

Forced March
Tom Long

Fog clung to the ground like stage smoke. It was cold, damp, and claustrophobic, like walking through a cloud.

The gravel road corkscrewed into the forest as if it were trying to avoid a dead end. A stand of pine trees towered over the leafless maples that lined the road edged with melting snow. Dogs barked in the distance, their calls muffled, mysterious. His heart thumped out a backbeat as he double-timed ahead.

Crunch...crunch...crunch. His hiking boots scratched out the rhythm.

The dawn excursion followed a sleepless night spent rolling between sweat-stained sheets, remembering things he couldn't forget: running in the woods when they were kids, swinging over table rock on the "Tarzan" rope swing, cooking hotdogs over a sputtering campfire, swimming in the muddy river, drinking their first warm beers. The memories flashed by like images in a powerpoint presentation.

He had known the guitar player since childhood. They reconnected recently and revived the garage band of their youth. On weekends they escaped the complications of work and parenthood to forge a few riffs onto an EP they hoped to distribute to family and friends.

The guitar player's wife called the night before. She said she hadn't seen him for a couple of days. He left for work on Monday and never returned. His truck was found at the end of the dead-end road in the woods where they had played as kids. He left his cell phone behind.

Had he seen him? Her voice trailed off.

The missing person story in the paper this morning said he took his handgun with him. The guy who wouldn't eat meat and refused to swat a mosquito because all living things that had a right to life had a handgun?

In retrospect, there were hints. Dark mentions of bullying in the woods by the older kids when they were young as well as intimations of something much, much worse. But he only intimated, never explained, and he changed the subject just as soon as it was broached. It was like the guitar player wanted to talk but couldn't. Was there something he could, or should, have done?

He couldn't just go to work, could he? He had to do something. He decided to go to the woods where the guitar player left his truck and look around. When he arrived at the end of the road there were half a dozen SUVs and a few cop cars parked at the turnaround. A couple of dogs barked and strained at their handlers' leads. The crunchy backbeat stopped as he froze in his hiking boots, unsure whether to proceed or retreat. But he was quickly relieved of the decision. A uniformed policeman came out to meet him and turned him away. "Sorry, you'll have to leave. Police business," he said. "There's nothing you can do."

The obituary was in the paper the next day.