

# Mother's Home

by [Michael Shindler](#) (July 2021)



*Rocks in the Forest*, Paul Cézanne, 1890s

**The hour, though late, was bright** while little Charlie sat on the back deck looking out at the treeline bordering his backyard and the forest. Fall had just begun and a strong wind breaking through the canopy knocked a first batch of leaves from their branches. Tinsel-like they fluttered, catching glints of afternoon light in the open air. To Charlie, they seemed unnaturally suspended, as if gravity were for whatever reason availing them a few extra moments to glimmer freely

before taking hold of them. Nonetheless, he delighted in the spectacle immensely, and as he delighted, he began to savor the subtle perfumes the wind was carrying from the forest floor, which brought him into a state of elation he reckoned would go unequalled for the rest of the month. Then his father sat down beside him.

He was a quiet man and his face was crowded with thick muscles laying over well-formed bones, with brows wearing invariably the expression of an altarpiece-Adam just kicked out of paradise. But unlike Adam (at least in conventional depictions) he had a very large and dense moustache, the sort which has been out of fashion for at least a century and a half, but which on his face seemed perfectly appropriate—as if a smaller mustache would not have sufficiently anchored the weight of his expression against the drama of his features.

Looking down at Charlie, he judged that the child was in a relatively agreeable mood. (Little Charlie was prone to melancholy and his father knew better than to foist bad news on him in the midst of a purple moment.) So, in a tone of self-conscious paternal gentleness, he said, “Charlie, I have something important to tell you.” But being young and inexperienced with what such phrases meant, Charlie did not have the slightest notion that he was about to hear something upsetting.

The gist of the news was that his late mother’s illness had been expensive to treat and that the whole process of treatment had taken a toll on his father so great that he lost his job—to the effect that the family (which was just the two of them) was broke. Their savings were exhausted. His father could no longer afford the mortgage payments on the house. They would have to sell or give it to the bank. It was not clear to Charlie. But then his father explained in a forced, lighter tone that there was good news. He had just been offered a new job and found a comfy little house for them to rent. However, as it happened, the new job and house were

in Connecticut and the two would have to move in about three weeks.

He said such things as, "I know you love this house quite a lot, but home is where the heart is" and "though this will undoubtedly be a very hard thing to bear, it is the very hardest things upon which good characters are built," *et cetera*, taking pains to hide his characteristic enjoyment in weaving together cliches and platitudes. But then he saw the sadness welling up in Charlie's eyes, which were a sort of goldish, speckled-hazel like his mother's, and supposed it derived from the prospective loss of the home in which his mother had raised him, and that this revelation consequently linked itself to and compounded that of his mother's loss. So, in a tone as soft as a landscape-painting-cloud on a blue-grey mountain jutting over the horizon-line, he added, "She'll always be with us." But little Charlie did not seem reassured. If anything, he seemed sadder. Big tears pooled atop the apples of his cheeks, wetting his eyelashes.



Charlie did not tell his father the true reason for why he was so sad. (Even at his age he recognized such a reason would not do.) He loved the forest he was looking out upon—irrationally and totally—and did not want to leave it. He nodded his head towards his father to signify that his father's words were aptly meant, and his father, looking tenderly down on him, saw this nodding and recognized it as an act. In Charlie's eyes, still welling pitiably, he saw, just behind a watery reflection of the falling leaves, a sadness he could not quite understand. But he excused his lack of understanding on the grounds that little Charlie's premature loss and this news were things that he himself had little comparable experience with. Thus, he did his best to exude an air of reassurance, feigning with various solemn gestures a semblance of understanding.

Later, when he was alone, Charlie wondered what to do. His father was his father: his lord and master. From him he got his food, shelter, and guidance. Further, he supposed he loved him and was bound to him—a supposition he knew from school was codified in Exodus 20:12: “Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.” This commandment had been given by God to Moses, who gave it to the nation of Israel in the wilderness from Mount Sinai. And because his mother was gone, he felt he ought to honor his father all the more, like those Orthodox Jews whose distress at their inability to observe mosaic laws concerning priestly vestments and animal sacrifices, which necessitate an extent Temple—the last of which was destroyed by Roman legions during the reign of Titus—manifests in a keener reverence for the laws they can keep. (A reverence notably exceeding that of the ancient Israelites in the Book of Kings—which Charlie was then studying in school—who lived in the shadow of the Temple and regularly grieved their prophets by flouting mosaic laws and worshipping foreign gods willy nilly.) Thus, with an air of willful piety, Charlie resolved to part ways with the forest and go with his father to Connecticut.



He had not always loved the forest. For most of his life, it had simply been a vast stretching thing behind his house: a tangled sprawl haphazardly occupying space in-between patches of civilization. An industrialist whose name Charlie once read on a rusted plaque at school had bequeathed it all, erstwhile a mixture of old-growth woodland and infertile farms, to the county on the condition it not be developed, and in the century and a half since his death, nature reclaimed it.

About a year ago, on a mellow Saturday morning, when his mother was still alive and well, Charlie was bored and

marched into his parents' bedroom to announce his boredom, hoping they would address it. His father, who was a light sleeper and usually woke first on such occasions, looked down at little Charlie with that numb expression worn by all parents when they are awoken in the middle of a lovely dream by their lovely little child. Briefly, he turned towards his wife, who was a heavier sleeper. On her lips and eyelids was a look of bliss reminiscent of the faces of heavily tranquilized bears. He turned back to Charlie and said, "Why don't you and I go for a little hike out back?" And Charlie agreed, though he was suspicious of his father's proposal as being somewhat second-rate—as if he had just proposed picnicking on the weeds under the deck.

With the customary sanctimony of those that give well-worn advice, Charlie's father instructed him to pull his socks over his pants, wear long sleeves, and take a water bottle. And though he did not understand why such precautions were necessary, they had the effect of piquing his interest—quite the same way that learning signs, handshakes, and dictums tend to heighten a prospective initiate's regard for the mystery into which he is to be inducted. So, cautiously-yet-excitedly Charlie followed his father to the treeline and stepped in after him.



There is a peculiar experience that people, particularly children, have when first stepping into a true forest. The light changes. The scents change. Colors bedevil the constancy of their character, suffusing themselves with shifting shadows and the play of sunlight. Perhaps an analogous experience occurs with temples and churches. The columns, decorative glasswork, and polished stone surfaces all echo elements of the forest, particularly forest groves (wherein some anthropologists propose our ancestors first worshipped). But though such buildings echo these elements,

perhaps even bring them to a clearer pitch, they only echo them; in the forest the resonance runs deeper.

Oblivious to Charlie's enamorment, his father provided a running monologue of warnings and commentary: "look where you step," "if you're not sure where to step, step where I've stepped," "see that? that's all poison ivy, don't touch it." Eventually, the pair arrived at a low stone wall, or rather the remains of one. Here, Charlie's father remarked, "See this? The settlers built it. There are walls like this all over." Instantly, Charlie's appreciation for the forest became saturated with historical significance. Though not explicitly, he now conceived of the greenery around him as a symbol of nature overcoming human effort: the triumph of unthinking life over thinking life. In a sense, it was the same notion he had formed with regard to weeds, but extended globally. He wondered about the people, these "settlers," who built these walls and marveled at how quickly their work had been encompassed, for he knew the United States was not a particularly old country. His parents had once taken him to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and he had seen paintings there that looked quite modern that he knew were older than the Revolutionary War, and Greek and Roman statues that seemed, if not modern, at least familiar, that were older than the English language. Somehow, Charlie thought to himself, this forest, which could not be chronologically much older than his school or house, seemed markedly older than those paintings and statues. Perhaps only the mummies in the ancient Egyptian exhibits seemed nearly as old, but even then, in a different way.

The two progressed; Charlie's father led him on a genial tour of brooks, thickets, gnarled trees, glens, and so on—not proceeding according to any established route, but just in one direction, knowing a highway bordered the portion of the forest directly opposite their house and that if they walked long enough, they would arrive at it and easily find

their way home.

Thereafter, Charlie would regularly ask his father to take him on hikes and as he would often ask on weekend mornings, when his father thought his mother needed her sleep (it was around then that her illness began to run its course), he would oblige him. For Charlie, each trip was wholly unique, involving new scenes for his delectation—a ladder-less treehouse, an abandoned car, a boulder that had been split in half, an old-fashioned arrow stuck in a birch tree, and so on. Initially, he would try to rekindle such scenes. But he was never successful. Gradually, he began to feel that each was significant: when he saw one, it was because the forest intended for him to see it. It was not to be sought again—and if Charlie did reencounter a scene, he would regard it as a profound sign, spending days thereafter reckoning the forest's meaning.

As his mother's illness worsened, his father felt it best to stay, when possible, with her at home, and therefore permitted Charlie, figuring he had gotten a hang of the forest, to go on hikes unchaperoned—provided he returned before sundown. For Charlie, this newfound freedom had neither been anticipated nor remotely imagined. At first, he exercised it cautiously, pretending on his hikes that his father was with him, scrutinizing his actions. But in short order he grew at ease with the forest, wandering it with jejune abandon.



Often, he would set off early so as to spend virtually every daylight hour in the shade of the canopy, verging carelessly from sight to sight, barely tracking his direction, knowing at any time he was at most a mere two hours' walk in a straight line back to civilization. And never once did he encounter anyone else, which was not particularly remarkable but had the effect of engendering in him a sense of intimacy

with the forest. No one was watching.

Every scene yielded an exhaustive encounter with a shade of the forest's beauty. On one occasion, for instance, he found a cluster of old-growth trees underspread with patches of moss and there, lying down, drifted into a caliginous half-sleep, taking in with barely open eyes the scene's pulsations of agrestal splendor. At such times—within such scenes—he was like someone attending a performance of Liszt or Chopin after a heavy dinner, who at first listens attentively, but at length feels sonorous rivulets pouring inwards, supplanting the process of thought that erstwhile anticipated or marked passing notes—till at last the music cascades in his depths and slips into the seat relinquished by internal monologue.

But just as that concert-goer the morning after experiences a different, secondary appreciation for the music he heard, generated in the process of recollection, perhaps even aided by the review of sheet music or the careful consideration of whether a pianist did a particular cadenza adequate justice, Charlie also experienced a secondary appreciation for the beauty of the forest; after his hikes, he would typically spend hours weighing the aesthetic merits of the sights he had seen, comparing (often with reference to an old illustrated encyclopedia) the colors of leaves, the textures of barks, and the characters of songbirds.

But perhaps there is a better analogy—the lover who sees the face of a woman unknown to him and becomes instantly enraptured (in quite the same way one of Liszt's etudes might have enraptured our concert-goer, but more overwhelmingly given the beauty in question has a real, tangible, living existence). In the morning after seeing and perhaps even meeting her, he reflects on her face, considers its features, perhaps muses over its similarity to the subjects of famous paintings. In both cases, whatever their applicability, there exists the first sort of experience of beauty and the second.



Thus did Charlie delight in his daylong hikes and nightlong reveries.

On the afternoon of the penultimate day, he sat on a boulder by a brook about a half-hour's walk into the forest, barefoot, taking in the scene's fragrance. It all seemed more glorious than usual, the same way the face of a beloved might seem when one is grievously sure it will not be seen again. Little Charlie felt this—though like most nine-year-old boys he did not have any real experience with romance. (However, he had read many books and watched many films treating the subject). In his heart, he felt he should elope that night, but figured he could not responsibly make that decision where he was, but would have to do so at home with the windows shut and curtains drawn—where he could not see the forest and the forest could not see him.

Later, in his bedroom, he closed his eyes and thought about the forest and the things he would have to forsake were he to run away—his books, his father's company, candy bars, a normal life—but he concluded that these things were rather boring and that the forest offered its own delights and way of life. He knew from his reading that men had not always lived in houses and gone to school, that they once resided quite happily in forests. As to the character of this life, Charlie favorably recalled displays he had seen in the Museum of Natural History involving well-built, vigorous-looking individuals with spears, pelts, and baskets of berries and mushrooms. Then there intruded the thought of his father's disappointment.

He knew the commandment to honor his father and mother was good. But he also knew it was not very specific. Would it not likewise apply to an adopted child regarding his foster parents? Did it not simply mean one should give due honor to the things responsible for one's upbringing? And did not man have his upbringing in forests? Thus, Charlie reasoned that if a single man ought to honor that which provided for his

upbringing, he ought to honor all the more that which provided for the upbringing of man in general. This, Charlie admitted to himself, was not an iron-clad argument, but it was solid enough for him to pronounce that his head had cause to agree with his heart. So, a few minutes to midnight, well after his usual bedtime of 10:30 p.m., he stole away into the forest.

He had never been in the forest at night, though he had often imagined it, conjuring up visions of sleeping fawns, gemstone-clear stars, and numberless crickets—which, though he had often heard them from his window, he supposed in the forest were louder and more musical.



The forest exceeded his every expectation; in the starlight, in the glow of the full moon above the wavering canopy (a moon little Charlie had entirely forgotten to account for) the forest seemed a mysterious mirror. And he thought about how strange it was that the moon—though it was the second brightest light in heaven, with its whole brightness being derived from the sun to the extent that it was only properly visible in the latter's absence—should cast a light so much more beautiful than sunlight. Somewhere in the cosmic alchemy that transmutes boring sunlight into moonlight a process of refinement or elimination must take place, as when streetlight passes through stained-glass into the apse of a cathedral and suddenly becomes suffused with angelic grandeur. Whatever their means, such secondary lights seem not only to make things apparent, but also reveal them in a second aspect. In that vein, there is yet another sort of experience of beauty thus far unmentioned with bearing on Charlie's situation.

When our analogical friends, the concert-goer and the lover, first encountered their beauties, their experience, roughly speaking, was immanent, and when they soberly

considered them afterwards, it was reflective. But in the experience of the latter there occurs a disappointment, for though it is often far richer in detail and certainly more explicable than the former, it seems to lack something, which memory fails to resurrect, but the existence of which is felt as an absolute necessity—because without it the great love in question feels unreasonable, if not impossible. In the middle of the performance our concert-goer remembers hearing, for instance, a sort of voice, akin to a soprano, but from the middle of the strings section, where there were no singers—and this voice was the sweetest of all. But he cannot find it the morning after in the sheet music or even in a recording of that same concert. Likewise, our lover replicates in his mind's eye the face of his beloved or looks at a photograph of her, and it seems impossible the face he is considering is quite right. It seems to be missing something—seems not to capture that which he knows he saw and hopes with all his heart to see again.

Naturally, our friends return to their beauties seeking that which so roused their ardor. But generally, they do not find it: they find a piece of music and a woman, and in finding them as such find them to be part of that world of things of which they have knowledge. (Notably, it is this prototypical re-encounter that usually precipitates the transformation from music lover to connoisseur and boyish romantic to responsible husband.)

But then it happens one day when neither of our friends is searching or even thinking about their beauties: they see or hear something in a strange light or circumstance and for a moment—which seems in retrospect either a sublime gift or cruel trick—see again what they once saw, before they recognize it and it reassimilates itself into the world they know. And in this encounter, just as the thing begins to assume its known aspect, it becomes for the most fleeting moment all the more beautiful, because the lack of it had so

engraved itself on their innermost foundations (and not neatly, but causing all sorts of long, winding cracks). In that moment the lack is filled overflowing, as with a brilliant draught of molten gold. Then it is as if their whole soul is set aright, stronger than ever—able to withstand the weight of the world and then some.

That is how the forest was in the moonlight for Charlie. He saw it all again, strange, new, and wonderful. In hours passing like paradisiacal weeks, he lost all doubts, even the very thought of doubt. He forgot his father, his house, his school, the whole of the civilized world. But at great length, in view of the coming dawn, inordinately tired, he laid his head down on a root and fell asleep blanketed in the rich hues and welcome warmth of the morning sun. Meanwhile, Charlie's father had woken up and—not finding him anywhere in the house—figured he had run off, and was frantically calling the neighbors, asking if they had seen him.

A few hours later, Charlie also woke up, though he had not brought a watch with him and did not know the time. He supposed he had slept for a day or two, considering how well rested he felt, and although he was initially worried about his ignorance regarding just how long he had slept, he figured such things no longer mattered.



In the daylight, the forest was not half so magical as it was the night before. But Charlie recognized it as the same forest and was not much troubled, presuming he was sure to see it in moonlight again. However, his clothing was damp with dew and the weather was a bit chillier than he had expected. He should have packed a sweater, he thought. But he soon reasoned, perhaps overconfidently, that if fawns and foxes could hack it without sweaters, so could he. Thus, with the

aim of finding shelter for the coming night, he explored while dark clouds gathered overhead. To his dismay, he realized he was hungry.

He knew that there was what to eat in forests—berries, mushrooms, and the like—and set out to collect some. Sure enough, he found an abundance. Yet, he was not sure that everything he collected was good to eat, knowing well there were things that grew in forests that ought to be avoided. But the notion of poison berries, *et cetera*, in terms of Charlie's general knowledge existed in the same category as the witch's apple in the story of Snow White. That is, he knew there were such things as fine-looking natural foodstuffs that were bad for him. But in practical terms, he did not know how statistically common they were or by what means, if there were any, he could differentiate them from their normal counterparts. Certainly, what he had collected looked good, and when he ventured a very brief lick of a cartoonishly appetizing mushroom, he found that he did not seem to suffer any ill effects. So, he reckoned that though it was true that poisonous things in forests did exist, they were probably not very common, and probably not common enough to have ended up in the little pile of things he had just collected. After all, this was no fairytale forest in Europe and he was no Snow White.

At home, his father was talking to a group of policemen. They had enlisted a helicopter from the next county over to aid in the search. Though he could not see it overhead, Charlie heard it flying in the distance, and figured there was a good chance it was looking for him. For the first time since running away he thought of his father and how worried he must be. But he also thought about the punishment that would be in store were he to find him. More affected by the latter than the former, he hardened his heart and resolved not to give himself up. He was doing just fine, he thought, while settling down on a well-shaded patch of grass. He had

gathered food and found shelter. More or less at peace, he began chowing down.

Nothing tasted particularly good. But he thought that was probably because it was not the right season to be eating whatever it was he was eating—even apples, he knew, were bitter out of season. Certainly, he had nursed a hope that the mushrooms and berries he had collected would be as appetizing as the sights and smells of the forests he had come to love, but he assuaged his disappointment by reminding himself that his meal was probably nutritious given how natural it was—and was therefore good for him.

Hours passed; the forest became more enthralling, exuding here and there peculiar snatches of moonlight, appearing, if not actually brighter, infinitely more vibrant. Lights and shadows meshed among the flora, interweaving themselves in a coruscating plexus of organic geometry. Charlie felt as if he were no longer a stranger, as if the branch beside his arm were one of his arms, and his arm one of its—as if the rivulets running off a nearby brook flowed from or perhaps into the pinkish veins he knew from the mirror at home climbed at the corners of his eyes. Abruptly, he had the impression that there were no meaningful divisions between the forest and himself, that he as such had no true existence. And this impression—this conviction—seemed incredibly alluring. A part of him was quite at ease, but another reflected. Terror heaved up like a wildfire within him. He tried to reassure himself, to delineate his body from the forest, but the more he tried the more the shapes of the forest bore down upon him from every angle.

The forest was no longer a mere agglomeration of individual specimens of flora and fauna. It was a large, cohesive, flat being—larger than the forest, encompassing all forests, living and dead matter: the world in all its weightiness. And he railed from his innermost against this other being, so much bigger than himself, in view of which he

felt there was no hope, and towards which he felt more like a child than at any instance in his whole childhood. It had all been so beautiful. And still—it was beautiful, exactly the same in the bare terms of beauty. This was the forest he had loved, the one he had slept in just the night before with unequalled delight. Something in him longed to cry out, to demand the identity of the thing he was struggling with.

He listened but heard nothing, felt nothing. He concentrated on the one part of the forest that seemed out of reach of the moonbeams, a little patch of darkness in the distance, and there began to see something. Certainly, he knew that when one stares into the darkness or a mirror, the mind begins to play tricks, and he did not discount the possibility that what was emerging in the darkness was such a trick. It seemed to be a face, a woman's face. No, it was his mother's face. And Charlie knew his mother was dead and was struck through with fear. But he could not look away and soon, it did not quite seem to be his mother's face at all. That is, not in particular. It was simply the face of a mother. But this was even more terrible.

And though he suspected that what he was seeing was not real, he still felt that he existed in the relation of a son to this face. He recognized his own eyes set deeply in its and in looking at those eyes, in meeting their gaze, he felt the totality of the forest bear down upon him in knowing concentration. He tried to imagine his father's face, thinking confusedly it might be of help. (He knew dimly that opposites sometimes cancel each other out.) But try as he might, his father's face eluded him. Every time he started to mentally sketch the brows and eyes, this other face would impose itself. And yet he knew his father was looking for him. He was so lost. He must be looking for him. He wanted very badly to go home, even to the home he did not know in a different state. But he could not turn away. His eyes looked into her eyes, and suspended in-between were leaves catching the

morning light, glimmering, almost-disappearing till the breeze would twist one of their faces sunward. And little Charlie knew then that the whole beauty of the forest he had loved and continued to love, in spite of everything, was in that glimmering.

## [Table of Contents](#)

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