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On the Edge of Everything

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The weekend before the first and only South Florida COVID-19 shutdown began, my fourteen-year old daughter and I accompanied the moms and daughters of her Girl Scout Troop on a swamp walk through Big Cypress Preserve. In my imagination, the day is a pin stuck into a map, marking the location of a portal we slipped in and out of, leaving the cypress behind and entering the harsh light of a global pandemic. I've returned to this outing in my mind all year, turning it over like a found coin. In a year when it felt as if my entire world was reduced to a hamster habitat, the rooms of my small house the tunnels of my nest, I find myself thinking of expansiveness, boundaries, and the transformations that happen when we traverse geographical and spiritual lines.

The trip was planned months before most people in the U. S. had become familiar with the terms “coronavirus” or “social distancing.” The troop, having been together since elementary school, was now made up of teenagers who were vastly more interested in their cellphones than nature walks, but earning badges was still part of the deal when it came to Girl Scouts. Collectively, they'd earned badges on CPR, babysitting, First Aid, baking, website design, self-defense, and social media safety, just to name a few. Each girl got to choose one badge to earn for the year. Learning about the topic and sharing that knowledge with the troop meant everyone acquired that particular badge in the form of an iron-on patch.

And we were about to go stomping through a swamp on the eve of a pandemic shut-down thanks to my daughter who chose “Trees” for her badge.

I suppose she could have just pointed out a few Live Oaks to the other scouts—a Pygmy Palm here, a Flame Tree there—and been done with it. But our troop leader was delighted. She was a woman who knew how to put up a

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tent with her eyes closed, and so she booked our spot at Big Cypress National Preserve before anyone could object.

The decision to go on the swamp walk was a difficult one to make. Covid-19 was just beginning to wreak havoc in New York City, and the CDC couldn't decide whether the virus was airborne or not, whether masks were useful or harmful, whether a vaccine was ever going to be a possibility. We found ourselves in that liminal space between "Did you hear about the virus on the other side of the world?" and the toilet paper running out in stores. We were on the edge of an event horizon, trying to peer into the future without light. Would the kids go back to school after Spring Break? Would everything be okay in three months? Was this the first wave of the pandemic and would there be a second? Is a swamp walk a safe thing to do? The choice wasn't an easy one, with so much of the future cloaked in unknowing. Several members of the troop stayed home, but the rest of us ventured forth. I figured this would be the last social thing we'd do in a while, and I wasn't wrong.

The year that followed would be all new, strange, and fearsome. It coincided with my daughter turning fifteen, an important year for Cuban-American girls, often marked by a big quinceañera party, a line that demarcates the border between childhood and young adulthood. There would be no party. She would leave behind her fourteenth year quietly, practicing her guitar in her room after we sang "Happy Birthday" with family via Zoom. It was to be a year of crossed borders, of sorts, though not the international kind with pandemic travel being both unsafe and difficult to do. I mean borders of a different sort. We were all journeying into a frightening darkness together. Who knew when there would be light again?

Speaking cartographically, the easiest way to get to Big Cypress National Preserve is to take Tamiami Trail, which is a trans-peninsular highway that starts near Tampa and ends in downtown Miami. For part of the way, the street is known as Calle Ocho, which cuts through the heart of Miami's Little Havana, home to Domino Park, where Cuban viejitos sling fichas while tourists gape. The road is a straight line that gives way to a string of unsavory hotels that come alive at night, past swaths of ranch-home neighborhoods, beyond Florida International University, home of the Golden

Panthers, and then, finally the edge of the Everglades, where the water is so still that slender grasses appear to be set on mirrors, reflecting endlessly.

The Florida sky always seems bluer in the Everglades, an azure blanket overhead, pierced by long-necked birds now and again. On the drive to Big Cypress Preserve, I urged my daughter to lift her head from her phone and look. I wished I wasn't driving, wished I could just stop and observe the grass, the sky, the birds, and the bumpy alligator backs, like shadows resting three dimensionally on the water. Eventually, the grasses gave way to trees. This was the first of the "borders" we would cross. The trees were short at first and spindly, with leaves tiny and bright green, and bark that was knobby and tortured into strange shapes. These were cypress trees, the forest line that marked the end of the Everglades, and as I drove on, they got taller, the road became shadier, and the sky felt smaller. It's helpful to understand a little about the way Florida is shaped here. If you aren't a Floridian, you might not know why, on maps, Florida has a gaping hole in it two-thirds of the way from the bottom. This is Lake Okeechobee, known as "Florida's Inland Sea," and the source of water for many municipalities, industries, the Everglades and Big Cypress country. One way to imagine the lake is think of it as a bowl of water tipped ever so slightly south. Also helpful is to imagine a vertical ridge bisecting southern Florida in two. That ridge marks the line where the grasses of the Everglades give way to the trees of Big Cypress. Deep among those trees is Big Cypress National Preserve, our Girl Scout destination.

It wasn't until we arrived that I noticed my daughter was wearing her new white sneakers and white socks. "You're going to end up tossing those," I said, and she shrugged the shrug of a young person who does not pay bills. We caught up with the rest of the troop members sitting on a picnic bench outside. The parents debated where to leave the lunches we'd brought, wondered about the virus, and discussed which stores still had supplies of hand sanitizer. Meanwhile, the girls compared soon-to-be-ruined sneakers. After a while, we were joined by Ranger Bill, who told us about his long career as a Park Ranger, his on-again, off-again seasons at Big Cypress and Yellowstone, and then gave a mini-lecture on cypress trees and Florida ecology. But all of this was preamble to the big event—the swamp walk.

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Ranger Bill offered the girls three choices. We could go on a tree walk, which was not through a swamp at all, but rather, on an elevated boardwalk. It would be a three-mile hike on a hot day with little shade. This was my choice. The alligators would be safely lurking in the water beneath the boardwalk, we would stay dry, though hot, and nobody's shoes would get ruined. But, as this was not Mom Scouts, but Girl Scouts, the girls got to choose, and they were hungry for adventure. Option two was a deep-water walk, in swamp muck waist-deep, with the added fun of running into 'gators and pythons. Luckily, one last mom and daughter pair joined us late at the very point of making this decision, and said parent put her foot (in a glamourous sneaker, mind) down. Only two of the girls were keen on getting that wet anyway, which left us with option three: a proper swamp walk through the cypress trees, thigh-deep water at most, and a quick turnaround at the known alligator hole.

Off we went to retrieve bright orange vests and walking sticks from the trunk of Ranger Bill's car. Thus attired, we crossed Tamiami Trail like ducklings after Ranger Bill and passed into the tree line. At first, the cypress trees were scattered, sad things, and the ground underfoot was dry. Every so often, Ranger Bill would pause and tell us about the history of the cypress forest, how the species was nearly driven to extinction by loggers, the strength and waterproof nature of the wood ideal for ships and life in muggy, humid Florida. Squelching underfoot alerted us to water, which grew deeper every few feet. We had traversed yet another boundary without realizing it. Now, the sun was tucked above the trees and the temperature was easily fifteen degrees cooler. The girls stirred up the mud with their walking sticks, and soon, shoes were being sucked off of feet and had to be retrieved.

At one point, Ranger Bill gasped. "A wild orchid!" he shouted, and paused to show off a delicate, purple flower near the ground. "I haven't seen one in years," he mused.

One of the girls asked, "What if somebody picks it?"

The look Ranger Bill gave her suggested the images that in that moment flew through his mind. "I wouldn't," he said, and then we all gave the flower a wide berth as we walked by.

Ranger Bill also pointed out “cypress knees,” knobby protuberances that jutted out of the swamp to trip an unsuspecting Girl Scout or two. Their function is unknown, but like all things in the swamp, Ranger Bill urged us not to touch them, or poke them with the walking sticks. Another gasp from the ranger led us to a rare salamander slithering between cypress knees. It was as thick as my forearm, shiny and quick. Ranger Bill fumbled with his iPhone to snag a photo, but the creature darted by.

“What if someone catches it and makes it a pet?” the girl who asked about the orchids put in.

Ranger Bill ignored her this time. He was evidently a quick learner.

“You’re my lucky tour group,” he said, and I whispered, “From your mouth to God’s ears,” because the water was getting deep now, and Ranger Bill had just pointed out the muddy trail left behind by a massive alligator. All the while, the latecomer to our group, the mom in the now-ruined glamour sneakers, muttered, “Oh my God,” continuously behind me, and shouted ahead to her daughter, “Be careful, my God,” anytime there was a change in water depth.

The girls were, largely, only interested in the curious sensation of mud in their shoes, laughing each time one of them tripped and got soaked, and squealing at the sound of creatures scurrying in the distance. I suppose that being fourteen years old is not exactly the most conducive age for wonder of this kind. The ego thrums loudest during the teen years, the awareness of self reaches its highest pitch, like an incessant, internal scream of “ME.” But if their developmental stage had allowed for it they would have noticed the curvature of the trees above us, how we found ourselves in a green dome, made particular by the delicate cypress leaves, the lichen illuminating the trunks in neon colors, the dark, wine-colored water swallowing our legs. The sun pierced the density here and set the backs of low-lying plants aglow. The rush of Tamiami Trail was gone, and it was quiet, quiet, save for the slurp-slurp of our feet, and I thought of alligators, the kings of this swamp, and how gloriously beautiful their kingdom was.

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Here, in the cypress swamp, coronavirus fears seemed very far away. Here, in the swamp, my daughter and her friends stirred the sludge with their walking sticks, giggling like children. Miraculously, cell phones stayed put in their pockets. They yelled at the sight of a snake, hugging one another in delightful fear. The eyerolls, the shrugs and cultivated teenage nonchalance had flitted away to some other place. We had entered another country somehow, a Narnia of the spirit. Had I missed the lamppost, the wardrobe? I decided that the peace and beauty and wonder of the swamp walk was worth the destruction of all the shoes in my closet. I briefly wondered what life would have been like for me if I'd become a Park Ranger and took a walk like this every day. I'd be healthier, happier, more positive, perhaps. It was the kind of place that made thoughts like that feel real, and not products of the serotonin that the cypress forest had milked out of me somehow.

Looking back now, I think of this excursion as a bookend to another life. In his poem, “January First,” Octavo Paz writes of the new year:

*The year's doors open
like those of language
toward the unknown.

Last night you told me: tomorrow
we shall have to think up signs,
sketch a landscape, fabricate a plan
on the double page
of day and paper.
Tomorrow, we shall have to invent,
once more,
the reality of this world.*

Walking through the swamp with my daughter was like saying goodbye to an old year, one in which she was not yet a high schooler, had not yet learned to drive. But not only that. Hopping into our cars without having to think about whether or not we had masks in our glove compartment, or worrying about what it meant if we didn't, would be a feature of the old year, the old us. Unaware and innocent, like the figure in Paz's poem, we would soon be tasked with inventing a new day and a new reality.

The swamp walk ended when we reached the previously mentioned ‘gator hole.’ Ranger Bill announced that the alligator who made this section

of deep water his home was about eight feet long, that it was best to leave him undisturbed, and that it was time to turn around. “Oh my God,” groaned the mom behind me, and she was the first to head back towards Tamiami Trail, the traffic of which grew louder as the water diminished underfoot.

Too soon, we’d left the magic of the cypress swamp walk behind and were back at the Visitor Center. Ranger Bill pointed us to a hose connected to the back of the building so that we might wash off our legs and shoes. My daughter’s shoes were, indeed, ruined, and smelled like dead things, but she was happy, and so was I. We ate a picnic lunch under the shade of an oak tree while blackbirds squawked for bread crusts. Afterwards, the Girl Scouts and their mothers parted ways in the parking lot, telling one another, “We’ll see each other soon,” and “This will all definitely be over by summer,” and making plans for the girls’ freshmen year in high school together, not knowing that they’d take their first 9th grade classes from home, Zooming the year away while grandparents got ill, parents lost jobs, and the coronavirus flourished unchecked in the United States.

That afternoon among the cypress trees, we had crossed in and out of an old world without knowing it for more than it was. The primeval peace it afforded lingered for a while, that is, until I got home and checked the news again. The next days would bring a flurry of changes—schools would be closed for the rest of the year, grocery shelves were empty, ICUs across the country would likely be at full capacity very soon, and all State and National parks were shuttered for the foreseeable future. We had, indeed, spent some time in Narnia, and like the Pevensies, had been thrust back into a harsher world. As I write this, my daughter has found a passion for music, and tarot, of all things, and I wonder if it’s not the borders of her future that she worries about most. What shape will they take in this strange reality? Perhaps she and the other scouts left a bit of their childhood behind at Big Cypress. I think I may have left some of mine there, too. I hope an alligator is guarding it for us in the quiet stillness of its swamp on the edge of everything, waiting for our return.