



## FIRST LANDFALL

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I am almost forty-eight years old, in what I hope is the middle of my life, walking a remote path on the east side of a wild barrier island, Gulf of Mexico, Florida. The day is in early January, and I am celebrating a new year where bald eagles nest, where red wolves have been reintroduced, where migratory birds land and feed after their long journeys, and where signs of Native American habitation, mostly oyster-shell middens, still abound.

Friends and I boated here this morning, across Indian Pass to a protected inlet with 360 degrees of wildness except for one lobster boat easing through Saint Vincent Sound, toward Apalachicola Bay. I walked alone around a spit and down a beach that faces the morning sun, keeping to a strand firmed by outgoing tide.

I can't remember being on a beach more wild. I pause to examine sand dollars and sponges. Sometimes uprooted trees,

eroding majestically in wind and tide, block the way. I walk backwards against the calendar, against the years, becoming the young woman I have been, who had time for nature, who did not sit for long hours at a desk—and on backwards toward the naturalist and the explorer and then the native I do not remember being, although the ancient landscape stirs in me reminders.

My friends and I are the only people, I am sure, on this wild January island, and now I am almost a mile from my friends, down a wild beach.

But the wild island can only be as wild as the Gulf that surrounds it, and the Gulf can't get away from people. Around me the beach is littered with human detritus—plastic buckets, Styrofoam crab floats, rubber gloves from the oystermen, plastic drink bottles, aluminum cans. Part of a dock has washed ashore, treated lumber with nails exposed. A lobster boat passes and I hear its deckhands calling to each other.

The things we manufacture and use away from this wild refuge wind up here anyway, in the one place they should not be. I stand and look out at the Gulf, my head full of terrible thoughts, thinking about an oil spill and what would happen to this place, warm Gulf waters unswimmable, beach contaminated, sea life extinguished. The thought of it is too horrendous to dwell upon. The worst of human civilization insinuates itself in the best of what we have left. I see a woods path and go inland. I am far, far away from everything I don't like about the world, and I am in the embrace of that which I love most. The maritime forest is alive with magnolia and live oak, with tall cabbage palms. This is not a thin forest, not a sparse forest, not a new forest, not a forest to be taken lightly. This is an old forest on an old barrier island where red wolves have been calling.

As I walk I am remembering the young woman I used to be, who came alive in wind and sun.

These feelings are especially strong because the Gulf of Mexico was the territory in which I came of age. Here I first saw plovers nesting on beach sand. Here I saw a freshwater

spring bubbling from the salty depths of the Gulf. Here I experienced wildfire. Here I made my first bird list and retrieved my first scallop, caught my first shark. Here I tasted smoked mullet and found an ancient pottery shard and sailed and identified an oystercatcher. Here, as I said, I came alive.

As I walk I am making resolutions. As I walk I am coming back from the dead. In the New Year, outside will be inside. I will spend more nights out of doors, the way I used to do. I will canoe more rivers. I will celebrate the high holidays of the sun, earth's calendar, with ceremonies that involve fire and no money. I will pay more attention to birds.

I will use less, stay home more. I will think about the consequences of my decisions on even the smallest menhaden in the sea. Along my path are the large bones of sambar deer. In an owl pellet (marked by white stains on leaves, below a level branch) I poke around and find the tiny skull of a rodent. I am happy in these old coastal woods, happy in the middle of my life, happy in this moment.



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