

Through the Woods and Beyond

Marilyn Nease

Like swirls of giant snowflakes, dogwood blossoms floated above us and reflected their whiteness back to the April moon. We drew our eyes from the wondrous sight to check our footing; then, we marched single-file downhill, across a creek, and uphill again, sometimes slipping on springtime's mix of damp earth and decaying leaves.

Between squeals of surprise—when a foot slid, or someone warned, “Watch out for that branch!” or someone else struggled for balance, with arms flailing—we laughed, talked, and thought of Daddy. We knew he'd love every step and sound of our family's hike through his woods this night.

In the afternoon we'd attended Daddy's funeral in the small town six miles away. Then, we'd gathered for his burial in the little cemetery across the road and up the hill from his and Mother's home.

After others had left to journey home, my sisters and I, our spouses and children, and three other family members, had decided to drive to Daddy's cabin and pond in the woods. Some had fished or relaxed by the pond; others had roasted hotdogs. Gradually, day had turned to dusk, then darkness, signaling the time to for us to return to Mother and Daddy's home.

Charles, my husband, had offered a challenge: hiking one mile straight through the woods, rather than taking the longer, roundabout way by car. An adventurous group had formed. The non-hikers had headed home by car to wait.

A short distance to our right, we heard a soft, crashing sound. Then behind, we heard an owl's *Who—who—who?* Another light thud came to our right.

“What was that?” Nervous guesses followed.

“Where's Brandon?”

A shriek answered, and our prankster-nephew appeared, laughing delightedly. We laughed, too, and promised to get even.

Keeping the moon to our right, we trudged on in the semi-darkness, listening, trusting we'd find our way home. On our heads, backs, and arms, the moonlight cast silhouettes of dogwood blossoms, tree limbs, and the few unfallen oak leaves left from autumn. Ahead to the left in shadows, something large moved. When we drew closer, a horse stepped forward, pushing its head over the fence dividing the neighbor's land from Daddy's. We paused to rub its nose and offer a cookie from someone's pocket. Afterward, we emerged from the woods and continued our march, now over pasture, then barnyard.

Across the backyard, we spotted my sister Frances, sitting on a porch step, waiting.

We'd made it home, this time without our father, without our children's Papaw, but we'd celebrated him by spending time at his beloved pond and cabin and by walking a mile home through his woods in moonlight. We knew he'd be pleased at our enjoyment of what he'd loved: the land, the outdoors, all of nature. He, too, had found his way home, a little ahead of us—his body to the earth and his spirit to the greater world above, around, and beyond it all.