

Summer Shorts II: Best Kept Secrets
Durham Editing and E-Books © 2014

This collection was compiled when contributing authors granted Durham Editing and E-books one-time copy rights for each submission. These rights refer specifically to this edition of Summer Shorts II: Best Kept Secrets, the 2014 Durham Editing and E-books Short Story Anthology. All legal rights outside this collection are maintained by the contributing authors.

A PLACE IN THE WOODS

By Duane L. Herrmann

Rain on the roof of the car in the woods: tap, tap-tap... , tap, taptaptap, tap, tap, tap-tap, taptap, tap. Soon the sound became steady with periodic intensities. Rivulets coursed down the windows, but not so much as to prevent seeing. The clouds came lower and the sky darkened. The wind picked up and rocked branches of the trees. It was a storm, but not a violent one. After a downpour, the sky lightened but a gentle shower continued. The sound became thunderous as a brief shower of small hailstones pelted the car and the woods. The ground began to appear whitish with the bits of ice, but they soon melted. Winter was over, but it was not yet spring. The weather was as unable to make up its mind as Derik. Should he go or stay?

The new job sounded good, the offer was tempting—an office of his own and a small staff with a liberal budget plus an expense account. It sounded like a dream job. It sounded too good to be true, and Derik was wary of that. And to take this job, Derik would have to leave his woods. The new job was a thousand miles away.

His mother was delighted to learn of the offer and had urged him to take the job. It would be an exciting and impressive promotion for her son: his own private office, staff, and, down the road she could see, his own company plane! Wouldn't the bridge club be amazed! Especially that insufferable Lenusa! Every day, it was her son this or her daughter that. Well, now! The tables would be turned!

Derek's mother had to admit to herself that the company plane was a pure fabrication, but wasn't she entitled to a little fun? Especially at Lenusa's expense? Besides, what would it hurt, really? None of her group knew anyone in that city; no one would ever know the details! Derek's mother entertained herself endlessly with anticipation.

Derik hadn't wanted to apply for the job. His mother was the one who had learned of it and urged him to apply. To satisfy his mother, he did. She was much more excited about it than he was. He wasn't even looking for a different job; his present one was just fine. He had his woods; the job didn't really matter.

Ever since he was a little boy, Derik had dreamed of having a place with trees to play in. He loved the woods: the shade, the patterns on the ground, the sound of the wind whispering in the leaves. He'd saved and saved and, finally, just two years ago, he'd been able to buy this twenty acres. It was mostly woods with a creek to one side and beyond that a small meadow.

It was his woods, and he was just beginning to learn it. *What time of year did the creek flow?* Because it was dry in late summer and autumn, he concluded it was not spring fed, or at least not with a continuous spring. *Where along the creek bank did the ferns grow?* In just two or three places. *How high into the trees did the poison ivy grow?* Very. *Why did the hillside slope unevenly?* No idea. *Where did that huge boulder come from when there were no other stones like it anywhere around?* It was a mystery he wanted to solve.

The woods had its mysteries, and Derik wanted to learn them all. He had just begun to learn. How could he think of leaving?

What animals lived in and roamed through these woods?

Deer. He'd seen their hoof prints, but no actual deer.

Turkeys. He'd not only seen their droppings, but heard them, and then, just last fall, he'd seen a few rushing away from him. Derik was amused by the way their heads jerked forward and back ahead of the rest of their bodies.

Pack rats. They were the ones who created the piles of bark here and there.

Snakes. He'd seen one sunning itself on a rock one day last spring.

Songbirds of all kinds lived and sang there, and crows in the winter.

How could he take himself as far away as that new job? He hated his departure each time he had to leave the woods and go home. How could he bear to live so far away that he could only return on long three- or four-day weekends or holidays?

The new job was in a huge city in the desert. No woods there. No water. He could understand that the desert has a beauty of its own, especially in the spring when the flowers bloomed, but there were no woods. And the price of land near the city was out of his reach even on a higher salary.

Derik started his car and sadly drove back home.

Indecision tormented him for the next days. Friends were excited at this opportunity for him and urged him to accept it. “You’re crazy not to!” Some even said. One, though, understood his love for the woods and sympathized. That Friday, before the Monday when he needed to confirm with his new employer, Derik found a card on his desk with a brief note, just one sentence, but written in calligraphy and decorated with leaves, vines, and flowers.

“The country is the world of the soul; the city is the world of the bodies.”

This was followed by a word, Derik thought it might be a name, one he could not read, but it began, “Baha...”

Derik knew who the card was from and smiled. He would have thanked her then, but he knew that she would not be at work. The day was a holy day for her, and she had spoken of some observance she would be attending.

Derik placed the card where he could see it all day and no one else would notice.

By the end of the day, he knew his answer, and his heart was calm. After work, he drove directly from the office to the woods. He sometimes did this if he desperately needed the peace of the woods. That day his heart was filled with joy he could not contain.

As soon as he parked, Derik jumped out of the car, ran to the top of the hill in his woods, and, with arms flung open to the heavens, he shouted, “Thank YOU! Thank You, GOD! Thank YOU!” And he twirled around and around in a circle embracing all of God’s creation.

That day was not only a holy day for his friend, it was now a holy and sacred day for him as well. He knew he was not going anywhere, no matter what the supposed advantage. Money and prestige were not his highest goals. How could he give up this place—his place—in the world of the soul?

His heart was at rest for the first time in months.