A Week in the Woods – Part I

Magic Mushrooms

“The sudden appearance of mushrooms after a summer rain is one of the more impressive spectacles of the plant world.” - John Tyler Bonner

The dark clouds roll in yet again, mid-afternoon instantly replaced by dusk. The hermit thrushes even start singing their sweet, flute-like songs as if it were time for evening vespers, fooled by the sudden loss of daylight. In the thick conifer forest of mostly white pines and hemlocks, interspersed with ancient oaks, all massive and hundreds of years old, the canopy is 200 hundred feet above us, and when the rain and thunderstorms move in quickly, it is like someone has flipped the off the light switch. It now seems almost as dark as night when the raindrops start falling heavily, hitting the tarps and tent with loud, unnatural plops, like a crowd of people flicking bugs off a screen door with their fingers. The songs of the thrushes are swallowed up instantly in the din.

Everyone knows about the forest part of Cook's Forest State Park, in Clarion County, nestled along the Clarion River. It's why we have come, to partake in a sharing with the elder trees, to feel their energy, perhaps even absorb some of their ancient wisdom. Old growth forests are a rarity here now, in the East, our appetite for new hardwood floors and a dozen napkins with our paper wrapped fast food and 6-ply toilet paper insatiable, demand only satisfied by the constant cutting of our forests, the evidence a steady stream of trucks laden with trees just like these. These small groves, allowed to reach
maturity only by the protection of their State Park designation, are the last refuge we have of the glory of a forest that once spanned our entire state, indeed the entire eastern part of the country, before the arrival of manifest destiny and industrial logging.

I planned on teaching my boys of the forests' magic, thinking mostly of these trees, as we spent four days camping under the ancient boughs. I would point out how different this forest is from the ones back home, which are never allowed to reach this size, the cull of the dollar too pressing to pass up. We would hike and bike and maybe even canoe through the trees and time on a different, older planet.

Of course, I pictured us romping under sunny skies, enjoying the warm temperatures of summer. And the trip started like that, a spring in everyone's step as we spilled from the car after a two-hour drive, excitement tingling up and down our spines, the perfect father-son's camping trip. But I had no sooner released the bikes and set up camp and the tent and the tarps, when the clouds rolled in, the sky opened up, and the temperatures dropped.

Initially, I was disappointed, visions of our trip turning into misery as we traipse through mud and muck and shiver in the cold. And there was a bit of that, at first; but this place is too magic. And rain is what feeds the magic.

Trevor is the first to point it out, commenting on the "magic tree" in a clearing near our tent. It is a small white pine only 80 feet tall, but lit up by the sunlight created after the fall of an ancient elder cleared an opening in the dense, dark canopy, allowing light to the ground, a rarity here. The young pine does seem like the Anointed One, aglow in the bask of sunshine and white light when the clouds do part, while all the other trees are in shadow. Even at night it is special, as the moonlight lights up the tree, too, now in silver.

Trevor's magic tree gives me pause, causes me to re-think my disappointment in the rain. Soon I am noticing the magic, too, as the forest reveals a side that I didn't expect. The life giving rains are gobbled up by the massive root systems and intricate layers of branches that allow only the heaviest waves of rain to actually reach the ground. Indeed, the trees hold the rain up high, for hours after the rain has ended, releasing it only reluctantly and only when the wind forces the droplets to pool, creating heavier drops that fall to the ground when finally unable to resist gravity. We cannot tell after a while if it is raining or the water is falling from the trees.

So we venture forth between the raindrops, the boys on their bikes, exploring the campground, me exploring the trails around camp. Nobody is here in "our" section of camp, we have it to ourselves, everyone scared away by the forecast; this is a gift. And the other gift that is presented to us, which takes me a while to notice, just like the magic tree, are the mushrooms.

Mushrooms, a much lower life form, a fungus, beneath even the plant kingdom. Mushrooms, the forest janitors, cleaning up the decaying messes of the forest, the rot and death that inevitably comes with life, the job that no one wants to do. But they go about their jobs simply, patiently, beautifully even, sending out their spores when the time is right, those spores just waiting for the right conditions to bloom and grow. The conditions are right now; the sopping wet forest has exploded in fungus' of every color, shape and texture.

I am fascinated, stopping to admire the spectrum of colors and patterns that seemingly weren't there yesterday, though maybe I just didn't see them in my disappointment. There is the huge, globular orange barf that covers an entire rotting log with spectacular color, contrasting markedly with the bright
green water laden moss. The perfect orange-yellow globe of a tiny mushroom amongst the leaf litter, the bigger orange-yellow nipple-shaped mushroom near it, the huge cluster of orange hats the boys find in the campground and excitedly bring me to see. The cascading brown shrooms fringed in creamy white, looking like a slow-moving, exfoliating glacier, wearing down their host log with every rain. The ribbed, fluted undersides of the delicate flesh-colored caps, propped up like an umbrella on a thick toadstool stem, visible only by lying on the ground and peering upwards. The flower-like squawroot, shooting up its translucent white stalk and petals, pollinated by bumblebees. The cacophony of shapes and sizes and colors is dazzling, and mushroom finding becomes my main activity.

The next day the boys join me for a five hour hike, down through the valleys of pine and hemlock and oak, and mushrooms of all shapes and sizes. We talk, about life and god and the universe and mom, about school and football and fantasies, as their imaginations are sparked by the undeniable life force flowing through us here, of which we are palpably a part. We talk about our favorite mushrooms, having a contest to decide the “best” one. Everyone has their own favorite, their own opinion, and we leave it at that, the sense of equilibrium and respect for each other growing as quickly as the mushrooms, as quickly as my boys are, as quickly as they are becoming young men. We need this walk, this trip, these mushrooms, hemmed in by duty and video games and responsibility too often, not always enough time for the simple magic that life brings, if only we take time to notice. I notice now, especially, the magic in my boys, in Jake's big brother nurturing that is always behind the teasing of his younger brother, in his very impressive growing up, and in Trevor's determination to keep up with his older brother, in his heartfelt laugh, and in his bright blue eyes that reflect his mother's love of life and kind heart. The wisdom of life does seep in, to all of us, in these heartfelt conversations we share on this magical hike through an ancient forest.
We return to camp no more than fifteen minutes before the sky opens up again. But we share lunch under the tarps, protected from the rains, and are soon curled up in our camp chairs as I read out loud to them. We are reading a book about a woman who hiked the Pacific Crest Trail, solo, after the
death of her mother, too young, from cancer. We are mesmerized by the words, perhaps even more so by the pounding rain falling only inches from us, a reminder of nature's power and our own fragility. I pause at the profound sections, using a large stick to raise the sagging tarps and drain the water that pools on them, that weighs them down, allowing the words to sink in like the water that flows onto the ground. Always there is a request to read more. We read for three hours, and don't even notice the rain.

And then the rain suddenly stops, and the clouds part. Our camp is drenched in godlight, the beams from the magic tree clearing landing directly on our tent. Trevor bounds into it, splashing in the puddles, arms held high trying to catch the sunbeams through the fog. The scene is lit up like a holy painting.

I light the campfire in this reprieve, in anticipation of evening, our wood and kindling piled under the tarps, mostly dry. Thick, white smoke billows from the fire struggling to maintain life; everything is wet, even the air needed for the fire. The smoke filters off through the trees, drifting through other campsites and up into the canopy in waves, like the fast moving fog that rolls in quickly off the ocean on the West Coasts' ancient redwood forests. It is just as magic here in our rain forest.
The fire roars to life, and we enjoy a wonderful family meal around it, the conversation continuing. Soon the boys are full and antsy, and they disappear down the gravel road on their bikes, shouting with glee and joy, doing “their” 3-mile loop to the fire tower one more time before dark. The music of their voices fades, and I am left alone, with just the sounds of the water droplets plopping, and the vespers of the thrushes, this time at the appropriate evening hour.

I am content, happy even, in the rain. Life isn't always sunny days, I know. Some days you just have to let go of expectations and go with what life gives you, like mushrooms and magic trees and a good book under a tarp in the pouring rain with your boys. Water droplets hang on the delicate hemlock needles, lit up like Christmas tree bulbs in the low evening light and against the dark wet moss-covered oak trunk behind them. Occasionally a bulb drops, as fast and spectacular as the shooting star I saw during a brief clearing two nights ago. Catch it while you can, life moves fast. It is up to us whether we choose to see only the rain, or the unexpected beauty and gifts it brings.

Later that night, around the campfire, eating snacks with the boys, a raccoon brushes against
Jake's leg as it brazenly marches right up to us and steals our entire bag of cheese curls! Jake screams like a girl, before we regain our composure enough to chase down the marauder and rescue our curls. We howl with belly laughs for fifteen minutes, as the drops roll off the trees and splat on the cheese curl bag and the mushroom caps that keep us company in camp.
“Love is an irresistible desire to be irresistibly desired.” — Robert Frost

The pull is irresistible.

First is the sound, the constant low gurgling, the tumbling of water cascading over rocks, a low murmur from a distance, usually discreet, and only a white noise. Kim and I are walking into the woods, up on the Ridge again, this time trekking along Fish Run. Sure we notice the sound, on some level, not conscious, but it is persistent and patient, waiting for us to notice.

I often overlook so much now, as an adult, including the sound of babbling brooks. Too much duty and obligation and adult distractions, like raising two boys on my own, which leads by necessity to the inability to slow down and take time for such “non-productive” activities. At the beginning of our hike, the sound of the stream is drowned out by conversation and the wind rustling through the treetops, by worries over whether we forgot anything, or if the four kids will be okay at home, on their own. It is their first overnight, without us. Parental concerns, to be sure, especially with teenagers, but also a quiet confidence that things will be fine. We have good kids.

But oh how that sound held so much promise when we were children! We called them creeks growing up, “cricks” if you were a native to these parts. As a kid, the sound was irresistible, calling me
and my friends closer, until we were knee deep in the cold water. The cascade is a din when in it, punctuated with the splashes and plops of shoes and rocks in the water, joyful shouts of shock and laughter when someone falls in, or of discovery when finding a crayfish or minnow or water spider, and of unbridled creativity as muddy hands make dams and divert channels to make waterfalls. The sparkle of childhood summers was reflected in the golden rays dancing on the crystal clear waters, and in the inspired, excited eyes of these young creek dwellers.

I remember, too, quiet times spent by a creek as a boy. I would stop and be still, just listening, intently, to the babbling, with my eyes closed, sitting on the bank. I swear occasionally the murmur would be interrupted by musical singing, the creek even calling my name. Often times this seemed so real I would open my eyes and look around; of course no one was there. But in these special times of solitude, I felt the pull of something deeper, a connection, something common that runs through all of us, this creek, these trees, our hearts...

And so it is with love, too, the pull just as irresistible, just as magical, just as mysterious as a creek. The bright, sparkly river of love offers the thrill of adventure and exploration, and the refresheningness and renewal of cold water on a hot summer day. But love also needs quiet time, alone time, without distraction, to really feel the connection, the depth, and unlimited wellspring of its potential, to hear your name being called in the sweet gurgling of real emotion.

It takes us a while to reconnect sometimes, Kim and I. It is not our choice to be apart for long stretches of time, but we are bound by the duties of single parenthood and making a living. Our choice would be to never leave each others’ side, to abandon everything and sit by a creek for the entire summer, maybe forever. That is what our twin souls want, but that is not our choice to make, not yet; too many other souls to worry about, for now.

So we have to dance back together, slowly, after being apart for almost a week, courting all over again, testing to make sure the other still feels the way I do, still a bit afraid of how deeply we really feel, when we really admit it to ourselves. And the preparation for this backpacking trip, only Kim's second ever, the distraction of her new boots and new equipment to fit, the planning of meals and kid care, the prep of making sure everyone is taken care of in our brief absence, they are the activities of our foreplay. As unromantic as it seems, that is the build up of two solo parents working towards opening our hearts fully to each other, once again. But we are not complaining; we recognize the holy gift, and will do whatever is necessary to swim in it again.
Finally at night, we are tucked into our campsite, nestled in a warm hemlock grove on a bench above a gurgling stream, “our” creek. The low, warm fire casts an orange glow on her angel face, smoke fills our nostrils, wine and chocolate on our breath, followed by the taste of her soft, sweet lips. The clouds part like our worries and fears, the sky as clear and starry as the welcome realization that we are still connected at the heart and soul level, not hoping this time, but feeling it, deep inside. We melt into our shared camp chair, into each others' arms, into each other, into a glorious night intertwined, heart and body and soul. And all through the night, keeping constant vigil, seeping slowly into our unconscious, is the call of the creek...

We make love again in the morning, in our tent lit up with the rising sun, followed by camp coffee, and breakfast of cheese and crackers and chocolate. We sit on a rock above the gurgling creek, our backs against a massive hemlock trunk, the same tree that stood guard over our tent last night. Canada warblers flit through the forest at eye level, and the pine scent and smell of fresh coffee lingering through camp tempt us to stay here all day. But the creek sounds are edging into consciousness now, too, finally. It is irresistible, like our love, no matter how long apart – we must explore.

I have been to this spot many times, I have taken my boys here, and we have made a dam across a narrow channel on Fish Run, and we have made waterfalls, too. The dam is breached now, the waterfall just a trickle. That is unacceptable; this needs some work.

Kim and I are in the creek now, our hands muddy up to our elbows, our feet in the water (we need to test Kim's waterproof boots anyway), the plops and splashes of rocks in the water punctuated only by our laughter and joy and shouts of “We need more rocks and muck over here”, and “If we can only dredge this part of the channel a little more, we'll really get that waterfall flowing.” I hear myself saying these things now, but it is the nine year me, answered by the childhood ear-to-ear smile Kim flashes back at me when she discovers a crayfish.
“Maybe we'll find a hellbender!” I excitedly call out, explaining they are the biggest, meanest, most ferocious of our amphibians, a giant salamander up to two feet long that lives deep in the mud, where we are digging. We are biologists now, studying the rare creatures, before morphing into civil engineers and fixing those breeches, even raising the water level a good two inches. Boots squish in the mud, dirt lodges under our scraped nails, manicures for Kim a million miles from this creek. And where oh where in a million universes would I ever find someone to join me in dam building and crayfish catching and splashing in a crick? But she is here...

This creek is so familiar, so magical; is it a time machine? Is this the same creek of my childhood, so long ago but so right now? Was there someone else in the creek at the same time I was, on those quiet, solo banks? Was that Kim I felt, all those years before, when everything felt just right with the universe, she in her own creek on Chestnut Ridge, me in Sugarloaf Run? Were we marching inevitably to this day, to this point, this creek, just like when our paths crossed oh so close so many times in the past, but just never at the right time? Is this what I felt, the perfect future, here now? For this is perfect, right here, right now. There is no individual consciousness right now, my mind's voice has completely disappeared, and the sunshine and the cold creek and the deepest love possible shared between two human beings flows, as open and pure and natural as those perfect days of youth.

Is the flow of the creek, of love, timeless? I wish I could bottle it up and say yes. But the sun arcs across the sky, our old bodies are getting tired, and we have a long walk back, followed by a long drive back to duty, and away from each other again. We don't think about that, still enjoying just merely being in each others' flow, as we always are when together. We blend, seamlessly, when together. We need to be together, all the time. We are working towards that. But for now, Kim carries a rock from this creek back with her, to go into the backyard creek of her own design and labor. It's the reminder we need when apart, of our timeless march and inevitable flow into each other...

“Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.” - Lao Tzu