

Appalachia

Volume 72
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2021: Mountains in a
Pandemic*

Article 13

2021

The Shaking Trees: In the Forest, Catching Up with Mom by Phone

Andrew Jones

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jones, Andrew (2021) "The Shaking Trees: In the Forest, Catching Up with Mom by Phone," *Appalachia*: Vol. 72: No. 1, Article 13.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol72/iss1/13>

This In This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu.

The Shaking Trees

In the forest, catching up with Mom by phone

Andrew Jones



“YOU SHOULD BE WEARING YOUR MASK,” MY MOM SCOLDED FROM 400 miles away.

“I’m in a forest,” I replied. “I think I can rule out the maples coughing up virus particles.”

There’s a young forest that starts at the edges of my backyard. It doesn’t go very far: Wolf Creek and the Grove City suburbs that look like every other western Pennsylvanian small town keep it from developing into a dense and thriving forest. Most of the trees stand fairly tall, but their trunks aren’t thick. Flexible and limber, the strong winds that blow from eastern Ohio cause maples to smash into black gums, while pines rustle down needles like green dandruff. Nature had become a quick yet effective panacea to isolation life, and these brief excursions into this pocket of nameless nature nestled between my house and the creek provided some relief that sidewalks and passing cars couldn’t. “Either way,” I told my mother, “I rarely see people wearing them.”

“Well, I read that in Pennsylvania it’s mandatory when you leave the house to wear a mask or something covering your mouth.” She sighed and paused. “I just want you to be safe.”

“I know,” I respond. “I’m sorry. But there’s rarely anyone back here. I think I’ll be OK. I am thinking ahead. It’s just a bit different out here than by you.” There’s such a disconnect between our experiences with this stay-at-home order. It feels impossible to speak about something without having to clarify something or frustrate her.

“Is Sky with you, at least? I bet she’s enjoying the day. It’s nice and sunny here.” I look up, and dark clouds are pushing through the blue sky.

“Yeah, she’s up ahead a bit.” I scanned around and watched Sky, my black and white pit bull, sniffing a patch of grass. She began to open her mouth when I yelled out. “Sky, you’re not a cow. Do not eat that!”

“What’s she doing?” Mom became worried on the other side.

“She was just about to eat some grass,” I responded. “Nothing to get worked up over.”

“Oh. Well, work’s having me do some extra shifts,” she said while my other ear listened to a not-so-distant woodpecker. “The nurses’ union set up a daycare for all Long Island hospital workers who have kids,” she said. “The daycare centers shut down, so we’re all they have that’s open. I’ll take their temperatures a few times during the shift to make sure no one’s exhibiting a

The author’s dog, Sky, explores a suburban woods in western Pennsylvania.

ANDREW JONES

fever. We don't have enough tests to go around, so taking their temperature is the only way to reliably guess whether they have it or not."

"Catch anyone yet?" I asked. I leaned over to a muscledwood and felt its smooth bark. It's not often anymore that you can touch another living thing, with social distancing and face mask enforcement around every corner. Even though it's been relatively quiet, we've been given pretty strict guidelines to follow. The quiet stresses me.

"So far, we've been lucky, although I'm sure one of them will get it eventually." Mom was silent for a few seconds. Sky found a patch of grass to roll in for a spell. "Had to bring Aunt Barbara some eggs. She was almost out; I still have half a dozen left, so I should be good until whenever I find them next."

"Why was she running out? Couldn't she just go to the store and grab some herself?"

"Andrew," my mom said. "The stores are all out. Long Island is out of everything essential."

"Oh," I muttered. I thought back to my last trip to the store. Eggs were there by the dozens of dozens, along with milk, bread, chicken. Hell, you could still have the deli slice up a pound of American cheese and hand it to you. The only odd thing not in stock was toilet paper, which so far had been the only commonality we'd shared throughout all of this. Even if they did run out of eggs, I knew enough people that had chickens. I think I knew more chickens than people in Grove City.

"Which reminds me," my mom began in that tone that told me I would be quiet for a minute or two. I let her ramble on about eggs, freezing milk, buying yeast, doing some deep cleaning, and going for a jog around the block with Sky to keep my mind off things. The wind was picking up again, and I could hear it in the trees. A branch here or there would plummet to the ground, and Sky would jump if they landed near her. The trees bowed together and whipped around, crashing into their neighbors like packed subway passengers. What I wouldn't do to be a subway passenger stuffed in a full subway car, tapping into others as it shifted and stuttered toward something to do filled with people to see. Concerts have been canceled, classes have been postponed, and work has been upended. The restaurant where I work has converted to take-out only.

I heard a loud crack across Wolf Creek: Another tree must have given in to that eastern terror piercing through. I walked over to the steep hill that dipped into the creek and peered through the trees to try to find its fallen trunk.

"Grandma's not doing well," Mom's words broke through the woods and brought me back into the conversation.

"Didn't she just get out of the hospital last week from pneumonia?"

"She wasn't in the hospital. She stayed in the nursing home that time, but yes, they think she's got pneumonia again," Mom said. "Or maybe not. You've seen the case numbers out here." The number of confirmed cases in New York had just crept over 20,000. Meanwhile, Western Pennsylvania has barely seen cases in the 100s. Grove City only had one case, and that was reported two days ago. "So she's in the hospital now."

"Have you gone to see her yet?"

"They won't let you in," her voice became heightened. She took a deep breath. "They don't let you into the hospitals with so many COVID patients going in, and she said she's getting tired of talking to everyone on the phone. It's hard for her to talk. So I haven't heard from her. I call the nurses station every few hours and send them bagels every once in a while. It helps them remember her. She said at one point it took her four hours to get some Tylenol."

"Do you think she's got it?"

"All I know is that they're doing the best they can."

"She's gotten over worse. I'm sure she'll get through this. She's practically an expert at kicking pneumonia's ass," I tried joking. Conversation was all I could do, and this realization made me feel worthless.

"Just pray for her," my mom trailed off, holding something back. I could hear the trees groan louder. The wind blew harder, and black clouds covered the sky.

ANDREW JONES is a creative writing student at Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania. He has been published in the *Showbear Family Circus* and *In Parentheses*.