

## DOLAN WOODS

One would never know Dolan Woods existed before those rows of cookie cutter condos and schools obliterated its memory. The only remaining legacy of Mr. Dolan, who must have been the owner of all that acreage, is the junior high school I attended that bears his name. Unlike the settlements of ancient cities dug up by archeologists, nothing remains of Dolan Woods, the site of my first mystical experience, my childhood cathedral, my playground, my refuge, so the excavation must be done by memory.

Each day during spring weekends and summer months as a girl of seven and eight I would climb the steep, rocky path that lay behind our house to the top of the ridge, cut through Jimmy's backyard and emerge onto Ridgewood Avenue, the street of modest working class homes above ours. I would then turn left and walk down the hill which dead-ended in the entrance to a vast, multi-acre forest of old growth trees and tangled vines. Sometimes I would enter the woods with Betty Lou, who must have introduced the woods to me as she lived on Ridgewood a few doors from its entrance, but more often I would be alone. Entering the dark portal of Dolan Woods was like stepping through the wardrobe in the *Chronicles of Narnia* into land of enchantment. Here I encountered flora that have long been obliterated by the city's relentless development: towering red and white oaks, sugar maples, black locust, sassafras, mountain ash, mountain laurel, service berry, witch hazel. Lining the path that ran through the woods were beds of white trillium, red bunch berries, bloodroot, Indian paint brush, lambs' quarters, and sorrel. In the spring I would sometimes spy the delicate, greyish rose tip of a lady slipper hiding beneath the foliage. Fall would bring the bright tomato-red sparkle of winterberry vines.

Dolan Woods provided me with a rich palette of subjects that an imagination schooled in solitude would paint. My favorites were always the Jack-in-the-pulpits. Whenever I came across one I would say “How do you do, today” to those funny little pale green men who peeped out of their red-veined hoods as if they were elfin acquaintances. The path, that had probably been worn by generations of children before me took me deeper into a woodland where stout, woody vines hung from tall trees. We kids would swing from the vines, pretending to be Tarzan, though they were often not as sturdy as our imaginations allowed and we would accidently pull them loose from the branches over which they were draped as we fell to the ground. With my hands around the trunks of thinner trees I would pretend to be hanging on to a microphone and would croon made-up songs to myself imagining that I was playing before an attentive audience. Farther along the path and deeper into the forest was a fairy bower formed by what was probably an invasive species of vine; it made a perfectly round enclosure into which I would crawl. Sitting beneath this dark, verdant canopy I would imagine myself in fairyland as in the books I was reading at the time. In my bower I would make up stories and poems that I would recite to myself.

A large outcropping of rocks that must have been deposited by glaciers eons ago formed the side of a hill within the woods. This was our “mountain.” Within this outcropping, boulders laid over each other made small caves into which we could crawl. Neighborhood boys would often display their incipient macho prowess by standing on the top of the mountain, taking out their penises and seeing how far they could shoot their pee. We girls would look on with wonder and a bit of disgust.

I must have been about seven when I had the first of only two mystical experiences I have ever had. It was on one of my first trips into the woods. If you followed the path far

enough you came to a steep hill which had to be descended on hands and knees as there was no path at this point. At the bottom of the hill, where Dolan Junior High now stands, the woods opened out into a partially sunny meadow. A brook bubbled through the area that is now a baseball field. Along its boggy edges grew blue flags and a field of star flowers that blazed in the sun like a thousand twinkling stars. The tall grasses were a psychedelic green. As I sat down amongst all this glory an ecstatic sense of peace and wholeness overtook me. The little girl who longed to be recognized no longer existed. I was at one with the universe.