. Bugs swarm against me, finding my exposed skin. To the bugs, I'm an all-you-can-eat buffet. Overhead, thunder rumbles and rain soon follows, drenching me and making the mud rise, or maybe making me sink. Lightning burns bright against my eyes.

And I'm awake.

The light forces me to squint to see who turned it on. My mom stands in the doorway, her hand on the light switch. I shove my face under my pillow.

"Lydia, Hon, time to get up. We're going mushroom hunting today."

I don't respond. If I remain quiet, maybe she'll leave on her own. Maybe they'll go without me.

"You know, a walk in the woods is a wondrous thing," she says. "Good for your soul."

"What soul?" I mumble.

My mom sighs and says something to my sister. Cold air steals my warmth as she tugs at my blankets.

I tug back, but it's too late. I am now awake.

"Please Mom," I beg, as my sister laughs. "Can't I stay home?"

"It's not that bad, we only do it once a year. It's a family tradition," she says.

"What if I'm sick?"

"You'll disappoint your grandparents."

There it was - the grandparent card. She played it. There was no way I was getting out of going. Even if I was sick.

My sister tugs again at my blankets.

"I'm up, I'm up," I say, putting on my glasses as I motion for them to leave so I can get dressed.

On the drive to our grandparents' house in Kalona, I plug in my earbuds and tune out the world with my music. Out of the corner of my eye, I see my mom looking at me. I look away, trying to come up with an excuse she'll accept. My mind is stubbornly blank.

No getting out of this. I'll have to go mushroom hunting.

It's not that I don't like my family. I just don't like the outdoors. It's humid and hot, not to mention the bugs. And, of course, it rained last night, so there will be mud. I know that my grandparents really enjoy mushroom hunting, and I really love my grandparents, so I decide to try to fake it. We walk into their house and I greet them with smiles and hugs.

My facade works, they don't suspect a thing. I tell myself that I'll have fun, that it won't be so bad. I can do this.

Once we get into the woods, the mud, the thorny bushes, the gnats, I can't keep lying to myself. It's worse than last year. I'm not an outside kind of girl. Give me my Netflix and books.

The timber knows that I don't belong and tries to get me out. It sends its soldiers at me. The bugs come first, surrounding me like wolves circling their prey. I swat at them, but they don't leave. They buzz in my ears, their bites stinging for a moment before the urge to scratch hits.

My family is long gone. They've headed to the known mushroom spots. Spots deeper than I want to go.

The humidity squeezes my chest and I struggle to get enough air. The sun-dappled greens of the leaves blur together and I try to rub my eyes, but smudge my glasses instead and scowl. Every step I take becomes heavier and heavier. The mud covers my shoes, splattering on my pants and socks. I step over a fallen tree branch. The wet moss, like slime sticking to anything and everything it touches, clings to the bottom of my shoes.

I slip and fall, barely catching myself on my hands. The rough bark scrapes my palms. I am utterly alone and utterly out of place. The timber seems to swallow me whole. I'm an insignificant speck, nothing more than a single leaf falling to the ground.

Everything here seems connected.

Everything except for me.

Plopping down on a tree stump, I think about this realization. *It's all connected.* From the smallest gnat to the giant trees, they all work together to survive. I place my hand on the bark of a tree, seeing it with new eyes. This tree provides shelter for many animals, and they in turn, care for the tree.

I close my eyes, listening with new ears and hear the gears in the machine of the timber. Birds dive into the shelter of the trees to escape the rain, their feathers shining in the dim light. They call to one another in their own language of songs, together they create a melody that nothing can compete with.

Not even my favorite band, Breaking Benjamin.

A goldfinch stares at me from its perch before soaring away, its wings creating their own wind. The wonders of nature are only hidden until you look. And look I do. From the small flowers covering the floor to the birds soaring in the sky, the sudden beauty consumes me.

A gray squirrel runs in front of me, leaving its miniature paw prints in the mud. I close my eyes and decide to just breathe it in: the smell of the woods, the damp earth, opening up to release its secret sweet scent; the sounds of the many creatures that reside here; paws scrambling up trees, birds taking flight, deer chomping on the plants of the forest, rain pitter-pattering on the canopy of leaves above me.

I imagine that I can feel the steady thrum of the timber's heart underfoot. *Buh-bum, buh-bum.* Steady and strong. Beating in all the living things around me. *Buh-bum, buh-bum.*

My own heart matches pace.

Buh-bum, buh-bum.

Everything is connected, but only if allowed. It is a mutual decision, for the timber to accept me and for me to accept it. I think of my family. Are they connected as well? Is that why they always want to go mushroom hunting?

I can hear my family laughing a distance from me. In discovering this sudden beauty, I forgot that we were in the timber to find mushrooms. They've probably found plenty by now. Knowing that my sister would mock me if I didn't find any, I look under the wilted umbrellas of Mayapples, hoping for good luck. Although I'm not a lucky person, per se, this time is different. There, peeking out from underneath a pile of decaying leaves, I find one, tiny, precious, morel, and pluck it carefully from the ground. It almost breaks in my hands, but I handle it lightly.

Placing it in my bag, I meet up with the rest of my family.

“Find any good ones?” my sister asks, coming over to stand next to me.

“Not really,” I reply. She smiles and as a group we move out of the timber. I glance over my shoulder, hearing the timber’s call for me to stay.

At my grandparents’ house, we dump out our findings. My one mushroom joins the many found by the rest of my family. Soon, the aroma from my grandmother frying them in melted butter makes my stomach growl. Luckily, my sister is the only one who hears, sparing me from my grandmother’s forced feedings.

My grandfather found the most mushrooms, as usual. After all, he is the Mushroom Master. Even though I hadn’t found as many as the others, I found something much better - a connection with nature that I never had before.

Travelling home, I plug in my earbuds and think. I think about the timber and about nature. I think about my family. I’m still not an outside kind of girl just yet, but I now hold a piece of it inside me. It lives on in my love of thunder, my amazement and wonder of birds, and even in our family tradition of mushroom hunting.

And, you know... a walk in the woods *is* a wondrous thing.