

ANALYSIS

"The Old Forest" (1979)

Peter Taylor

(1917-1979)

"The Old Forest' explores with Taylor's characteristic finesse and subtle psychological understanding the impact of a single, quintessential event on the lives of its three major protagonists. Nat Ramsey, twenty-three, newly entered into his father's cotton-brokerage firm, is 'still learning how to operate under the pecking order of Memphis's male establishment.' Caroline Braxley, like her fiancé Nat a child of Memphis society, is wise beyond her years and her experience. She expects not only to have 'a marriage and a family of the kind [her] parents had had,' but because of her establishment heritage inevitably to contend with 'girls of another kind...who had no conception of what it was to have a certain type of performance expected of them.' Caroline's unwitting nemesis is just such a 'girl whose origins nobody knew anything about.' Lee Ann Deerhart is a 'dead attractive,' intelligent young woman come from the country to earn her own living in the big city, freed from the doubly binding constraints and protection of generations of family that 'girls like Caroline' enjoy.

A week before the wedding, on a snowy afternoon in 1937, Nat's car skids on the ice as he is on his way to study for a Latin test, and the resulting accident becomes 'a calamitous thing to have happen--not the accident itself, which caused no serious injury to anyone, but the accident plus the presence of that girl," Lee Ann. She has gone along for the ride, as she has on other occasions gone with Nat to drink in roadhouses, although she is 'perfectly decent' and their relationship is not sexual. Immediately upon impact, Lee Ann disappears into 'the old forest in Overton Park,' 'an immemorial grove of snow-laden oaks and yellow poplars and hickory trees....that men in Memphis have feared and wanted to destroy for a long time and whose destruction they are still working at' even some 40 years later as the aging Nat tells the story.

The old forest, Memphis's version of the forest primeval, is the site of an age-old conflict, literal and metaphorical, between men and women. 'It has only recently been saved by a very narrow margin from a great highway that men wished to put through there--saved by groups of women determined to save this last bit of old forest from the axes of modern men.' Women see as benign and sheltering what men see as sinister and destructive of the established order: 'Perhaps in old pioneer days, before the plantation and the neoclassic towns were made, the great forests seemed woman's last refuge from the brute she lived alone with in the wilderness [among wild Indians?]. Perhaps all men in Memphis who had any sense of their past felt this, thought they felt more keenly...that the forest was woman's greatest danger. Men remembered mad pioneer women, driven mad by their loneliness and isolation, who ran off into the forest, never to be seen again, or incautious women who allowed themselves to be captured by Indians.'

Although the wedding cannot take place until Lee is found, we know from the outset that she emerges from hiding four days later and that life goes on, superficially as usual, but deepened by the process of both the search and the discovery. Caroline, the levelheaded and magnificent representative of the old order, recognizes her precarious status in a 'world where women [are] absolutely subjected and under the absolute protection of men,' a world in which women 'have to protect and use whatever strength [they] have' in order to survive within the boundaries the patriarchy permits.

Lee Ann represents both the threat and the freedom of the new order. She and her liberated women friends 'treat men just as they please...and men like them better for it.' They 'have learned to enjoy life together and to be mutually protective, but they enjoy a [communal] protection also...from the men who admire their very independence'--the police, the newspaper editors who shield their names from public notice, business and community leaders, the very fathers of the 'girls like Caroline [who] took seriously' the forms and heritage of their closely regulated lives.

In this magnificent story Taylor explores many facets of his quintessential themes: the injustice of arbitrary power; the inevitability of social change; the fragility of social status; the complex ambiguity of relationships between parent and children, peers and subordinates, friends and lovers--with the women here as in many other stories, far stronger than the men in personality and in character."

Lynn Z. Bloom

"Peter Taylor"

Fifty Southern Writers after 1900: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook

eds. Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain

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"In the mid-1970s, Memphians had mobilized to change the course of an interstate highway slated to go through Overton Park. The campaign stirred Peter's musings about the ancient trees there in the heart of the city, the contrast of urban and primitive. The forest also brought back memories of an automobile accident Peter had in the park while taking courses at Southwestern. From these vague beginnings emerged his carefully plotted masterpiece about the search to find a lost girl and the effect on three lives--a young man, his fiancée, and the girl in his car at the time of the accident. Employing a character like Tom White, who had changed careers in mid-life, Peter presented as setting the Memphis of his youth and the position of different sorts of young women within the Southern patriarchy. When asked to explain her southern background, a woman of a later generation, a graduate of Harvard Law School, once said in my hearing, 'Read that story. It's all there in one place.' But the social delineation, however astute, is but one accomplishment of 'The Old Forest'; more broadly the story represents Peter Taylor's ultimate statement on the question of freedom and limitation. On August 1 (the deadline he had set for himself), he mailed the completed story from Sewanee to Frances Kiernan, his new editor at the *New Yorker*....

'The Old Forest' appeared in the *New Yorker* on May 14, 1979, one of the longest stories the magazine had ever published. Three weeks later Frances Kiernan wrote to say that the fan letters were surpassing even the response to 'In the Miro District'.... 'The Old Forest' had been selected for both *The Best American Short Stories, 1980* and the O. Henry Prize collection for 1980--the first time that a Peter Taylor story had made both.... Steve Ross called to tell Peter about settings for the movie version of 'The Old Forest'... Stories of the filming of 'The Old Forest' filled the Memphis newspapers."

Hubert H. McAlexander

Peter Taylor: A Writer's Life

(Louisiana State 2001) 237, 240-41, 247-48

Michael Hollister (2021)