

*The Embracing Woods* by Richard Lee Fulgham

# Chapter One

## The Great Pine Forest

Georgia's Pine Mountain is the southernmost ridge of the mighty Appalachian Range, stretching from the Blue Ridge all the way down to the Chattahoochee River -- from above Atlanta to below Columbus. Comprised of quartzite, it's heavily forested with pines and bespattered with rock outcrops. It's interlaced with clear streams and sparkles with tumbling waterfalls.

The mountain is not very high, only an hour's climb for a kid, maybe two for a short-winded adult. But it's worth the effort because from its crest you can see the Great Pine Forest extending horizon to horizon in all directions, carpeting the land with millions of loblolly pines and kudzu vines. You can see the ocean of evergreens covering west central Georgia – the immense woods in which a kid can explore forever into the hidden and unexpected worlds of Nature.

Into this sea I once escaped, when I was maybe nine or ten, the small town life I found so boring and dull. The time was the

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early 1960's and the town was called Manchester – a cluster of about 3,000 souls at the foot of the mountain. I wouldn't be so bored today – having suffered so many strenuous times in my adulthood that I desperately crave the peace and quiet I once despised.

How sad that it's now too late to find that state of grace again. There's no returning. Those days have been absorbed by time and the small town has grown into a city in which I am a stranger. I return only to roam the streets like a ghost, invisible to the young and unrecognized by the old. Only a few souls who knew me still live there. But they are no longer the kids I knew when we were wild and free.

Thus laments a native son . . . .

I have tried to return but nowhere can I find the Main Street. I remember, the avenues I walked, the alleyways I explored, the gang I knew, the trails I tramped, the dogs I loved. The town I knew is gone forever. But I do have one consolation -- the mountain and forest remain as they were, vast and wild. The mountain still welcomes any lonesome souls who crave the solitude of her crest. The great pine forest still whispers strange and profound lessons to those who wander along her trails. The wisdom of the woods is still

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to be found.

I resist being personal but must dip a little into that time forty, fifty years ago when other kids and I could roam without limits or licenses or fears. It was a time when dogs ran free and so did we. Only the schools we attended – Manchester Grammar and Manchester High – penned us in. But even those we could escape every day at three, rushing home to change our school attire for the worn out clothes our mothers refused to throw away.

Of course, we never hung around our homes – for us it was the street or the woods. The outdoors was our reality. We thought of ourselves as prisoners when forced to stay at home or trapped at school. We roamed as a pack in our preteen years but when adolescence came I separated myself and turned more and more toward the woods, preferring the mountain over the baseball diamond, the trees over my pals, the animals over the adults. By the time I was thirteen, I was a bonafide, dyed-in-the-wool loner.

At that time, in the mid 1950's, Nature and humanity seemed two different forms of life to me. I can't speak for my old buddies but decades would pass before I would realize that the town and its people were as much a part of Nature as the forest and its creatures. How could I have understood then that the

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incomprehensible forces which ruled the woods also ruled the township – that the nature of the wild was also the nature of man?

Though I had plenty of pals, I was always alone in my heart – so most days at four o'clock I would leave the house by myself to follow a trail I'd made over the mountain and through the woods. It led to my secret refuge – a patch of old pines carpeted with soft, dry pine needles and drained by a tiny stream I called Copperhead Creek. It was clear as only a Georgia creek can be.

It was about five feet across but only a few inches deep as it flowed through the refuge. But I could take off my shoes and socks and wade a mile or so down till I found pools where the water had collected in ravines. I named one of these pools – one especially full of snakes – Moccasin Pond.

The water had pooled in a deep trench cut through red clay. It was about ten feet in length, four or five feet across, about two feet deep and was bordered on both shores by perpendicular clay shelves rising five or six feet from the surface of the water. Someone years before had tried to bridge the ravine with an old wooden door, which had eventually fallen into the little gorge lengthwise to make a platform over one end of the pool.

I was able to stretch out on the old door and peer directly

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into the pool. The ravine was wide enough so that the sun almost always flooded my private pond with a penetrating white light which made the water and everything in it shine with an awesome clarity. Vines crisscrossed the tiny realm over my head and dozens of queen watersnakes sprawled across them, basking in the sun.

It was a microcosmic, magic world. But it was not mine alone, for I shared it with queen snakes, green snakes, garter snakes, ribbon snakes, brown snakes, a massive tub-sized snapping turtle, a smaller hand-sized mud turtle, three painted terrapins, a box turtle, hundreds of anole lizards, a half dozen spiny swifts, one five-lined skink, six brown skinks, one grapefruit-sized bullfrog, five green frogs, dozens of smaller leopard frogs, a slew of peeping treefrogs, countless salamanders and their aquatic young, and countless mudpuppies, tadpoles, minnows, sunfish, crayfish, dragonflies, damselflies, and other monstrous-looking insects and their larvae.

All lived together in the crystal creek. Oh yes – there was also a young water moccasin who always basked alone on a particular branch, far away from the other watersnakes – and a coral snake, whom I saw only once.

Upstream, I knew, lived a giant six-foot brown watersnake and somewhere in the woods lived a cannibalistic kingsnake. I had

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seen them both but they rarely visited Moccasin Pond when I was around. There was also a sly gray fox whom I'd seen only once, surprising him as he devoured a squirrel he'd ambushed. Over the pool and all around lived thousands of birds, including a barred owl who slept in a hollowed out cavity in a huge dead tree and a kingfisher who buzzed my pond every day. So this was my world and its exquisite sea.

And therein lies a tale . . . .

One Saturday morning, just after the sun had risen as white and round as the eyelid of a dying bird, I lay on my bridge and was watching the mudpuppies stalk earthworms I had dropped into the water. The turtles and crayfish were hungry too, and a little battle erupted beneath the surface as the predators fought each other for the drowning worms.

The commotion was so great, and I so thrilled, that I didn't notice a fat queen watersnake crawling out of the water and onto the bank. The bank was covered with muddy grasses and it was the sound of slithering that awoke me from my transfixed state. Looking at her, I saw that she was about two feet long and apparently searching for something.

Suddenly she seemed to find the right place, next to a large

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piece of rotted log, and began to shiver as if freezing. Then, to my astonishment, she began giving birth to living young. I knew that some snakes lay eggs and some give birth to living young. But reading is one kind of excitement and actually witnessing such an event quite another. One by one the baby watersnakes were born, each wrapped in a transparent membrane, through which they easily tore.

She gave birth to seven snakes, each about four or five inches long and as big around as a pencil. As they broke through the membrane, each would instinctively head for the water. The mother paid no attention to them. She didn't care about their fates.

As I watched, hypnotized, the hideous snapping turtle appeared and snatched the first baby snake to slide into the water. As the gruesome snapper grabbed it, the baby seemed to give a silent scream, opening its mouth wide and writhing back and forth as blood tinted the water red. It was over quickly and I watched as the monster turtle dragged its victim into its lair dug into the bank underneath the water.

The second baby watersnake slid into the water and immediately disappeared, safely hidden underneath the vegetation along the shore. I was happy for it.

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But Nature had a lesson to teach me. I was caught by surprise as the big kingsnake appeared from nowhere and began swallowing the baby watersnakes one after another until none at all were left. The aptly named king, gleaming black with a golden chain shining on its back, didn't bother to kill them first. The king merely grabbed a tiny head and swallowed the tiny body in a matter of seconds. And when he was finished with the young, he began to flick its tongue excitedly over the mother, who finally came to her senses and tried to escape.

It was in vain. The kingsnake had her before she could hit the water, grabbing her just behind the head and coiling around her in a ball of rippling muscles and glittering scales. But she didn't accept her fate lightly, thrashing and biting for a full five minutes before she at last fell limp and lifeless, to be swallowed whole by the king of Copperhead's Retreat.

I was paralyzed with excitement and awe. How swiftly and cruelly death came in the wild! Life was extinguished almost as quickly as it was born. Out of seven young and the mother, only one had escaped to perhaps grow to maturity and give birth again to keep the queen watersnake population alive.

It was then I had my first inkling of Nature's first rule:

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produce many so that a few may survive. At that time, child that I was, I didn't see that this same rule applied to mankind and to mankind's ways. I would not only understand when I reached adulthood, I would experience the same unbending rule in my own life and ambitions.

It was early spring and the pool was filled with clear, gelatinous blobs of toad, frog and salamander eggs. There were literally thousands of tiny black eggs in the blobs, deposited by the adult amphibians after mating in February as they emerged from hibernation.

I watched those eggs day by day as they changed from black dots to true embryos. I took some home at intervals to study under my microscope. Even then, at that young age, I knew from my books that all embryos look startlingly alike at the beginning. In fact, even human embryos look like the frog and salamander embryos at the earliest stages, with tails, gills, and red, beating hearts seen through transparent skin.

As the weeks passed, the eggs began to hatch and fill the pool with thousands of tiny tadpoles, most of whom were eaten by larger creatures as soon as they tried to swim. I admittedly felt bad about this carnage occurring in my little universe. As I watched, the

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tiny infant creatures were mercilessly devoured by the turtles, mudpuppies, crayfish, and especially the hideous dragonfly larvae with their long, fanged lower lips. I came every day -- and every day there were fewer and fewer tadpoles. By summer, there were only a hundred or so left out of the hundred thousand or so which had been born.

As the surviving tadpoles increased in size and began to develop limbs, they became prey for the snappers and the brown watersnake, which would come only when I was gone. Only a few dozen tadpoles and salamander larvae remained by the time summer arrived. But even those were endangered. An unexpected threat awaited them on land.

Many, many times as I was watching, a tadpole which had survived long enough to transform into a true frog or toad would boldly hop on land and see for the first time the terrestrial jungle of grasses and weeds it would inhabit. But as dusk came, the mighty bullfrog would take his position on the shore and, between deep-throated songs, would snap them up as if they were insects. To make things even worse, a gartersnake appeared and also feasted on the young amphibians. As each died, it gave a tiny cry of fright and horror as it disappeared down the carnivore's throat. Maybe a

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dozen lucky infant frogs and toads escaped into the night.

So, out of at least 100,000 new lives, about 12 survived. It was embedded in my mind: Nature creates thousands or millions so a few might survive and reproduce. Such is the struggle to survive. Next year there would be maybe five or six new frogs living on the shores of Copperhead's Retreat. They would sing into the night and feast and copulate and live until found by the snakes, bullfrogs, water birds or other predators hunting their flesh. Just to live was to live dangerously.

I have never forgotten the carnage I saw at that tiny pool of water in the middle of the pine woods. So I was not surprised when war and accidents and disease took a toll of my friends as I matured through the years,. I had grieved for snakes and frogs as a child; as an adult I grieved for my lost friends. But I understood and did not condemn life or accuse God of cruelty. Nature feeds upon itself and in this manner grows. It could be no other way.

Though I went through an adolescent stage when I blamed mankind for all the pain and death in this too real world, I eventually connected my lessons at Copperhead's Retreat to the process of existence. Nature is one immense organism growing in the Universe and those creatures we call individuals are cells within

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its body. As in all bodies, cells mature, reproduce, then must die to make way for the young.

The universe is a cold and hostile place. Nature must make up for this by over-producing in order to appease that higher consciousness ordering the grand scheme of being. Nature is lush, fecund and beautiful -- but she can only be this way by constantly creating in such abundance that death cannot devour all of her creations. Whether there is a God separate of Nature, or whether God is Nature, the same basic rule applies and can't be changed.

Now, having reached that point in my life where I see more behind me than I can see in front, I understand and accept the violence that seems to engulf this living earth. The fear, grief and pain we must experience is not cruel. It is only natural and in the long run, renews and refreshes Nature as she feeds off of the dead.

And I understand, too, that there must be a single underlying spirit animating all living things, a shared spirit which never dies with the material flesh but continues forever as Nature proceeds into the unknown tomorrow of the future. Perhaps in the end, Nature will indeed be one vast living, conscious being which will survive and reproduce until the universe is filled with life.

There was much more for me to learn from Nature, and we

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shall discuss these hard-earned lessons in coming chapters. In the words of the existential philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, “Nature speaks and experience translates. Men have only to keep their mouths shut.” I have lived by this advice when in the wild, and it is only now, among my fellow humans, that I try to translate Nature into an understandable human language.

Despite Sartre’s well meaning advice, there comes a time when we must try to communicate the will of Nature to each other -- and in that process come to understand that life and death are intimately married and neither is to be feared, only accepted. With this understanding and acceptance, perhaps we eventually will leap through life like laughing lions, strong, bold, wise and free.