LOOK BACK BIG SAVAGE

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When I look back, the happiest time of my life was the nearly decade long period I spent on Big Savage Mountain and Backbone Ridge, in the scenic wildlands surrounding the Savage River Dam and Big Run State Park, in the mountains of western Maryland. I owned nothing but a dog and an old Ford pick-up truck, and if I had five dollars for gas, it was enough to get there and back. From the bridge over the lower Savage River I'd unconsciously hold my breath to the crest of the dam then gasp at the beauty that stabbed me in the eyes there every time, an expanse of blue-green water, fjord-like in its containment by steep mountain walls and cliffs of green forest, Backbone Ridge on one side, Big Savage on the other.

I lived in the back room of a small country store where along with my mother we sold pop, candy, and cigarettes, homemade sandwiches, cinnamon buns, pies, and fudge. My only requirement, to relieve my mother at three, tend the store until ten, take five dollars from the register, and at dusk head back into the beauty, permanence, and inspiration of the wilderness.

We'd left Big Savage when my father died. Widowed young, my mother went to find work in the city. Leaving Big Savage, growing up on city streets, Big Savage never left me. After high school I entered the Marines, while in the Marine Corps my mother retired and returned to Westernport, about ten miles from the crest of the dam where we'd lived years earlier. She'd bought a trailer that had an old, abandoned storefront from where she could make and sell her wares. When I left the Marine Corps, I was not sure I could return there myself and find work. To avoid going to work at all, I stayed in the city and went to college on the GI Bill, then drifted through a series of

jobs, always an ache in my heart to return to Big Savage. In a hasty and defeated withdrawal one day I opted to make my retreat, left the city to join my mother and in the manner of the prodigal (or so it was in my private vision) return to the wilderness, an opportunity regained to think and wander in introverted isolation and solitude over endless miles of rugged forbidding landscape.

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Across from Big Savage the six-mile drive around the reservoir along Backbone Ridge was nirvana. From the crest of the dam the road went to the bridge over the first of five tributaries, Crabtree Creek, then wound around to the bridge over Middle Fork, from Middle Fork the road went three-quarters of a mile to the top of Swisher Hill, then down the same distance to the bridge over Dry Fork, then finally snaked its way to the bridge over Big Run. Towering above the park at Big Run was the south end of Big Savage Mountain bright green and the upper Savage River running silvery below it, a splendid park with clean water, big trees, and a good breeze where I ran, hiked, camped, and explored unencumbered in a sweet sort of ignorant bliss, losing track of time, the future only the next day when I could return free and untroubled.

I camped everywhere and all the time. Along the tracks of the Western Maryland that cut along Backbone Ridge, I gathered old railroad ties for campfires that baked thick black creosote sooty and acrid into my skin and nostrils. Occasionally old friends would come. We'd pour Yukon Jack into paper cups under Hemlock and Spruce that blunted the wind and rain. Crowded around the firelight, we'd talk, laugh, shout, and reminisce. In the morning after farm eggs and black coffee we'd fish the reservoir or plumb caves above Crabtree Creek. But such occasions were rare. My friends from the city had obligations that kept them there. Once, we'd hiked the seventeen-mile trail from the north end of Big Savage Mountain and were camped near the bridge over the lower

Savage River, when Ann and I wandered off, we sat on the railing over the bridge under a full moon listening to water whisper softly over the rocks.

“You’ve been here several years now, educated, approaching thirty, and you’ve never found your niche,” she said.

“It is what it is,” I answered, “I don’t give a shit about that.”

“Okay, Mister I-don’t-give-a-shit, but you left a good job in the city to live with your mother, she has nada, and all you have is an old pick-up truck and a brown dog, you contribute nothing.”

“The city was a predator. It ate me up from outside in, its charm, if any, diminished by hazards that appeared and reappeared like pop-up targets on a rifle range. I found myself in a constant combative stance—catlike, cornered with back arched whirling on all fours to face the ‘enemy,’ whether it be rush hour, crowds, or the endless assault from crooks, kooks, and punks waiting to rip me off or to take me out, living dead in that cubicle I came to inhabit, trapped in a tall building and dead-end career watching younger people, less senior, less talented rise above me, another horse in a stable of broken-down horses. I can still feel the pull and jerk of the bit in my teeth. To feel alive and inspired again, I had to unbridle myself, and return to Big Savage, where I sat and listened to the ripple of water over rocks and breezes through trees, learned to see stillness in the flow of the water, sought my own truth, letting the worst of society go, waste, greed, pollution, numbing consumerism, started to explore again, found some wisdom and authenticity, honed an instinct for survival, refined my understanding of the earth.”

Unconvinced by this soliloquy I thought I believed in myself Ann left but I’d been guilted by her words, ‘you never found your niche and contribute nothing’ echoed in my subconscious. But, I thought, who was she to call out my years long experiment in simplicity and self-reliance, when

she and the rest lived dead in the city, eyes dim breath shallowed by the meaningless of it, swimming against a torrent of disappointment and dying illusions, never considering swapping out logic and practicality for a life with heart because as voracious consumers that would never sustain them, as if she'd found her own purpose. But internally her comment generated a seismic event that caused my knees to buckle. I was conflicted, not knowing what would become of me, one mind saying go, another saying no.

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I stood atop the view tower on Swisher Hill to see the one best image where everything had always combined to create in me a spell, a state of enchantment that allowed escape from everything else, the one best image I would take with me. The vast and utter indifference of the silence there offered no response to my decision except for the long, lovely wail of a Loon. I thought how all my life I'd been chasing illusions, too, that perhaps that's all Big Savage was, or had been. It was time to give up the beauty, and inspiration of the wilds, to give up the innocent bliss of isolation and solitude, return to a world of mindless iPhone zombies, deconstruct and rebridle myself, to again become a contributing member of society, and in a sudden wind, came the voice of the loon, this time its long rising wail a laughing crazy cackle reverberating like a primal scream throughout the entire chasm of ridge and slope water and dark forest in front of me.

On a visit now to Big Run I was three-quarters of the way in my new truck driving from the city when I pulled over. I couldn't go any further. It didn't feel the same and I didn't know why. Had the magic of my coming there worn off I wondered or was I suddenly overwhelmed with regret at having left and reburdened myself with old aggravations. Never stalwart, or unmalleable as I'd believed, influenced by guilt I'd traded away what I thought to have been my only loyalty, life in

the wilds was where I evaded death only temporarily, unaware our final appointment was always going to be in the city. Listening to an oncoming train struggle through the fog along Backbone Ridge, squealing sparks of existential wailing fused images and recollections of silvery apparitions flashed in front of me, angrily I tossed the empty flask of Yukon, Who the hell am I, I shouted. But the train itself had only been a memory, absorbed into the primal mist until dimly lit its taillamp winked farewell then barely flickered. I got to Big Run, stood in the rain--along with a profound sadness let it pour over me as the breath pulled from my body. Through this collage of disorientation, I realized what was true, like Indian summer my time there had shined briefly but flickered out as only another dying illusion.

I could feel the day coming, about to appear as if under glass or outside a picture window, the kind of rare day that would come only once or twice a year, almost always in early autumn, a day that would be like living in a great hall of still-life, with no weather--no wind, no clouds, the air rarified, leaves on the trees hushed and unmoving, not with the normal silence, but with the stillness heard after a great crash, that in its wake leaves only a faint, lazy, hypnotic buzz. It would be a day when spelunkers would soon fill the caves, climbers would scale cliffs, with wildflowers ablaze hikers would scan overlooks, out of the corner of my eye, and at every turn, under each shady tree, in the wavy grass and among the ferns I could see the brown dog, where the wind blows steady and unobstructed I'd buried her on top of the mountain, still running, still leaping, low to the ground, ears perked, stopping to sniff my scent in the brush, she had been waiting, I'd watched her look for me then disappear into the wood. When one tear was about to fall, I looked up at the mountain, red, yellow, and orange splotches of autumn on the trees then to the river undulating in the coming daylight below, ensconced in my failures and disappointment, I had to smile instead, as this thick melancholy ebbed away covertly as it came to reveal for one

moment a knowing and intense happiness, at where I was, where once removed from duty and obligation, I'd been joyful and free.