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Refuge

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Refuge

Amy Meadows

This task was put before me; to tell of an experience or part of my life that has helped shape my identity. I wanted to make it so you could look past the black lines on this flat page and feel my world; how I touch it and taste it and live it and know it. So here's a trip to my world, taken from my mind, seen through my eyes.

Preface/Foreword

Every night when I lie down to sleep, I can hear the continuous, buzzing echo of the day's residue. The cacophony of sound that gets trapped in my head all day long begins its slow release: the ringing of phones like calculated screams, the falling of fingers on key boards like pelting leaden raindrops, people barking orders at me as if they were the only masters I am obliged to serve.

The faces of these monsters I see in my mindwarped and twisted, still yelling, demanding, screeching. They circle around and taunt me. It is guilt that makes it so my eyes are wide and bloodshot while my mind throbs and my body aches for sleep. I should stay awake longer. . .there is more I can accomplish, more work to be done. I can push myself just a little bit more and I should. A go-getter wants more from herself than others expect, and the monsters are an ample challenge; they're insatiable. There is a fun house in my mind and all I want to do is sleep.

Every day my alarm sounds, my eyes crack open. I throw the covers off and feel the surge of frigid air, tired and grumpy and cursing the day for its fast arrival. It seems as if I never slept...all my days are like those before them, separated only by the nightmares that mirror them.

My body craves a shower but the clock on the wall says "No." I gather together the assignments that kept me up well past the change of day and hope they are as good as they seemed at 3:45 a.m. My stomach rumbles with indigestion from the 2 a.m. pepperoni and olive pizza. I grab a stale but clammy slice from the cardboard box on the floor and head out the door.

This is the start that propels me into my day. By 7:30 am I am roaming the streets, video camera in hand, searching for the latest news. It is my job to pry into miserable people's lives to disclose the boring facts about their boring lives. And *they* get frustrated and angry with *me*? Deadline is 11:30, but my six-hour class marathon begins at 10:00; at best I'm allotted two and a half hours to film, script, and edit a news package for the class that will make or break me as a broadcast journalism major.

10:00, time for class: *Depth Psychology and Religious Ethics...The Philosophy of Psychology*. . . need I say more? My veins are surging with caffeine and I try to make sense of the tangled words and labyrinthine ideas. My brain is racing and roaring and all I'd like to do is rest. At 5:20 class is dismissed and the dinner bell rings. An early evening nap would be nice just to freshen my senses and spirit, but time is ticking and my work shift starts at 7:00 p.m.

I'm a radio announcer. I get to spend five hours a day (eight on the weekend nights) totally surrounded by, and submerged in, noise. What was once pleasant music to me now has the same unfriendly bite to it as the other elements in my daily ritual that give me *The Headache*. It starts as a low, rhythmic pulsing at the base of my neck. It spreads like cancer through my head, the throbbing increasing in frequency and in intensity until external sounds are hardly distinguishable from those in my own mind. I do not feel at home in my own body; I need a refuge.

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I love the song of autumn, nearly autumn, when the season is advanced enough for crisp morning air, but not yet late enough for the birds to have disappeared. There's the melodic, high pitch of these creatures, joining each other for one last chorus before departing for the southland. The twinkling sound of the leaves are like rain as they laugh with each other and dance around. The trees wave their arms to welcome me.

One by one and sometimes in two's or three's the leaves will jump off the branches to a graceful descent, rocking back and forth along the air currents until settling on the ground below. There the leaves will lay with the rest of their kind, trembling with every gust that speaks to them. When a mighty wind passes through, a daring group will leap into the air and follow it, circling upward in its invisible force back toward the branches they once clung to.

But others just remain at the base of the tree, stuck together and hugging the ground. They seem as contemplative as I am about the coming of winter. They shuffle around on the ground, red and brown, making a sort of sizzling sound. All these sounds are sweet and welcome as I take a walk through the woods. And, like a score of music, there's a pattern, a rhythm. It's powerful and it's subtle, dynamic and delicate, and it soothes me like nothing else.

There's me. The sound of my walking, the crumpling, cracking, snapping of twigs under the weight of my stride. There is the rumbling of little rocks as I kick them on ahead of me. Occasionally, I'll send one of them bouncing and tumbling down the ravine. I can hear it colliding with the terrain as gravity relentlessly drags it downward until it lands with a *plink* in the bubbling stream. It's water I can't see, but its existence I am certain of. Its talk is ceaseless, an anxious, urgent rumbling.

There's the *zip*. . . *zip*. . . *zip* of my jeans; they rub together with each step I take. And now and then I'll sniffle--my nose always gets runny in the cool and crunchy autumn air. Usually by mid-walk my stomach is growling, protesting my neglect. My breathing becomes labored and my lungs begin to whistle. This is disrupted only by intervals of grunting as I negotiate the upward slopes of the path. Sometimes when the wind ceases to blow for a moment and I stop to look around I can hear myself blink I can actually hear the clicking of my eyelids as they come together.

I marvel at the power of the wind, the authority it claims as trees bend and leaves and twigs jump out of its way. It's big and it's arrogant and it's sweeping, or it's a whistling breeze passing you by for things beyond, or it's a howling echo in your ear. I close my eyes and feel it as it tickles my ears and slides its pointy fingers through my hair. It caresses my face with a whisper. I smell it, fresh and musky, and I taste it--it's clean. From it I draw my life and I am invigorated.

I don't wear a watch when I'm camping because it really doesn't matter what time it is. There is no one I need to check in with, no appointments that I must keep. I feel as though I'm ignoring some authority, and maybe as if I'm defying it. I'm far from the earshot of orders and requests and demands inaccessible to those wild dogs that snarl and snap at their cages, drool glistening on their greedy teeth, waiting for me to return so the wretched routine can resume.

There's no "real" time when I'm out in the wild just sunrises and sunsets. Nature follows cycles, like that of the sun and of the seasons, and though clocks were meant to illustrate this for us, they have instead overshadowed it and taken its place. For me, this manifests itself as my most vehement stressor: dead lines. Everything I do is so time-specific, so rushed, so urgent. My life is a series of goals, strung together by minor gratification for their attainment. So the world goes, I suppose. But for camping there is no specific, hard and fast goal, no single thing that will make or break or define the trip. And yet the reward is always great.

Once in a while I like to find a level place on the ground so I can melt. I lie on my back, stretch my arms out to each side and relax, letting my body sink as far into the ground as I can. I think of it as melting because that's the sensation I get; my body just seems to soften and take the shape of the ground beneath it. A great time to melt is at night when the stars freckle the sky, trailing off into eternity, and the moon smiles down with a welcoming, soothing glow. Lying out in the stars in the middle of the woods always reminds me of, and makes me thankful for, what stars really are: a true and natural blessing from God. I must say there could be no other explanation for things so vast, so curious, so fantastic.

It seems to be coming into focus what camping is all about to me: sensing. It's about sitting back, taking in, feeling, enjoying, living, thinking. It's really a chance for me to unwind, relax, recuperate, recharge, replenish that hidden source of strength that slowly gets depleted from the toll of life's stressors. It's a chance for me to get my mind back in order. It's a reality check; it puts things into perspective. *What's really important? What is worth stressing over? What should I be working for in life and toward what goal? What really makes me happy?*

For the most part, though temporary as it may be, I resolve these questions each time I take the trip. I usually end up coming to the conclusion that the hypothetical pleasures of life have become complicated, that people have lost sight of the most natural joys, ironically those that yield the most true and lasting pleasure. In light of this, I resolve that I must make adjustments that will eliminate some of the stress I encounter. My intent is to revise my philosophy of life, putting a greater emphasis on pleasing myself and my maker. I try not to set perfection as a standard and defeat as an ugly beast. Obviously, though good thoughts they are, these intentions crumble upon return to "normal" life. Once I'm back in that fast-paced, competitive ring again, my mind jumps back into the race, stress once again clamps onto those muscles in my neck with its vise-like grip, and I'm off and running.

I guess when I'm surrounded by the natural world I can pretend that's all there is. Feeling that constant sense of euphoria that comes with the enjoyment of this time, it naturally follows that I feel that's all there really needs to be. At one time, for some people, I'm sure this was the case. Simplistic and naive it would be for me to think I would last in such an environment for long. Despite all the whining and complaining I do about the rushed, demanding nature of my life, I know I would go crazy if things were any different.

If I take a moment to do some serious introspection, it becomes clear to me that much of the stress that dispirits me is self-inflicted. In the figurative sense, those monsters that claw at my back in the waking hours and keep me from sleep at night do not exist to the extent with which I've chosen to portray them. I have high standards for what and when and how I accomplish what I do. I don't know, maybe it's not enough for me to have self-satisfaction/gratification as a motivation. It seems easier to push myself and reach a goal if there is the illusion of someone else standing by, cracking the whip. When I do things for other people I like to do them well and in as short a time as I can without compromising my standards and, whether or not it legitimately exists, I feel an external pressure to do so.

So though I've told it differently, it's not so much that nature gives me an escape from the unfair, unsympathetic, slave-driving people of my daily routine. It's that it lets me get away from the person I become in the goal-oriented world of appointments and deadlines. When I'm alone in the wild, there's no need (and no real way) for me to be proactive. I just don't feel the nagging compulsion to sort things out and get things done. I am forced to be reactive, a passive element in the woods. I'm a guest there; it's like I've entered someone else's world, a place where I don't completely understand the rules. There's a sort of anxious excitement in just sitting back and watching nature take its natural course. There's something unique and enchanting about the fact that nothing man could contribute could improve the way and quality of this natural life as it stands--it's a system of true harmony. Or is it?

Some, upon reading this text, would wonder if this part of the world which I have so glorified is the same one they

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know. When I'm camping, does everything really look and sound like Sherwood Forest or the scene from a Disney classic? The answer is that it really doesn't matter. Even if this place has been idealized in my mind, that doesn't change the role it has played or the purpose it has served in my life. I don't doubt that my mind accentuates much of what I see, but I think that adds a sort of mystical quality that serves only to heighten the enjoyment I derive from such a peaceful setting.

And so it seems that camping has become a sort of refuge for me, the perfect opportunity to escape the madness of my everyday life. It lets my senses swim freely in a stream of perception, to capture all that is daily drowned out by the rattles and screams of the world. And it lets my heart be light.