



The Unmarked Trail

by Gail Tyson

The hand-drawn map, spider-webbed with forest trails, bears notations like “300-year-old red oaks here.” My husband, Dick, exhumes the curling parchment from an old chest when a hiker stops by to ask about walking the back-country. Our cabin and a few others are tucked into small clearings in the Cherokee National Forest that blankets the Unicoi Range. We’re in the heart of the Southern Appalachians, where the oldest footpaths were first trod by the Eastern Cherokee and, two centuries ago, by Scots-Irish settlers.

This place is our sanctuary—an isolated, rugged terrain, home to the Citico Creek Wilderness and Bald River Gorge Wilderness. To get here, we drive four hours from our home near Atlanta to the small town of Tellico Plains, slowing as the Tellico River winds into view. Then we head up the Cherohala Skyway, which sweeps and curls past 100-foot cliffs toward vistas of undulating, smoke-blue mountains.

The Skyway rises to 5,400 feet at the Tennessee-North Car-

olina border, but at half that elevation we turn off onto a gravel road. Powering down the windows so our border collie, Maggie, can inhale the scents of pine and wildlife, we shift into a lower gear. Light sifts through lacy hemlocks and glints on creeks; a hawk floats on a taut breeze; beyond sight, in the lengthening shadows, black bears forage and bobcats prowl. Crossing over the low-water bridge at the beaver dam, we climb another mile until we roll to a stop at our log home, perched on a rise within shouting distance of two friends’ cabins.

As we drive, we shed our habit of chopping time into meetings and deadlines and enter another realm. After big potluck suppers, we tell legends around the campfire—the ones churned up during times we paddled rapids, and older tales, like the one about the Cherokee brave, Dragging Canoe. It’s a place where Celtic folk melodies echo in the music we play, and our ancestors’ penchant for whiskey lives on when we sip homemade moonshine. We sleep deeply here, woken in spring and summer by the whippoorwill’s arpeggio or, during hunting season, by keening curs. We sip mugs of coffee on the porch while mist rises from the hollows and, in late summer, the hunchbacked sourwood begins to turn red.

After the young man hoists his backpack and leaves, I pore

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over the jottings on the map: *the wild boar nest, the question-mark tree, the fern grove, knee-deep river crossing*. “Let’s go for a walk, Maggie!” Overjoyed, she clatters down the steps and hurtles toward the forest service road. A hundred years ago, timber companies logged huge stands of virgin forest on these slopes; recently a man we know took up traditional mule logging, so he can access small tracts nestled in protected areas. It’s slow, painstaking labor, close to nature, like so much that seems to slow down time here.

Our way snakes past deep ravines on one side and slate rock face on the other. Spring was wet, and miniature waterfalls gush between the boulders, a soft refrain as Maggie crashes through the woods, flushing turkeys that flap indignantly out of the brush. We walk past our usual turning point, stopping at an unfamiliar trail. Two boulders filigreed with lichen mark the trailhead, like guardians at a threshold. Shaded by mountain laurel and wild rhododendron, the passageway calls irresistibly to both of us.

As we start upward, I notice the trees aren’t blazed and make sure I stay on the path. As most steep trails do, this one seemed to get longer as we ascend, and we pant in unison for the last hundred yards as we near the top. I wonder whether we might be walking up to a bald—the grassy heath that tops some of the mountains here—but when we came over the last rise, I stop abruptly.

A plush lawn stretches before me, sweeping up to a sprawling, rustic lodge. Two couples sit at café tables, having afternoon tea. A pair of German pointers and a border collie sprint past us, and Maggie takes off after them. Just as I call her back—she doesn’t always play well with other dogs—a deep voice with a Scottish burr says, “She’ll be fine.”

I turn toward imposing yet kind-faced man, whose bulk fills an Adirondack chair. Rising slowly, he introduces himself as the laird, and I compose a smile, peering around the glade. I have never heard of this place, yet the lodge looks as deeply rooted here as the old-growth hardwoods—200-foot-tall yellow poplar, white basswood, eastern redwood—that encircle it. It certainly wasn’t on the antique map Dick unearthed.

The couples sip their tea as the dogs come racing back. I tell Maggie to sit; when she does the laird’s coal-black border collie sits beside her, gazing unwaveringly at her profile. I marvel at how quickly they had bonded. Perhaps I can stop here a while, slake my thirst, and learn about this landholding.

Then another voice speaks, “You cannot stay here with the dog.”

I look up to see a strange, disturbing creature. Tall, erect, his bearing emphasized by his long robe, the man has a face as cold and imperious as his voice. His features seem to be plated with steel, like a knight’s visor, the metal welded to his face as tightly as a skin graft. Tales of the Nunne’hi, or Cherokee immortals, float through my mind, but that race of spirit people were friendly and helpful.

“Canna she stay in the guest house?” Before the Scotsman finishes his question, the knight-manager shakes his head. “The cottage?” Negative, again. I feel moved that the laird had interceded for me, but puzzled: If he is in charge, why doesn’t he simply tell my banisher what to do?

Silence ensues. Then one by one, the dogs rise and move toward the masked forbiddener. They stretch out diagonally in the grass, heads toward his feet, forming a St. Andrew’s Cross on the green field of grass. The four raise their heads, alert, as if

inquiring whether I am being banished, or relinquished?

Mustering up courage, I step between the dogs and approach the figure. As I come close, I see how the smooth plating is polished to a high sheen. And there, in that gleaming surface, the reflection of my face gazes back at me—as if part of me is in him, or part of him is in me. I stare, wordless. That intense connection lasts minutes, or perhaps hours, until the trees rustle overhead, and the sun begins to sink. As Maggie and I turn toward home, the whippoorwill shrills, first light gilding the bedroom as sleep releases me.

Two years after this dream, while reading about the wilderness on the Tennessee—North Carolina border, I am astonished to learn about a European-style shooting preserve established in 1912 on 1,600 acres surrounding Hooper Bald. The owner, a financial agent for the British firm that had purchased this tract of land, hired oxen teams to cart 14 wild boar, plus buffalo, elk, mule deer, American black bear, and Russian brown bear, to the bald. But the remote property never caught on with prospective clients. By 1920 the agent moved away, and the remaining 60 to 100 wild swine bolted into the wilderness. Over the decades, they’ve mated with farmers’ semiferal hogs, and today the crossbreed—up to 400 pounds, with menacing tusks—roams this part of the world, occasionally rooting up soil next to our cabin as they look for grubs.

This story stirs up my vision of the clearing. I perceive my guardedness armed with conviction, at odds with an impulse so generous it creates a place of deep repose. This history suggests, too, that my dreams can intersect distant realities, like a stranger seeking a treadway through the backwoods.

This juncture of my dream and the historic record may read like folklore; month by month, it reshapes my life with the power of legend. It inspires me to dismantle my intellectual shield, meeting conflict with questions rather than withdrawing in fear. Living more instinctively now, I welcome the totems—strange encounters, runaway energy, the wildness Thoreau says is not distant from myself—that daily erode and expand the contours of being in the world.

Today the path I follow in life is another unmarked trail, one I navigate by landmarks that lure me as clearly as the destinations on a mysterious map: the heartbeat of poems, numinous dreams, the havens that draw me inward.