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Window on the woods

by Jane M. Bailey

We drove down a long steep driveway into a shady dell, keeping our eyes on the thin strip of pavement to insure we didn't go off the embankment. We rounded a curve, and there it was, my sister's cabin-in-the-woods: Camp Wannastay. She and her husband had gifted us a vacation to ourselves while they were on a cruise halfway around the world.

"Please go and enjoy!" she urged. How could we turn her down?

The cabin is her dream home-away-from-home hidden in Black Forest on the edge of Lake James in Marion, North Carolina.

The drive from Connecticut was a grueling 15-hour trek that included rain, fog, traffic, accidents and a minor tornado. As I crawled out of the car on weary legs, I felt like Dorothy landing in Oz.

We located the key hidden in a built-in coded box on the porch, flipped utility breakers, added water to ice-cube trays, took dust covers off furniture, unpacked suitcases and were finally on vacation.

I tried to call my daughter to tell her we arrived, but there was no cell service; unless we went out to the porch and hung over the railing, facing the north...or was it the south pole? No Wi-Fi meant no e-mail. Or internet. No cable meant no movies, no sports.

With each "no" I felt my body relax, like it was coming off a drinking binge. Mine was a different addiction...one of

technology. Would I last the week without it?

By the time we settled in, the sun had set. There we were. In a cabin, in the woods. Little us by the window stood. You get the Little-Rabbit-Foo-Foo idea.

We turned out the lights to head to bed and plunged into darkness. Not just darkness, but the depth of darkness. We felt our way out the door and stood on the deck overlooking the forest we could no longer see. We couldn't see, but we could hear the symphony. And what a concert it was! Katydid and tree frogs, bellowing in tandem. Rattles, roars, goblins and ghosts hovered around us as our eyes adjusted to the nightlights above. Without ambient light, the stars multiplied exponentially, and we stood silent to the majesty. Until the majesty of the mosquitos sent us running for shelter.

With the window open, we bathed in the calming cocoon of nature that first night and slept a sleep of peace.

As dawn softly lit the cabin,

we looked through the beautiful windows into the trees to see a teepee of wood that begged to be explored. There were wild turkeys strutting their stuff and deer gossiping in the clearing. The birds called us to get dressed and join life in the underbrush.

We pulled sweatshirts over our heads, hiking boots onto our feet and followed the calls into the forest. Trails took us to waterfalls and vistas far and wide. Like a baby who knows its mother's smell, we learned the deep pungent fragrance of earth—dirt and pine, rhododendron and mountain laurel all rolled into one.

A black bear bumbled across our path and thankfully we saw his fat behind retreat into the camouflaging underbrush. We discovered a northern water snake sunning himself on a rock, posing for pictures as if he were in a snake enclosure at a zoo.

All week long, the woods beckoned us from behind safe windowpanes. We were called



outside to sit and sip and read and listen and wonder. We heard thunder echo through the hollow and watched rain drizzle down the chain link gutter from the cabin's roof.

Hummingbirds hovered at the cabin feeder as birds sang to each other from the treetops beyond. In this bird chorus, there was a single repeated grace note, beautiful and lonely.

"Did you hear that?" my husband asked.

"You mean, whit-whit? Yes, I hear that." And we bent over the railing to get wi-fi to listen to Cornell Ornithology Lab's bird sounds.

My ears got sharper, my eyes peered harder. My fingers felt the spongy earth. We ate healthier as we packed trail mix, protein bars, fruit and water into our trail packs. We learned to look down as well as up. Down into the world of ants and worms, moss and roots.



By the end of our week, the *je ne sais quoi* of the woods – the deep internal melding of body and soul – settled deep within.

All too soon we were on the fast-lane to Connecticut. Back through traffic, bad weather, accidents and tractor-trailer spray. We were quieter on the return trip as the calm of the woods lingered in our psyche.

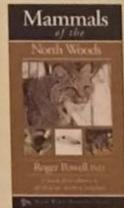
When we got home to the inevitable question, "How was your vacation?," there was only one

answer: "Just perfect."

Yes; bugs, snakes, bears and even mosquitos were perfect. As was the cabin – especially its window on the woods. Woods that beckoned us from behind the glass and drew us deep and high through the trees, to see the forest in all its glory. We learned that it's not enough to peer out of a window. You must fling it open and follow the call of the woods. ✦

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