**Ventures in Dreaming**

Ellen Wieland

There’s an abandoned car in the woods just north of the house I grew up in. It was there before my parents bought the house, when the trees were like them—young and skinny and growing fast. But even as the church bells escorted my parents to their wedding reception, the trees would have been too tightly packed to even think about dragging the car out—not in one piece, that is, and certainly not in driving condition.

By the time I was old enough to romp around in those northern woods, rust was rotting away the fenders and doors and the engine was long gone, though any details beyond that have been lost in the haze of mixed-up memories that age has melted together. The only way to know more is to go back into the woods and check on that old car.

I could do it. I’m quarantined fewer than sixty yards away from the car, living in my childhood home and wishing I were anywhere else. I have nothing to do, no place to be, no friends to see, and no reason not to walk outside. I could put aside the pre-recorded lecture videos I wasn’t paying attention to, slip out the sliding glass door, and go right now.

Those trees are taller and thicker than when I played in them as a child, but they’re still the same, the way I’m taller and thicker but still the same. I could walk outside and grab the lowest branch on the tree rooted like a headstone at the resting place of the rusted, forgotten car. It’s at the perfect height for a ten-year-old to hoist herself up and get her skinny little feet to balance her weight before she reaches for the next branch, a little bit up and to the right. From the second branch, the third is easy, then with a little stretch there’s the fourth and the fifth and up and up until the uppermost branches are too thin to support her weight, so she starts climbing back down without ever touching the top and without stopping to take in the sights. I remember the joy that was always in the climbing but not in the sightseeing.

I can see her shadows flitting up the tree as my eyes trace her path through the branches, through the window, calculating which would be the trickiest turns to make, the furthest stretches. The ghostly memory of being that girl and of climbing those branches drapes itself heavily over my calculations. I’m taller now and stronger. Would that reach really be so much of a challenge? Would my arms now easily carry me across the distance that I used to struggle so much with?

I could be holding that branch right now, gripping it and heaving myself up. From the second branch to the third and the fourth and higher, I could be planting my feet and pushing out from where I could find purchase on the scratchy bark of the trunk. Up I could go, holding hands with the tree and hugging the trunk with my legs, and then when I would be almost (but not quite) at the top of the tree, I could stop and I could breathe. On the inhale: survey the empty roads and bike paths and soccer fields. On the exhale: let the idleness chase me all the way down to the ground.

But the March air is cold today; the windowpane is cool as I push my palm up against it. I could do so many things, but I know I won’t. I wish the wind weren’t so sharp today. I wish the trees weren’t so close together and that the rusted car could be unearthed and brought into the world for a second chance at life.

I wish climbing that tree would bring me as much freedom as it did when I was a ten-year-old girl reaching for the sky. I wish I could be as close to someone as those trees in the northern woods are to each other. I wish I could drag that rusted car out onto the empty street and drive somewhere, anywhere. But the car is damaged beyond repair and the trees are too close together and none of that even matters because there’s no place I can go.