

In the Woods

by David Ackley

S- and I were going fishing, one of our friendship's pegs. For the most part it takes place in silence, which, in a way, protects the friendship.

We were on a dirt road in the woods, near a pond I wanted to check out, some miles from my home here in the White Mountains. He lives in Boston, but we'd grown up together in these parts. I could see the pond as a glinting through the trees, all thumbs trying to tease a snarl out of my flyline.

S- stood by, fly rod rigged and ready to go, making encouraging remarks.

"If you weren't so drunk, you'd be ready now."

"I'm not drunk, I'm hungover," I said.

It was good to breathe the cool, clean air through the residue of stale booze and cigarettes. I could smell the astringent jack spruce and pine.

An engine approached from the highway side, but I kept my head down, trying to focus on the loop which would untangle the snarl if I pulled it just right. I didn't want to see anyone else. You get possessive about your spots though everyone has the same claim on them, I suppose.

A black pickup drove slowly past, and I glanced up and back down, retaining a blunt thrust of a face, uncongenial in profile, and the ubiquitous green cap that says John Deere with the yellow ideogram of a deer for graduates of our local schools.

"Jesus, I hate to see that," S- said, looking after them.

I looked up at the truck from the rear, assuming at first he meant other fishermen invading our spot.

The passenger's bulky arm was draped along the seat back and between the two big men was a small head. The kid wore a knit cap with a little knit pom-pom on top that just reached to the top of their shoulders. There were spinning rods hanging over the tailgate.

It took me a moment to see what S- was seeing.

"They're just going fishing," I said, the taste of ashes back in my mouth.

"Sure."

"We could follow them," I said.

"Until when?...We've got to get back to the city tonight. You can take over. Make it your new career."

We watched the black pickup truck speed up and pull away, shrinking in the distance, the silhouettes of half-men and boy in the cab window melding together into one blurred thing. Soon it would be out of sight in the woods.

I tried again. "They're just taking him fishing. He's one of them's nephew."

"No doubt," he said. "Nephew. Cousin. Baby brother. Keeping it in the family."

"Fuck you," I said.

"Let's go someplace else," he said.

We'd been driving for a while in silence, when he said,
" Don't say anything to Elaine. She's death on that shit. It makes her nuts."

I pictured an army of S- floating into our congenial world under their white parachutes, armed only with clarity. Then, ashes.

