The Farm; Or, Life in the Country
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The Country

*We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return, prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms.*

—Henry David Thoreau, Walking

Chest pain, debilitating chest pain that seemed to have random onset and varied in duration from a few minutes to entire afternoons, sent me back to where I grew up. A trip to the hospital, a chest x-ray, an EKG, and two doctors’ opinions later, I was told that my heart was fine and that I needed to go see a specialist. This chest pain would put me back into the woods. Years had passed since I had spent time just playing in the woods, and then I found myself taking time out as often as possible to go wandering. I started locally and slowly branched out, exploring new areas whenever I could.

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When I was six-years-old, my grandparents moved from the house we all lived in, to the farm they bought in Eatonville, Washington. After they moved, I spent every other weekend at their farm. This is where my early country education began. Coming from nothing but an urban upbringing and then being exposed to country living in the shadow of Mt. Rainier created a big shift in my perception of the world. Vivid memories of my grandparents picking us up, my little brother Jake and me, for weekend excursions to their farm still come to mind whenever I see a mid-60’s Pontiac Bonneville.

I spent weekends at the farm during school and weeks at a time there during the summers. I remember bringing friends from the city on my visits to my grandparents’ house. We were the kings of everything when we were in the woods. There were no rules, nothing was off limits, there was no one to tell
us where we could or couldn’t go. We would spend countless hours building forts and then spend just as many hours convincing my grandmother to let us spend the night in them. She was always against it in the beginning, but somehow we would always talk her into it. We were not just children with sustenance packed into empty paint cans from our grandmother; we were adventurers pushing the boundaries of civilization by leading our expeditions into the unknown. We were boys, we were kings, but most of all we were men.

Also during the summer we learned, while at the farm and while hiking with our father, that the forest offered a lot of edible food. Some things tasted better than others, but in dire situations all will supply you with nutrients if you are struggling to survive. We learned that salal berries (*Gaultheria shallon Pursh*), sheep sorrel (*Rumex acetosella L.*), stinging nettles (*Urtica dioica L.*), wild strawberries (*Fragaria chiloensis*), chanterelle mushrooms (*Cantharellus Formosus*), and crab apples (*Pyrus diversifolia*) can supplement a tastier diet of wild berries. The wild strawberries are pretty tasty but they are so small that you have to put in quite a bit of work to get even a single mouthful.

As children, Jake and I collected blackberries (*Rubus macropetalus Doug.*), hazelnuts (*Corylus cornuta Marsh*), salmonberries (*Rubus spectabilis Pursh*), red huckleberries (*Vaccinium parvifolium*), and red raspberries (*Rubus idaeus strigosus*). My grandmother made a lot of jam out of the berries and froze whatever was left to cook with throughout the winter. The hazelnuts were left in a bowl on the counter to snack on. When we spent nights in the woods, we supplemented our paint can dinners with whatever berries were nearest to our new fortification.

I shot my first deer leaned up against a tree with my grandpa standing right beside me coaching me through every step. Since that day I have hunted blacktail deer (*Odocoileus hemionus Columbianus*), Roosevelt elk (*Cervus elaphus roosevelti*), black bears (*Ursus americanus*), cougars (*Felis concolor*), coyotes (*Canis latrans*), snowshoe hares (*Lepus americanus*), all three varieties of Washington forest grouse (*Dendragapus obscurus, Bonasa umbellus, Dendragapus canadensis*), Canadian geese (*Branta canadensis*), and assorted ducks (*Anas americana, Bucephala albeola, Anas cynoptera, Anas platyrhynchos, Anas acuta*).

I have also stalked a lone bobcat (*Felis rufus*) on the farm, but I never had a reason to shoot him. I first saw him a few summers ago and have since seen him a couple times each year during the summer and fall. I look forward
to my peaceful, and usually startling, yearly encounters with my bobcat companion. In the last few years I stopped hunting things that I didn’t eat, I had some sort of ethical epiphany in which I decided that as long as the animals weren’t bothering me I wouldn’t bother them unless I was hunting to feed myself or my family. I began hunting more and more with a camera. Everything is fair game and open season when you’re a photographer.

It was in the country that I honed my hunter/gatherer instincts while growing up. Sure, a trip to the supermarket is quick and easy, but there is something primitive and satisfying, to me at least, about killing something and cooking it over a fire. I’m not exactly a perfect model for Thoreauvian principles (I would consider myself more like Edward Abbey, I like meat and beer) but I do understand the idea of getting back to nature, especially in today’s modern high speed world. Quiet walks in quiet places, camping miles away from any manmade road, and supplementing your diet with wild fish, meat, and berries are all things I have learned to love. For a while I lost those ideals and it took too much of the city to bring me back into the country.

The City

*The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.*

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life In The Woods*

Living in the shadow of Seattle with the traffic, the smog, and the overcrowded schools was the only thing I knew as a small child. When I was eight, my family moved one town over to Pacific, Washington. This was a new neighborhood with new friends and it was about the time I was starting to look for ways to get into trouble. Mischief wasn’t hard to find because my father was at work a lot of the time, usually twelve-hour shifts. When we were a little older, my mother took a job working nights. This gave my little brother and me valuable experience in matters of the home. We learned to cook, clean, and do laundry because a lot of the time my parents needed our help to keep the household running smoothly. From everything I remember, we never complained about cooking or doing laundry, but I do remember not ever wanting to do the dishes because we didn’t have a dishwasher. Things went rather well when we lived in Pacific, for a while at least.
Pacific was an interesting place to grow up. We lived on a street that was lined with working class families on either side from beginning to end. A fence in our backyard separated the working class families from the apartments that spawned drug use, welfare abuse, and delinquents of all ages. One of my best friends growing up lived in these apartments. His dad was a single parent who worked as a janitor, and we used to hop the fence all the time to hang out with one another. Those apartments did house some good people, but a lot of them were rented to less than desirable neighbors.

I spent most of the summer after seventh grade avoiding confrontation with this guy who lived in the apartments behind us. He had picked on my brother and me for about six months. One day after school, he walked down the street and sat in front of my house with two of his friends, taunting us to come out. I don’t know exactly what happened, but something inside of me snapped and I went outside. I vaguely remember hearing the neighbor lady yelling at us while leaning over her white picket fence, but I couldn’t make out what she was yelling. Luckily for me, the two friends the guy had brought with him stayed out of the fray while I fought the guy in the middle of the street. The neighbor lady called my parents and my dad came out and pulled me off of the guy. I remember him dragging me in the house and telling me that he was proud of me for standing up for myself. He also said he was proud of me for walking away from the situation for so long. After that fight my parents decided the city wasn’t the best place to raise a family and we moved ten minutes from my grandparents’ farm in Eatonville, Washington.

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Now that I live in what most would consider the country and commute to the city for work and school, I see a version of the quiet desperation that Thoreau wrote about over a hundred and fifty years ago. I see that desperation in the eyes of people sitting in traffic, while waiting in line at the bank to talk to a teller behind bulletproof glass, in friends and family that work as much overtime as possible to support themselves and their families, even in the actions of the two bums (Homo sapiens vulgivagus) that kicked my ass and took my wallet one night while I was drunkenly walking home from the bar.
My Conflicted Existence

Every path but your own is the path of fate.
—Henry David Thoreau, Walden; Or, Life In The Woods

My chest pain took me to several doctors. The heart specialist I went to did another EKG and examined my previous x-rays and told me that my heart was fine, basically, “You’re not dying, have a nice day.” Another visit to a doctor, a small general practitioner in the country, confirmed that my heart was fine but my problem was probably caused from something stress-related. He explained it as being, most likely, excess stress causing my gall bladder to create too much stomach acid, and that was causing the overwhelming chest pain. The cure was a fifteen day regiment of Prilosec OTC (thank you modern medicine) and finding ways to cut out stress. For starters, the doctor prescribed me half-hour daily walks in a peaceful setting to help with the stress. I took a two week regiment of the Prilosec and started cutting stress and my chest pain slowly diminished and eventually disappeared. Since then I have been cutting out as much stress as possible and haven’t taken anymore Prilosec, I have yet to experience anymore chest pain.

For most of my life, walking was done while hunting, fishing, and hiking, all usually with a destination in mind. Now I was walking, wandering, and ambling almost daily as an outlet for the daily stress that I had been piling up.

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They say that April showers bring May flowers, I say every sunny day before July in the Pacific Northwest should be taken full advantage of. It is mid-April and I am taking an afternoon to go to the farm and spend some time by myself. The mercury rose to seventy nine degrees today and there isn’t a cloud in the sky. With a lunch packed from home, a sandwich wrapped in paper and an apple, wearing a pair of shorts for the first time this spring, I take off walking.

I wander first through the pasture and fields and then down beside the first creek. Sitting on the bank I watch water trickle by. Throughout the middle of the slow moving creek and wetlands in front of me are beautiful yellow
flowers, skunk cabbage (*Lysichitum americannum*). This flowering plant is aptly named, the yellow flower smells remarkably like a dead skunk decomposing on the side of the road. Skunk cabbage is best admired from a distance, but today I get close enough to admire the fresh blooms. Continuing on my walk I come to the first pond on the farm. Upon cresting the dike to look at the pond I spook a pair of mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*), a male and a female, and they take flight. Along with the ducks I also spook a couple of bullfrogs (*Rana catesbeiana*) off of the edge of the pond into the water.

Growing next to the pond, in the middle of the pasture, is a single Douglas fir tree (*Pseudotsuga taxifolia*). For as long as I have been wandering here, I have been stacking up whatever animal bones I come across at the base of this fir tree. This all started on a whim and it evolved into a tradition. Now when anyone finds a bone in the nearby woods they place it at the base of this tree on top of the ever-growing pile of sun-bleached bones. My grandpa told my little cousins that the bones were from an ancient Indian burial ground and that they shouldn’t disturb them. They translated that as spending afternoons hunting for bones to add to the pile. One of my little cousins once wandered off with the remnants of a KFC bucket of fried chicken and dumped the bones on the pile when he was seven years old. This scared everyone because he didn’t tell anyone where he was going; he just kind of wandered off. I silently applauded his courage, independence, and rebellion.

Next I make my way into the woods and towards the second pond. I stop to examine deer rubs on red alder (*Alnus rubra*) saplings, ones from last year close by the fresh ones from this spring. Last year's rubs are dark brown and the trees have begun to heal from their near death experience. The fresh rubs are still bright orange from the inner bark and tree not being exposed to the spring elements for long. I stop and make out the individual scrapes and wonder how big the buck was that made these. Deer and elk growing new antlers are quite amazing. The antlers are first covered in velvet, and then the bucks and bulls rub the velvet off to reveal their dark antlers that will slowly bleach over the course of the summer, only to do battle and lose them once again in the fall.

Breaching the open space between the woods and the edge of the second pond, my presence sends the same pair of mallards back into the air. They are quickly followed by a pair of wigeons (*Anas americana*) and I wonder...
how long the wigeons had been sitting on the pond before I disturbed their peaceful afternoon with my intrusion. I stop here, sitting at the edge of the pond with my back to the sun, to enjoy my lunch. I have learned during my time spent in the woods that the longer I sit still and don’t move, the more I begin to notice around me. There are small schools of crappie (*Pomoxis annularis*) swimming around in front of me. We caught a dozen of them from a local lake and stocked the pond with them. They are the only fish in the pond and they are excellent fishing with a light fly rod. I watch an assortment of birds flutter from tree to tree surrounding the pond, and a red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) circles lazily overhead as I enjoy my lunch.

After lunch I continue along the wetlands that supply the two ponds. It is more of a swampy marsh in April than it is a creek because the ground is relatively flat and the water flows over the path of least resistance. Combine the contour of the land with the copious amounts of rain that we get every year and you find yourself watching your every step so as not to sink in the mud. This area is one that is rarely ventured to, except towards the end of summer because it is so difficult to navigate. The only bridges I have to cross here are fallen logs and the only tolls I have to pay are the random scrapes I get from crawling through the brush and brambles to get to where I want to go. There are several paths around this area but this is the shortest path towards my destination, and I love this area because it gets so little attention from anyone else throughout the year.

Making my way out of the marsh, I end up next to the decaying remnants of a disassembled 1942 Chevrolet pickup truck. This truck has been rotting here since my grandparents bought the farm and it was a dismantled shell of a truck then. This truck was the pinnacle of automotive technology roughly sixty-five years ago, and now it sits rusted, rotting, and in pieces. Whenever I come upon this truck I wonder what things humankind will leave to rot during the next century because they become outdated. Today, I wonder where I will be in sixty years, then the pessimist in me comes out and I wonder where I will be in a year or two. My mind wanders as I stop and examine what the Earth is taking back, the raw materials that were once mined from Her depths, and conclude we should all be so lucky to have this kind bond with Mother Nature. To say that I envy the truck would be an understatement. Continuing along, I make my way farther into familiar territory.
Eventually, I come to the small road that runs parallel to the back fence line. The far corner of the farm is an open clearing in which you can see all the way to the opposite corners of the property when you look down the fence lines. I walk down the fence line at the back of the property and stop to examine random tufts of elk hair on the top strand of the barbed wire fence. Pulling a clump of hair from the barb and looking at the game trail, with its abundance of elk tracks that led to the fence, I know this is where the evenings come alive with wildlife.

Continuing along the fence, I start to make my way back towards my grandparents’ house. My pace is unhurried and each step is deliberately placed. I pay close attention to my surroundings as I walk. About halfway back to the house, I notice something white in the neighbors’ pasture not far from the fence. Crawling through the barbed wire to investigate, I come across the mostly bleached carcass of what resembles a large feline. The skeleton is mostly intact and from the length of the remaining cartilage of the tail I presume this was my bobcat. I begin to wonder how he finally met an adversary that he couldn’t outwit or outrun. I tell myself that he lived a good life. I remove the skull from the rest of the skeleton and carry it with me back to the pile of bones and carefully set his majestic bleached remnants on the top of the pile. If at any point in time I would have declared the pile of bones to be complete it would have been today, yet I know the tradition will continue and the pile will grow. I stoop down at the end of the pond and grab a handful of muddy sand from the shore and wash my hands with it in the pond water.

My pale skin is burning at this point; I haven’t spent more than a few minutes at a time in the sun yet this year. I don’t rush to get back to the house, but I know that the longer I stay out at this point, the more I’m going to feel the effects of today’s afternoon ambling for the rest of the week. I walk the rest of the way back to the house, basking in the burning sunshine, smiling with every step.

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For the last eighteen years of my life, I have been struggling to cope with a dual identity. I have been living two very different lives for most of my existence, one in the city and one in the country. I have lived, worked, and at-
tended school in the city. On the other hand, I have been hunting and fishing all my life; skinned deer and elk in the woods with grandfather, hiked for days with nothing but a backpack on adventures with my father, and spent many afternoons fishing in high mountain lakes and streams with my brother. I started learning to survive the city as soon as I was able to walk. Learning to survive the country took time, practice, and the loving patience of others.

When I am in the city all I can ever think about is being back in the country. Sitting in traffic makes me think about all of the negative things I have mentally associated with people in cities. I have grown to avoid crowded public places, traffic, and cities as often as possible. If I never had to drive through another downtown maze of skyscrapers and pedestrians again I would be happy. When I walk in the woods, especially at the farm, I am reminded of some of the best times of my life. I remember spending almost every day with family members, especially my little brother, whom I wish I got to spend more time with now, on adventures that I will never forget. I can only hope that one day, if I have children, I can instill similar appreciations of their surroundings in them and give them the chance to have experiences and adventures that will rival my own.