Amidst the Pines at Midnight

Daniel Tice

“What would men be without women?
Scarce, sir . . . mighty scarce.”—Mark Twain

Panic. I need out. Too drunk to stay in one spot. The Woods, you say? You want to go to my woods? It is a ridiculous idea, especially at midnight. Oh wait, it was midnight three hours ago. Time flies after a fifth of Jack Daniels. Let’s go, I guess - did you bring the other bottle of whisky?

My friend Anthony, tall, a bit flabby around the middle, but remarkably confident, came over with the intention of getting hammered with me. He said he is off girlfriend-duty for the night and we can do whatever we want. No women to pester us. Alcohol is the unanimous, most logically sound choice and my parent’s liquor cabinet is inviting. I wonder if they’ll notice two missing bottles of Jack Daniel’s.

I awkwardly fling myself out of my chair. My parent’s self-proclaimed “tree-house” (it is surrounded by trees), is dimly lit; they are asleep. Anthony, in his Abercrombie and Fitch wardrobe, is already outside and has lit up a cigarette. The coals burn brightly in the pitch-dark of mid-August. We are two high school kids, and we are drunk. We want to get drunker, but we must not wake my parents with the uncontrollably loud speech which now seems to leave our tongues without warning. Thus, we decide to embark on a journey to the woods.

The woods that encircle and nestle my northwest home are marked by an impressive array of deciduous growth, coniferous growth, and thorned vegetation. We scuffle through what we believe is a jungle in front of us, but our brains are operating upon the lowest frequency of function at this point. Thick maples, a fifth of whisky, and the dark night inhibit our sight. Nothing makes sense. Why did we come out here?

Anthony shuffles ahead, stops suddenly, and shrieks. I turn swiftly, dramatically, and stare at him earnestly. What is it, man? Did the bear get you? No, it was only a thorn from the invasive species of blackberry bushes. They are not native to this area, but then again, neither are we. And we do not belong in the woods at three in the morning, either. We did not bring flashlights.
We did not prepare for such a journey. We just went. No mothering female presence to stop us.

I suddenly hear myself yell for the whisky. I want more apparently, but why? Is Jack Daniels possessing my mind and soul? I certainly don’t need more. After a quick swig of hard alcohol, which now tastes like water, I reach into my pocket and pull out a Kodak disposable camera. How the hell did that get in my pocket? Who does this belong to? Anthony shrugs. I reach out my arm and take a picture of the two of us. The flash pierces our eyes—a brief preview of what’s to come? Who ever this camera belongs to, now has a ridiculous picture of two drunken teenagers in it.

We shuffle deeper into the woods and our bottle of Jack Daniels becomes increasingly lighter. The vegetation that surrounds us bends and cracks with each step. The leaves stretch and move as we swiftly step deeper and deeper into the heart of the shadowy woods. The moon is shining bright and we are lit up. But, where are we? A feeling of anxiety sweeps over us. We want to return home, but we have no clue where we are. Anthony claims he can get us back. And despite my sense of skepticism, I trust him. Although, I cannot muster my reasoning behind this decision because Anthony has gotten me lost on more than one occasion—most notably—three years earlier in Florence, Italy. At that time, confidently claiming he knew exactly where we were, he had taken the two of us on an unannounced circuit of the wide cityscape in a foreign environment—leaving our high school tour group behind in confusion of our whereabouts.

“All we have to do is retrace our steps,” he would say. Famous last words.

Now Anthony is leading us into even greater danger. Fatigue begins to fold in upon us. Our legs become heavier as our march continues. If we cannot find our way home, we may have to pass-out in the middle of the woods. Anthony claims he now regrets leaving his girlfriend behind only to wind up inebriated and lost with me. I claim he is being a woman, but then again, what do I know about women? I haven’t held a relationship for more than two weeks during my high school career.

Just then, we hear something. A hazy vision of a figure emerges. Are we imagining this? Have we become intoxicated to the point of hallucination? No! We can’t be imagining the same thing! The shadowy figure comes closer
and closer, silent footsteps that barely impact the thick vegetation on which it walks. We pause for what seems like an eternity. I turn and whisper, “Do you see something?” Anthony nods in the affirmative that he sees it too. Is it Bigfoot? What humanlike figure prowls in the middle of the woods at three in the morning? Well, us, but that is beside the point.

The figure emerges from the brush, and Anthony and I cling to one another, nails digging into each other’s arms in fear. We take a quick glance. It is a guy around our age, and he is carrying a hatchet! The weapon gleams in the moonlight and so do his braces. Dear God! We emit a shriek in unison, and then we run for it. Whoever this night-prowler is, he is wielding a weapon. We can take no chances.

Our drunken minds suddenly kick into primal, instinctual locomotion. We run like orangutans with little reverence for the thorns that scrape our sides with each step. I look behind to see if the guy is behind us, but my eyes deceive me in the creeping darkness of early dawn. Suddenly, incomprehensibly, our surroundings seem familiar. Good lord! Have we run straight back onto the gravelly paved path home? Indeed! We had become so frightened and panic-stricken by the shadowy figure in the woods that we unintentionally emerged from our directional confusion like human compasses.

No, we are not human compasses. We are more like barbarous savages. Without women, to mold us, to cling to us, to guide us, we become animalistic, primitive to the point of periodic episodes of inebriated insanity. The guy and his hatchet, and Anthony and I with our whisky—we were all beasts lost in the wilderness, receding to a primal existence seemingly without end. But, tonight, Anthony and I had learned a sobering lesson. Never again would we leave the world of civilization, the world of women behind in such a way. The next time we decide to subject ourselves to intoxication, without any women to inhibit our madness, we will prepare for the worst—flashlights, baseball bats, kneepads. Whatever it will take to survive in a world where men decide fates. Sans women. Sans logic. And men are supposed to be the logical ones, but we were hardly men this night. Only women can make us men.