

Woods Rush
by Rachel St. Ours

Everyday I walked my woods. I went down the path that took me all the way to the corner of the big field to the creak where I'd watch the soft water making its way. The creak went on curving and dipping to the giant gray pipe and passed under the train tracks. My woods were neat. Each tree big and every other tree just starting out. I couldn't tell which bones belonged to foxes or to racoons, but I could tell which were snakes because they were always found hidden under overturned rocks. In the winter I walked anywhere I pleased, unafraid. The ground leaves were matted down by old rain, the trees unbroken and straight up. In the summer I kept to the deer paths. The grass was itchy with tick homes, living things. I kept my walks to under an hour. Too long was tempting something strange, a lurking feeling, an old house, ground ill tread. I wasn't afraid but I paid attention. Beneath my cover was a blinding slit of hate. I pierced the palms with my own fingers as I walked. I wasn't sure what I was really doing, what I was really thinking.

I had a dog called Masher who would come with me. She had yellow teeth. I was supposed to say *leave it!* when she killed anything. But I let her keep the rabbit or squirrel; she could rarely make a kill, was too gawky, and when she did I felt she earned it. I'd take her to the big yellow field up through the woods and she'd bound ahead, the only dark thing in my eye. Unless I looked up at the black birds always sitting. Beyond this field was another field separated by a small creek and pocketed trees. Me and Masher didn't go there because in the middle of it was a chimney alone, bad luck.

My house was a small white box just enough room for me, my parents and Masher. My parents were older and had me by a miracle, they said. My father had an accident and got to retire early. My mother worked at the elementary school at the desk. To get to my house we had to drive halfway up then halfway down a big green hill. And then our house was out at the end of a long dirt driveway with cow fields running up one side and thick woods running down the other. I wanted a horse, we had enough land, but no fencing, and the little shed we kept wood in was almost rotted through. Instead I had Masher. I had my own room in the pitch of the house,

with a twin bed, a triangle ceiling, a window, and a collection of stuffed animals I felt too old for but couldn't part with.

I knew when I was older I could learn to drive, and my father said I could get a car and then I'd be able to go to friend's houses and to town and I could get a boyfriend. I thought about boys when watching movies. I'd cup my own hand to my face and imagine what it felt like to be touched so gently. I was small in my body, skinny, and for some reason angry. Angry at my quiet parents watching TV at night. I kept to my room writing angry things in my journal or I'd take long hot showers until my mother knocked and told me to stop wasting water. I could take walks whenever I wanted, but my father made me wear an ugly orange vest so hunters knew I wasn't something to be shot.

There was one house like ours built at the same time, we used to have a neighbor. The house was far enough away we didn't talk much, but could see their cars coming and going. They had a girl too, she was sixteen and had long hair. She'd lay on a blanket in the yard for hours. I'd watch her from my bedroom window. She'd start on her back then roll on her side, then her back and over again. I wondered what she thought about out in the grass for so long. She'd sit out when it was chilly and still wet in April only in a sweatshirt looking at the woods. Once I was coming back from my walk and she was sitting there, far enough away I couldn't tell if she was looking at me and Masher or the big trees around us. Still I managed a flutter wave. She put her hand up as a shield against the not-there sun, she may have waved as well, I don't remember, then she laid back down. Before she left, we were the only girls for miles.

I wasn't always alone, though looking back it felt like it. Walking in the woods, especially after it rains, and the air folds off the ground leaves, it's easy to imagine there is nothing else but you and the damp earth. In April, it was still overcast and wet, the trees were budding, the grasses peeking out. Sometimes one rain was the change between seasons and I'd find in the morning the green things were all bigger than the morning before. It was a Saturday and I was out with Masher, resolved to stay out longer than normal. My mother had shrunk one of my favorite shirts in the wash and it got me, to quote my mother, *all worked up*. My parent's tolerated my moods so easily and this would make me feel worse--all my flusters of rage were treated as mindlessly as changing the channel. *Watch out, she's in a mood again* my dad joked--it was infuriating.

As I tramped through the woods I dreamed of highschool only one crummy year away. Masher darted ahead of me. Sniffing here, pissing there, pausing, looking back at me, darting ahead again. We were making our way to the big field, as always, winding the path we both knew by heart. I was all in my head, barely in the woods at all.

We were rounding the last bend to go up the hill to the yellow field when from the corner of my eye, a dark thing moved between the trees. Masher halted, looked up, her nose pointed, her fur bristling. My heart beat a frenzy. No one else ever walked here. A ghost then, or worse. I stopped stupid. Ducked down. Fear gripped me, my stomach turned, my stomach in my mouth. The shape moving between the trees after I realized was a man and he appeared to be alive, about a hundred feet away. He hadn't seen me yet. He was dressed in all black with hiking boots and a big pack. I looked over my shoulder, the gray woods behind me just as it was. He hadn't seen us yet and I thought we could slip away unnoticed. Then, Masher started barking, getting excited. He jumped and looked over at us. That was all Masher needed to really kick into guard dog mode; she growled and burst off toward him barking. It was an all out scramble and he took off running with Masher at his tail. All in a flurry he dropped everything and practically launched himself up the nearest tree. Masher was going ballistic at the base of it.

I stood up tentatively. "Masher, Masher, come here!", she stopped and looked at me then kept growling and barking.

"Hey! Hey!" the stranger called, "Come get your dog! It's gonna kill me!"

I was already walking towards them, carefully. I was afraid but somehow excited. There was a stranger in the tree in the woods. All the time walking alone now this person had materialized. The air was fuzzy. I took Masher by her collar and pulled her away from the tree. "Come here, get away, Masher, come on, stop it, Masher stop, shut up."

Masher was still on her haunches, her ears perked, snarling low at him. The stranger looked down at me. He was perched in the tree between the tight branches. He wore a black slicker, dark pants, wet looking boots. His face was carved and his eyes were bright. He was cute, I couldn't help thinking despite his strange occurrence in my woods. I realized he wasn't that much older than me. Teenage was the right word for him. Who was he and where did he come from? It was all farmland and thick woods, the road was miles away the other direction. I backed away some more, I knew enough to be afraid of lone men. I was glad for Masher. She

leaned against my hold on her collar. "Sorry about her," I said, "There's usually no one else out here."

"It's alright," he said, looking down at me.

I waited for him to jump down and retrieve his pack and set on his way again. But he kept his perch. I thought to turn away but couldn't help my curiosity. "Who are you?" I finally said.

"I'm looking for Mandy," was his answer, "do you have a leash for your dog?"

Mandy, Mandy, then I remembered my long haired neighbor, Mandy who sat in the yard.

"I'm Jake," he went on, "I'm Mandy's boyfriend. I'm lost, I was supposed to meet her out here. We were supposed to meet at that big meadow this morning. Under the chimney."

Boyfriend. All I knew about Mandy was her yard sitting, her silence. Boyfriend and it all made sense. Mandy must have been in love. "Mandy's my neighbor," I said.

"Oh really, you know where she lives?"

"Yeah, that way." I pointed back the direction I came from.

"I'm lucky finding you then," he laughed, "can you take me to her house?"

I peered back into the woods, we weren't so far in. "Ok," I shrugged, "it's not so far." Masher growled beside me.

"What about your dog?" Scrunched up in the tree he looked so silly.

"She'll be good, I think." I wrapped my hand tighter around her collar. He didn't look convinced but made his way down the tree. Masher's hair was on edge. "Shhhhh," I said, "be good Masher."

When he was all the way out the tree and standing before me, Jake was much taller than I realized. I looked up at his gnarled, stubbled chin. And up close he smelled; not just of the wet woods but of laundry not all the way dry. He slung his bag over his shoulder then half smiled and looked down at me. His eyes were pill blue. "Thanks for your help," he said at last with a half laugh to match his half smile, "What's your name?"

"Laura," I said.

"Thanks Laura. You don't know how spinned around I've been. You've got some real woods back here."

"It's easy to get lost," I said even though I had never been. We started walking, him falling in stride behind me. I let go of Masher's collar and she sniffed his leg and gave him another low growl. He shrunk back. "Ignore her," I said.

We walked in silence for a moment. I could feel his tall form behind me. It was like the whole place was holding its breath. The squirrels and chipmunks that normally darted the brush were absent, the wind was gone, there was only the sound of our shoes, my sneakers against his muddy boots.

"I slept outside last night," he offered proudly. "Down that way by a big field. Under a tarp."

"There's coyotes you know," I said, "And bears." I couldn't imagine the woods at night. I only saw it from my bedroom window safe in my bed. My woods liked me I knew, but at night I left it alone to its own confessions.

"It wasn't so bad," he said, "Mandy and I have been planning this for a while. We are going to live with my cousin."

"Oh, you guys are running away?"

"I mean yeah, I guess. We just decided we want to be together from now on."

"Wow," was all I could say. I kept my eye trained on Masher.

We were quiet for a while longer. We walked up the last hill where the woods leveled out Mandy and I's yards. We trudged up and over, and then the clearing opened up as it always did to the long grass we didn't cut. "Almost there," I said. Masher went ahead of me, tail up.

It was only when we came to the edge of the yard, mine and Mandy's house in sight, the thought passed my mind that maybe Mandy did not want to be found by this boy. That she hadn't met him for a reason, and that I shouldn't take him any farther. But, just as quickly the thought came I dismissed it. He was her boyfriend after all. To be rescued from my lame life on the hill was my best fantasy. Mandy must have agreed. He had come all this way just for her.

I looked up at Jake who seemed apprehensive. "Well here it is," I said.

"Thanks," he said, scanning her yard, the drab vegetable garden soaked in rain, the sopping clothesline hanging between the trees. "Are her parent's home?" he asked offhandedly.

"That's their car," I pointed to it sitting in the driveway. I didn't know what to do then. He paced the wood. I had figured he would walk up to the front door and knock like in the movies of boys picking up girls for prom. But he just looked on as if trying to call her to him just by his

presence. Masher looked back at me and barked once. My parents were home too and I didn't want them to ask me about the strange guy in the woods. There was something thick in the air besides that. His eyes beat across the yard. My arms prickled. "Well, see ya," I said lamely. He must not have heard me because he didn't say anything back, and so I crossed back over my yard, Masher at my foot, to my own little house.

As soon as I stepped in the door I wished I had stayed to see how the drama would play out. Would Mandy cross the yard and embrace him and the two would vanish back into the woods forever? I peeled off my muddy boots, refused the lunch my mother had set out for me, and raced upstairs. Perched in front of my window I waited to see what would happen. Nothing for a while. I could make out the figure of Jake still behind the shadow of the trees. Then finally, he crossed into the yard making his way around the house. He didn't get to the door because then Mandy rushed out. She didn't look like she was ready to leave. She was wearing plaid pajama pants and unlaced boots. Her hair was long down her back as always. She gestured to the house angrily then back at Jake. Jake wasn't so happy about this cause he started making faces too. Then Mandy's dad stepped out on the porch and they both shut up. He said some stern words by the looks of it. And then Mandy took Jake's hand, led him up to her father. There was a lame handshake, and then all three of them went into the house.

That was all I saw of them. The rest of the day I sulked in my room. Tried at my math homework and abandoned it to watch TV. I ate the sandwich my mother had made but the bread had gotten soggy. It felt odd that my normal life could resume after something so strange and exciting had happened. I knew Mandy and Jake's secret. I kept my eye trained out the window so I could see them leave together. But as the afternoon spun into evening, still nothing happened.

When night came fully and they hadn't left yet I figured that was the end of it. My mother called me down to dinner. My parents talked to each other as they ate. I sat quietly, my mind all on Jake and Mandy and what they could be doing right now. My mother must have interpreted this as sulking. She touched my hand, "I'm sorry about your shirt, honey. We can go out to the mall this week and get another. You need some new clothes anyway." I shrugged.

After dinner, I helped my dad clean up the kitchen. It was my chore to take the trash out on Sundays for Monday morning pick up. I complained as always and let the screen door slam when I took it out. Masher dashed out with me to sweep the yard for foxes and coyotes. The air

was humid and chilled. The shades were drawn in Mandy's house. I took the trash to the bin and dropped it in.

"Pssst, hey Laura," a voice called. Mandy stood beside her own trash can. She motioned for me to come over. I crossed to her side of the gravel drive.

"Mandy," I said. I had never talked to Mandy alone. Only when our mothers exchanged words did we really interact. "What?"

"Shhhh" she said looking over her shoulder at the house. "My Dad is being such an asshole about Jake. We're gonna run away tonight."

"Wow" was all I could stammer.

"Listen though, we need your help. Jake said you know your way through the woods."

"Yeah," I said, "I mean I guess."

"Ok so you know that big field. Can you take us there tonight? We're gonna sneak out but I'm afraid I'll get lost in the woods."

Masher bounded across the yard excited by the night. "Awww, Masher" said Mandy, patting her head.

"You want me to take you there now?" I asked. I had never been in the woods at night. Even now across the yard the big dark trees bent in strange shapes.

"Not now, later. Once my parents go to sleep."

"When will that be?"

"I don't know in a couple hours. Like eleven probably, or midnight."

"I've never gone in the dark."

"Well it's just the same as in the day. You know the way."

I shifted. Masher leaned against me for a pat. "I don't know."

"Please Laura." Then Mandy took my hand. "You probably don't know it yet, but being in love is worth everything. And Jake and I are in love. My parents are terrible, they don't want us to be together. Jake's cousin lives in Fishkill. We just have to get to the quarry and he's gonna pick us up there. When you are in love, Laura, you'll understand and love will come to you because you helped us."

I looked at Mandy. Her eyes bore into mine. Her hair fluttered in the breeze. She squeezed my hand. "Alright," I said.

"Thank you Laura." She stepped forward and hugged me. She smelled like white soap.

"But we need a signal," I said, "So I know when to meet you."

"Uh huh" she nodded, "Good thinking Laura. What should it be?"

"Do you have a flashlight?"

She nodded.

"Well how about once you guys sneak out you can signal me with the flashlight. Stand by the bird feeder," I pointed to the region between our houses, "and flash the light three times."

"Great Laura!" She hugged me again. "I have to go now. But I'll see you soon. Jake will be so happy." Mandy turned and ran back to her house. Masher watched her go wagging her tail.

"Come on, girl," I said, turning back to my own house. My heart beat fast. I was going to help them. I was a part of their plan. It was an actual adventure. A real escape. Masher trotted ahead of me back to the house. In just a few hours it would all happen. I couldn't help but smile.

When I came back into the house my father said, "Was someone out there?"

"Just Mandy."

"That's nice, are you girls friends?"

"Yes," I said. I went up to my room and lay on my bed. Though it was barely nine o'clock I watched the patch of tall grass by the bird feeder for the tragic couple. Soon I would be in love like that too. I smiled over and over.

I decided I would need some supplies. I took my dad's flashlight from the drawer in the mud room. I filled a bottle of water. I took a couple band aids too, just in case, and put everything in a knapsack and hid it in the corner of my room. Then I resumed my post looking out the window and waiting. I heard my parents below watching TV. As the night got longer I heard them getting up and locking the doors, tucking the house in for the night. I heard them climb the stairs. "Goodnight, Laura," my mom called. "Don't stay up too late."

"Night!" I called back. I heard the door to my parents bedroom close. It was only a matter of time. And yet it got later and later and my eyes drooped. It was eleven forty seven. I closed my eyes for a moment and when I opened them again it was twelve fifteen. I sat up panicked, afraid I missed the signal. I paced my room. Maybe, I thought, I should go out and wait for them. Just as I was grabbing my knapsack and coat, outside across the yard the flashlight beamed three times.

My heart really started racing then. I still had to remember to be quiet. I put on my thick socks, turned off the light in my room, and closed the door behind me. I went quickly down the

stairs. The whole house was dark. I slipped through the kitchen into the mudroom, grabbed my sneakers and sat on the step to put them on.

Masher whined behind me. I jumped. She stood lamely wagging her tail.

"No Masher, quiet."

She looked at me oddly through her big black eyes.

"You can't come," I said. She blinked. But like she knew what would happen next, she lay down next to me.

"Good girl, Masher," I pet her head. "I'll be back soon."

I put on my big sweatshirt, and with a pang of guilt, the orange hunting vest my dad made me wear. Then I slipped out the door and tucked it closed behind me.

The air at night was sweet. The yard blinked back at me so empty with dark and breathing. I made my way across the yard and my eyes slowly focused on Jake and Mandy huddled together at the edge of the woods. Mandy had a duffle slung over her shoulder and she carried a lantern. She was wearing a bright pink carhartt hunting suit and her hair flushed her face. Jake was in his same disheveled clothes as before.

"Hey," I called.

"Shhhh" Mandy hushed, she peered over her shoulder at her dark house. "Let's get going now!" She was agitated, she dropped Jake's hand. "I think they may have heard us leaving, come on Laura, it took you long enough to come at the signal."

"Sorry," I said and a pang of doubt hit my chest. I struggled in my knapsack and took out the flashlight.

Jake was calm, he half smiled at me again, "Lead the way," he said, and nodded at the dark path of the woods.

"Alright," I said. In the circle of light the flashlight gave, the sodden path wavered in front of me. The night was quiet. It was barely spring and the chilled air made my skin stand up. The couple shuffled behind me holding hands again. I didn't think about where I was going, just followed the way I knew by heart.

"Is this the right way?" Mandy called.

"She knows," said Jake, "what are you scared?"

"Shut up Jake" she hissed back. "My dad will kill you if he catches us."

"I don't think you have to worry about your dad getting us. It's the bears that are gonna get you."

"Stop it, Jake!" Mandy said, trying to veil her distress with anger.

"This is the path" I said quietly, more to myself than to them. As I paced slowly down the dipping hill my stomach dipped with it. The trees seemed adults who knew better glaring down at me, *why are you out of bed? Who are these two?*

We paced slowly, my flashlight searched the ground for every root. I realized regretfully that I should have brought Masher. She wouldn't be afraid. She'd be awake and alert sniffing everything, running ahead.

Mandy screeched then and tumbled to the ground behind me with a thud. She must have caught her foot on a root. "Ow, fuck!"

"Jesus, you're fine I got you," Jake said, helping her back to her feet.

They embraced and I wondered if I should have looked away but didn't. Jake held Mandy up. She leaned against him, her cheek in his chest. His arm steadied her around her waist. "You don't have to be such an asshole about everything, that really hurt" Mandy grumbled. Her shoulders shook lightly and wondered if she was crying. He whispered something into her hair. The wind ran through the treetops, brushed my neck and scattered the ground leaves around us.

It roused them from the moment between them. Mandy looked up and glared at me. My cheeks reddened and I turned in embarrassment.

"Well, let's get going Laura," Mandy said, stepping away from Jake, "I want to get out of here!"

"It's not much farther," I offered lamely.

We all trudged on faster as though we had all decided the fear of the woods was better if we got through it rather than stretched it out step by step. I imagined Masher excited in this dark. She would listen for the pace of a coyote or the screech of a fox. The deer path rounded off and up the hill to the meadow and I wondered if we would see the deer warmly sleeping—I even wished for that peaceful sight, but we saw no animals, only heard them—the owls and larks in their hidden dwellings called back and forth.

Mandy and Jake were talking hushed behind me—she was cursing the scary woods and their shamle plan. He was attempting to reassure her but there was sharpness to his voice carved by his own fear. They were really running away. I balanced the thought in front of me. Would

they really go off and live happily together forever? Would I ever see Mandy again? I would be the only girl on the hill now. She was gonna sleep outside tonight with him. I couldn't place my envy from before. The ground was soaked through.

We reached the top of the hill and the ground leveled, and free from the cover of the trees the gray sky was bright. We all breathed a sigh of relief at being released from the hold of the woods. The field whispered as the air ran through it.

"Well," I said, "here we are." The field beckoned in the night, enticing me further. There was a strange yet wonderful feeling about the place. It wasn't just the chilly spring that gave me goosebumps; it was heartbeating sense that I couldn't put my finger on, couldn't name. The talking tall grass murmured like the ocean reaching the beach.

"We need to get to the train tracks," Jake said.

But I knew I wouldn't go any farther. Beyond this field was the next separated by the creak and then it was down a stiff bramble to the tracks. "I have to go back," I said. "My parents...." I trailed off.

"Come on Laura, it's not so far." Mandy pleaded.

"It's an easy way from here," I said, "Just keep along the field and cross the brook. Then there's the chimney, you know about it Mandy, just keep going through that field and then the tracks are at the bottom of that steep hill."

Mandy didn't look convinced, "Laura—" She looked up at Jake. What was she thinking then? That it wasn't too late to turn back? That she could cross the woods again with me and we could both go back to the houses of our parents. That we could leave Jake here where he came from in the deep night.

Jake cut in, "It's okay Mandy, I slept around here last night. We can camp in that next field. In the morning we'll follow the tracks to the quarry and Mark will pick us up."

Mandy looked at me. Was it pity for her that I found in my heart? The creeping jealousy I had before had all but slipped away. I said nothing.

Mandy's face searched the field. Our eyes caught each other for a moment. Then, she looked at Jake. "Ok, let's go," she said. She turned to me again, "Thanks for everything Laura."

"You're welcome" I said, and without thinking I stepped forward and hugged her. "I'll miss you," I blurted.

"Aww Laura," she touched my hair, "I'll be back to visit once stuff with my parents blows over."

I stepped back and nodded. Jake took Mandy's hand. "See you, Laura," he said. They turned and walked away. The lantern bobbed between them. I watched as they disappeared into the other dark things.

I turned and faced the wide open field again. The grass held its breath against me. Above were the wide stars. No big birds, they were all tucked away in their hidden places. It was me alone again.

The field led me back to the full mouthed woods. The woods stood thick and heavy between me and my home. I wasn't supposed to be out. I was supposed to be in my bed dreaming. I stood looking into the dark face the trees made frozen and more afraid than I had ever been. My flashlight was meager and shaky in my hand. I took a deep breath and started on my way.

Down the dark path I traveled, my heart jumping inside me. I knew enough to keep my eye on the light guiding me, to not look back. I thought of Mandy. I wished I told her not to go but she was on her own path now and I didn't know her anyway.

I don't know when I started running. If I kicked off because I felt some dark thing lurking behind me, or heard the howl of a creature, but I was running all the same. I was running faster and faster until I could only hear my own breath.

Before my real feeling came back, before my fear kicked and crashed over my body like breaking glass, I saw every tree as its sulking black form of authority and truth. I didn't need the path, it felt me and I felt it. My flashlight was shaky and when I dropped it I didn't reach for it. The wind broke. With every footfall the force of the woods pushed back against me. The thistle, the dark animals, the lurkers must have known me from the corners and watched me as a fast girl going faster. My ears were the sound of my own beating; the affirmation of my flight. Every moment I was braver. It wasn't my legs but it was me running. It was like every creature I had ever been lashed out and broke me completely and I wasn't afraid because I knew I'd make it.

Every moment took me closer to things I loved, to my bed and sweet Masher. Because when I got home, I had crossed some threshold. I didn't know anything about the love that Mandy talked about. And when I grew up later, and learned a little more and fell in and out of love myself, I was a little closer to knowing better. That the love that sends you into the heart of

the dark woods is brutal and worth giving up. I was closer to knowing that I was lucky for my dog and my parents. In the matrix of the twisted woods there are things to brave and things to fear. There are things to run fast from and pass without knowing.