

*A Spot in the Woods*

**S. L. Matthews**

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# Camp T.R.

## A Place for Healing

For two decades, Carroll Hospice's Camp T.R. has been a place for children to find comfort during their time of grief. The free weekend camp combines grief education with traditional camp activities in a supportive setting.

Link (but it doesn't work): <https://www.carrollhospice.org/a-place-for-healing>

A Spot in the Woods is a true story--my story. This is my personal childhood memoir about love, loss and the power of a bonding friendship strong enough to span centuries.

I dedicate this story to the memory of my best friend, my partner in innocence and mischief. You always wanted to help people--I know you still are.

Keep your powder dry, T.R. I'll never forget.

Love,

S. L.

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## Author's Note

Unfortunately, *Memories from Maple Street*, the anthology housing my nonfiction short entitled "A Spot in the Woods," is no longer in print. Due to the great importance of this story and my desire to educate about the Camp T.R. Grief Counseling camp for children, I have decided to publicly post "A Spot in the Woods" for you to read at your leisure free of charge, with permission from the original publisher.

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## A Spot in the Woods

“Not yet,” he whispered. “Steady your aim, men!”

Men? Oh, how I hated that. I could fight just as well as them. Poking my head over the log fortress, I grit my teeth and glared at our brave commander. Just because I was the only girl in our rag-tag band, didn't mean I wanted to be lumped in with the boys. T.R. knew that, how many times did I have to remind him?

Ignoring me, he aimed his old blunderbuss down the path where the enemy certainly lay hidden. I suppose now was not the time to bring it up again. When lying in ambush, one must never break into an argument, even if you were just called a boy. I wondered if ole Major Rogers had to enforce that rule upon his Rangers?

We could hear them coming. They were marching closer, flashes of red glistening through the trees. Lobsterbacks! They sure made a racket, marching and drumming, announcing their passage to every bird and squirrel, and any Patriot for a hundred miles around. One even took up blowing on his tin whistle.

Our ranks were relatively secure, hidden behind the massive logs of our fortress. T.R. was certain of his trusty blunderbuss, and our own weapons were at the ready. Just a little closer.... One of the men at my left took a fit. Emboldened by our position, he jumped straight up and hollered.

“Attack!”

T.R. grimaced, he would have to deal with the overzealous Patriot later.

“Bang! Bang, bang bang!” sounded through the forest. The air was acrid from musket-fire. The Lobsterbacks were surprised, but they held their position, returning our fire. Ironically, the man who sprung the ambush too soon, was the first one hit. He grasped his stomach and cried out, rolled off the wall and wiggled like a worm in the dirt, moaning and groaning. I paused to watch his theatrical performance. He seemed to be taking an awfully long time to lay still.

Our enemies were trying to regroup, but we held firm. We could not lose the safety of our fortress, no matter what the cost. Again and again they attacked, but we drove them back each time. I hoped we had enough powder and lead to see us through the battle, otherwise, I knew who they'd be sending out amidst the melee to fetch

reinforcements. I always figured they knew I ran faster than any of them, even with layers of petticoats...not that they'd ever admit it.

Had we been left to our own devices, we probably would have survived the battle relatively unscathed. Of course, nothing ever goes as planned in war. So focused on the enemies to the front and sides, we failed to notice the arrival of the giants. Tall, lumbering men two, no, three times our size stepped over our barricades as though made of kindling and, selecting our finest logs, uprooted them from our walls.

"T.R.! They're stealing our fort!" I shouted over the din, for chaos broke loose. My band was running everywhere, ducking to protect the remains of our precious stronghold. The Lobsterbacks scattered into the woods to regroup, in doubt. They wanted no part of the log-stealing giants.

One of the rotund bearded fellows, carrying a stash of fortress logs in his massive forearm, paused to grin at us. He reached out with a large paw and tousled T.R.'s fair hair.

"Sorry kids, but your fort has to fuel our dinner."

Maybe the giant didn't see T.R.'s blunderbuss raise in defiant retaliation, but I did. I considered the man lucky; had he not left when he did, he might have been dinner for the buzzards. Instead, T.R. grabbed my hand and we fled into the woods together, away from battle and away from the loss of our firewood fortress.

Eager to catch our breath, we sat together, peering into the thick pine forest towering above us. It was dark under the pine boughs, but the brown needles made for a soft mat on which to rest. I attempted to smooth the wayward strands of my hair while he cocked his head, watching me.

"Stop calling me a boy," I told him. "Just 'cause I run with the men, doesn't make me one."

He laughed at me, but I wasn't so very mad anymore. It was just what we did, picked at one another. Apparently T.R. had his share of battle for the day, because he didn't take me up on our usual argument. Instead, we huddled together, enjoying each other's companionship. Conversation was slow at first, but before long we were sharing secret dreams and adventures for the future.

The pines seemed to lean inward, as if drifting in the gentle breeze to catch our deepest thoughts. We didn't mind, the trees would shelter our secrets just as they shelter the forest floor from the harsh reality of the elements. I told T.R. how, despite our frequent arguments, he was my security. I could be myself around him, like no other. Years of adventure, of running wild and free across daisy-strewn fields and through pine thickets, kept me sane when we were apart. He knew I struggled, for the outside world was cold and cruel. I told him how much I thought of him when we were apart. He kept me sane in a world I didn't know how to fit into.

He took my hand and squeezed it, nodding his understanding. I leaned in, letting my head fall against his shoulder. He still clutched his blunderbuss in his grip, but we had forgotten about the Lobsterbacks, and the theft of our fort. They, however, had not forgotten us. I detested the crude interruption when we found ourselves surrounded by the enemy. Since when had Lobsterbacks learned to sneak up on people? T.R. and I were separated, and my hands bound behind my back with a length of rope.

As routine dictated, I was held, bound at the wrists within the enemy camp, grumbling about my lousy luck to be the only girl in our troupe of ruffians. No one else ever got tied up and captured! I knew it wouldn't be long before T.R. would wriggle free and come for me, so I lie still, waiting. Freedom sure does take time! Soon, I heard a scuffle at the tent flap, and there he was, fighting his way to my side. My hero had come at last! I wanted to ask him why it took so long to reach me, but curbed my tongue. The enemy picked up a cold fire poker, wielding it like a sword, so T.R. did likewise. Was the boyish display for their benefit, or my own? The battle grew a bit out of hand, so I shrugged out of the ropes. Luckily for me, that Redcoat didn't know how to tie a taut knot. The boys thrust and parried with their fire-pokers, shouting insults, and the Redcoat spun his weapon, intending to poke the air in my general direction. Trouble was, he was closer to me than he thought, and his jab caught me in the shoulder. The poker ripped the sleeve of my dress, and I screamed as blood ran freely. I didn't wait around to see what T.R. would do to the boy who had just stabbed his girl--I lit a shuck out of camp, clutching my wound, seeking solace.

T.R. didn't show up again until the following morning. I suspected he had gotten in trouble, but he never did really say, and I certainly didn't blame him for my battle wound. He hadn't stabbed me...but he had fought on my behalf. A truly heroic deed!

Still, we were now confined to "nice" play--an unjust sentence that hung over both our heads. No battles? No fort? No Lobsterbacks and Patriots? What was left to do? We appropriated tin lanterns for catching grasshoppers, (no doubt our mothers loved this as they prepared to light the candles just before dusk!) I picked meadow daisies to adorn my hair, (amidst T.R.'s eye-rolling at my girlish behavior), and we mounted our trusty haybale steed and raced around camp, righting wrongs and running down the bad guys.

And so it went. Every year, our families met for the ten day gathering of the clan. T.R.'s father took us out in the canoe on occasion, and we would glide stealthily across the water. Oh, how I adore the tranquility of Indian Summer!

Seemed no matter where he found himself, T.R. always had a 'secret spot' in a patch of woods nearby. Outside of the Rendezvous gatherings, my parents and I would visit T.R. and his family, staying at their beautiful log home in the woods. It was on one such occasion, while playing outside when T.R. grabbed my hand and led me off into his secret spot. Honored to be invited, we napped in the filtered rays of the sun, catching up on our dreams for the future. When I close my eyes, I can still see the beauty of that day in the woods. Sunlight caught his fair hair, I recall thinking he looked like some sort of golden boy. This was our place, our time, and the world was ours for the taking. We addressed our issue of arguments, for we had many over the important things--what to play and how to play it--and bared our souls to one another. I flung my arms around his neck, and was surprised when he didn't reprimand me, but returned the embrace. Last time I tried any of that girlish stuff, he threatened to scalp me with his toy tomahawk. Had I known then what I know now, I never would have let him go.

One December night, a few weeks before Christmas, I bolted upright in bed, shaken by a horrific nightmare. Soaked in sweat and tangled in damp sheets, I struggled just to breathe. I had never had such a vivid nightmare, and I could not shake the weight of it, even after pinching myself to prove it was only a bad dream. To this day, I cannot bring to surface the darkness of that dream, and what I saw. I remained awake the rest



of the night, shaken, and unwilling to drift back into a state of tormented unconsciousness.

My grandmother came to collect me the next morning, and we spent the day Christmas shopping. I said nothing of why I was tired and sullen, after all, everyone has bad dreams once in a while. When we returned home that afternoon, my mother was sitting at the kitchen table, sobbing. The phone was in her hand. She did not speak, she couldn't. Nothing needed to be said. I knew. Something deep within me, knew. The dream...the awful nightmare had been no dream at all.

My world crumbled.

I don't recall the details of what happened after I hit the floor. I overheard the veiled whispers about T.R.'s delivery of fruit for the Boy Scouts, about a car, and a helicopter airlift. My mind shut down, blocking out certain truths, which remain hazy at best to this day. All I knew for sure was that my soul laid bare, and I couldn't breathe.

I never felt the drive to Maryland for the funeral. I don't know if it was a sunny day, or a cloudy one. Faces were a blur, I couldn't tell one adult from the other. My mind flashed in random picture-images. I don't remember the service, but I remember standing under a chestnut tree. I picked up a hull, those hard, spikes with the seed in the middle, and clenched it in my fist until the spikes dug deep into my flesh. Look at this, T.R. What perfect ammunition. Remember when we threw these over the walls of our fort, pelting the enemy? The hull imprinted my hand with its spikes, but I didn't care. I think maybe I carried it around the rest of the day, unable to let go.

Oh, how I remember! I recall T.R. and how he liked to pepper his pizza. At his house, we would always pitch a tent in the living room, a haven for T.R. and I. And when he slept, he made sounds in his throat like an exploding cannonball.... Whether this was a ruse to annoy me, or whether he actually exploded cannonballs in his sleep, I never could tell. I recall the time he and I ran across a field, ducking under a fence, only he didn't duck quite low enough and caught his britches on the barbed wire.

Again.

I saw a friend's wedding, and how T.R. helped decorate the bride and groom's car by gluing old cigar butts inside the door handles. (Oops, sorry, T., I wasn't supposed to

tell anyone about that one). I remembered our arguments, but mostly I thought of our adventures.

I'm not sure how long I stood and thought about all those things, but I looked around me, lost in that crowd of people. I found myself searching for that fair-haired golden boy to come gallivanting out of the woods, grab my hand and lead me off into another adventure, running down the bad guys.

That day, clinging to that jagged old chestnut hull, my childhood ended.

Twenty-one years later, I am still overwhelmed with loss. T.R. was my soul, my safe-haven in a cruel world. I always had him to go to--my guiding light. My angel. But, if I look closely, I might find a meadow daisy to adorn my hair, and beyond that, T.R.'s face, laughing and rolling his eyes over my girlish ways. Once in a while, out in the woods, I'll stumble across a particularly brilliant ray of sunlight filtering through the trees, and I'll sit within that spot, fingering a tiny scar on my shoulder. A scar left from hand to hand combat in 1776, with the point of a five-poker. T.R. always comes to me in the woods, smiling his beautiful old smile, and off we'll go, hand in hand, crashing through the trees in search our next adventure.

T.R.'s light of life, his bold, adventurous spirit and loving nature lives on in our hearts. Those who met him, loved him. He dreamed of helping others. I remember well our discussions in the woods, he often confided his wishes to help those in need of a friend...so people struggling would know there was always someone out there who cared.

T.R.'s family and friends, work to bring his dreams to life. I have only recently learned of a wonderful program called Camp T.R., and it brings tears to my eyes. His family started it in 1994 to fulfil his dreams of helping others. Camp T.R. is an annual weekend camp open to children suffering grief and loss. Education and the sharing of each child's personal stories are interspersed with light-hearted activities such as canoeing and campfire cookouts. Children learn they are not alone in their grief, and they learn how to cope with loss. I never knew how to cope with my own grief, no one ever showed me how.

I miss my friend. I hope he knows how much I loved him.

As I write this story to share with each of you, I realize this, perhaps, is my way of learning to cope, at last. I smile through my tears, for T.R. is still my hero. Oh, how he used to bust into camp, eager to save me from the ties that bound me! I know now he's still there, in camp, bringing love, brotherhood, laughter and light to the hearts of others. Just as he knew, someday, he would.

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*T.R.*

*My hero. Thank you for saving me...so many times. I love you.*

*—S. L.*

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# More by S. L. Matthews

## *Nickel's Luck*

Born with a permanent grin and natural charm, young Ryder Wheeler wanted to be a Pony Express rider just like his dime novel hero. In a coastal Texas town in the 1870s, it isn't easy to turn cowboy, so Ryder relies on what he has—a strong will, a nickel's worth of luck, and an inclination to take on any dare. Adored by all, he gains notoriety as the “luck child” of Indianola.

When Ryder's abusive father goes too far, a hard-fisted cowboy intervenes, offering him a deal with one condition: He must leave his beloved town of Indianola behind. After peddling his luck for so long, will he make it as a cowboy at the Middle C Ranch?

As Ryder faces the consequences of his decision, the Mistress—the ocean Ryder loves to hate—tries once more to claim him. Can young Ryder best the storms in his path? Or will he lose his dream—and his town—forever?

Brimming with superstitious sailors, rugged cowboys, and catastrophic events, *Nickel's Luck* is a coming-of-age tale that takes readers on an epic journey.

**Read now:** [slmatthewsauthor.com/nickelsluck](http://slmatthewsauthor.com/nickelsluck)

## *Ravens in the Graveyard*

Born with a simple mind and left without family, Bosal Moon grew up under the shadow of ridicule and loneliness. Now he must escape the only home he has ever known: Dozen, the dust-laden town morality had deserted long ago. Bosal leans on his sole friend for wisdom: Preacher August Maloney.

Each day, August tends to the ravens that flock to the graveyard outside his lonesome little church. Harbingers of wayward souls, he calls them. But the most wayward soul of all belongs to the Professional Butterfly, a ravishing woman with a talent for bleeding men of their integrity. Bored and broke, the Butterfly turns her attention on August and hatches a brilliant scheme to deliver him from a disaster of biblical proportions.

But her risky actions result in a shocking and untimely death. All fingers point to the Butterfly as the murderer. Only one witness remains, and he isn't talking.

Will Bosal be able to save the Professional Butterfly from the noose? Or will the callous judge get his way and hang one more wayward soul?

Read more: [slmatthewsauthor.com/ravensinthegraveyard](http://slmatthewsauthor.com/ravensinthegraveyard)

## About S. L. Matthews

S. L. Matthews is an 18th & 19th century living history reenactor, hobbyist photographer, and avid writer of the Victorian Era and the Old West.

She grew up in the past, weaving on a loom and producing period rifle and accoutrement straps for reenactors, museums, movies, and television worldwide.

Now she weaves three-dimensional characters through unusual plots and focuses on stories largely untold through history.

When she's not dressed in Victorian Era and Old West attire, you can find her outside photographing Tennessee landscapes and living history, tackling her garden with her Welsh Corgi and Anatolian Shepherd, scouting shops for old books and historical treasures, and of course, always researching and writing novels.

S. L. Matthews is the author of *Nickel's Luck* and "Ravens in the Graveyard." She lives in Sparta, Tennessee with her family.

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