

WHOSE WOODS THESE ARE

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The morning of my first ever foray is blessed with a surprise rain. It's more of a thick mist than a shower, like invisible hands are catching the drops and cupping them in midair for a moment before letting them plummet to the earth. Despite the drizzle, at least fifteen people are standing in the cratered parking lot of Schiller Woods. Baskets in hand and clustered in groups of twos and threes, they chat amongst themselves and nestle in the black-green-brown comfort of their raincoats. They're an eclectic looking bunch, but their separate conversations all swirl in similar directions. There are vegetable seedling successes and transplanting woes, upcoming homemade jam experiments and pickling attempts gone awry, and empathetic exclamations whenever the goliath pothole at the entrance to the lot snares another unsuspecting four-wheeled victim.

At about five to ten, one of the foray leaders holds up a clipboard to get our attention. He waits until a hush has fallen over the small crowd, and then he turns to face the forest and delivers a rather eloquent topographical sermon.

"Buckthorns." *An emphatic point to the left.* "Mud." *Another emphatic point, this time to the right.* "Golf course ... somewhere over there." *A wave.* "No foraging on the fairway."

There's some appreciative laughter, which is followed by a firm reminder that we're operating on a permit. Another one of the leaders volunteers to adopt all the first-timers and as the rest of the foragers begin a meandering descent into the trees, I make my way over to her side. I'm the only newcomer and I'm nervous about slowing her down. I tell her as much, and as she veers

off to the left—away from the majority of the crowd, who have headed straight for the tree-line or off to the right, towards the mud—she waves away my worries with a practiced hand.

"It's not a race," she says sensibly. I get the sharp sense that she's been on the receiving end of these words before, perhaps back when she herself was out on her first foray. "We'll find some great stuff over this way. Trust me."

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She shoots me a grin over her shoulder and then turns to concentrate on her forward march into the woods. Her movements have an almost choreographed fluidity to them, but to say that she's comfortable among the trips and traps that the forest has set is an understatement. It seems more as if she's taken these exact steps before, as if these low-flung branches and divots in the earth have already taken their best shots at her and she knows exactly how to evade their efforts to snare her feet and swat at her face. I do my best to mimic her weaving strides, but I am a fish out of water, a newborn thing. If my bumbling and crashing disturbs her, she bites her tongue.

By now, the misting rain has mostly stopped and the sun is beginning to squint through the clouds. Deeper and deeper into the thicket we go, pausing now and then to scoop little odds and ends off the forest floor and lock them safely in the plastic compartments of the scientific treasure chest that she's

brought along with her. As we move, it strikes me that I've heard more birdsongs in this scant, twenty-minute adventure than I have in the past month. I'm so intent on looking up and trying to catch glimpses of the singers flitting between branches that when the guide comes to a sudden halt, I almost run right into the back of her.

She is bending over to pluck a thin blade of green that's peeping up in the gaps between fallen leaves. "Wild onion," she says as she straightens back up. Her fingers are nimble, knowing. She breaks the stem in half and waves the pieces under my nose with a grin. "Smell that?"

It smells like the start of homemade marinara. My feet are planted in the middle of the woods but another part of me is flying south, instinctively seeking out the cozy yellow kitchen of my grandmother's house and her holy trinity: olive oil, garlic, onion. The guide pops one of the stem halves in her mouth and then turns and motions for me to follow her.

"Ah HA," she says around a series of chews. After only a half a step, she has come to a stop again. She crouches down beside a rotting stump and motions for me to join her. "These are fun. Grab a stick."

I do as she asks. The stump is covered in a squatty cluster of silvery-brown orbs, each the size of a quarter with a tiny puncture wound at the top. They look like popped balloons frozen in time, trapped in the precise moment before the air goes whooshing right out of their skins and renders them nothing more than old scraps of rubber. Yet here on the stump, they are neither balloon nor scraps, instead peering up at us as something unabashedly in between.

"Lean back a little so you don't breathe anything in," she advises me. "But go on, poke one of them."



Hesitant and trying to balance on my heels, I give the nearest orb a cautious jab with my twig. To my surprise, it lets out a quiet plume of dust and in nearly identical fashion, a giggle sneaks out me. I poke another one, and then the one beside it.

“*Lycoperdon pyriforme*,” the guide says, and she contentedly jabs away with a stick of her own. “That ‘dust’ you’re seeing is all spores. Oh, look at the side of your stick! May I?”

I nod. She gingerly relieves me of my weapon, inspects its far end, and then turns it on me.

“There,” she says, brandishing the twig in my general direction. “See the orangey patches? Right near the tip?”

I nod again. I do.

“Crust fungus,” she tells me. She brings the end of the stick within a few inches of her eyes and keeps talking, though this time not to me. “Don’t worry. We already have a sample of you in the basket. We’re going to put you right back where you were.”

True to her word, she places the stick on the earth beside the *Lycoperdon* stump. Her hand hovers, suspended over a stray leaf. She plucks it from the ground and holds it aloft, turning it one way and then the other in the dappled light of the woods. It’s the curling ghost of an oak leaf. She points to a few dark patches on its underside and rattles off a few potential culprits, saying she can’t be sure, but it’s likely one of the usual suspects. Their names, so familiar to her, roll over me in a wave of foreign, magic sounds and drift off into the forest.

“That’s the best part of all this,” she says as she stands back up

with the slightest of winces. She rubs her hands together to shake off the bits of woodland floor that are trying to hitch a free ride on her palms. “When you’re out here looking for fungi, pretty much everything has potential. Twigs, bark, leaves, dead logs, you name it. You just have to have the patience to look.”

We spend the next hour and a half collecting samples and by the time we return to the parking lot, I’m disappointed. The two hours have passed in a blur. We are the first to arrive back at the meeting site but soon enough the other foragers begin emerging from the tree-line, once again moving in twos and threes and showing show off their finds with unbridled excitement. As the group reassembles, we pass specimens around and snap pictures and compare mud stains until we’re called to order. The inventory commences and though the names of the fungi are nothing more than a scientific blur, I still listen with rapt attention. I’m hooked.

It’s been over a year since I set out on that first trip into Schiller Woods and went treasure hunting with strangers. I’ve gone on dozens of forays since then, both in groups and alone, and contrary to my mother’s fears, it’s fungi who have treated me with the most kindness when I’m out there among the trees by myself. There have been spider bites, swarms of starved mosquitos, mildly twisted ankles, furious squirrels, freeloading ticks, and lost sunglasses, but through it all, the fungi have remained patient. The knowledge comes slowly but it blossoms with every foray I embark on. What was once an alien world of nameless greens and browns becomes a collection of old friends: *Jack-in-the-pulpit*. *Hackberry*. *Chicken of the Woods*. *Dryad’s Saddle*. *Elm*. *Ash*. *Amanita*. To stroll in the forest and greet these organisms by name is to shed the troubles of modern life and become a part of something grand, something beyond yourself—if only for an afternoon. 🍄

