

THE PATH

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Danny lives in an aging ranch house, once the latest thing, in a fringe suburb. He can walk to his public school in a middle class enclave.

Danny's mother is a faded blond, who works in the Township office doing jobs no one else will do. Like so many of her generation she's holding on to a second marriage. Danny's father disappeared when the infant cried for nurture, and the father started searching for something that always slipped away.

Husband Number Two, a widower, arrived on Danny's scene with two fat teenaged daughters. This new contingent needed meals and bedding. The fresh husband is hearty and sure of himself and knows how to manage his wife and his household. He wants to be called "Sarge."

The stepfather and the boy get along after a fashion. Danny's animal instincts keep him from trouble by saying little at meals and retreating to his room.

Danny's teacher reports satisfactory progress in the main courses but underlines that he shows no interest in Computer Science. This disturbs Mom.

"Danny," she whines, "You do okay with other courses. What is the problem with Computer? The school gives every kid a free one. Why not enjoy it?"

"Mom" he mumbles, "It bores me."

"Bores you?" she cries. "It's time for you to know that if you ever want a decent job you have to be on good terms with the computer."

Danny's smart enough to say nothing. He just hangs his head in a resigned gesture of no.

"Danny" his mother keeps on, "why don't you watch the computer screen with the girls?" Danny knows that they spend three hours a day in front of the screen munching greasy snacks. It is no surprise to Danny that they are fat and dull.

"Mom," Danny replies as for the tenth time, "The screen is dreary and fake. I fall asleep in front of it."

Danny's teacher tells Mom that since the boy shows no zest for the computer, she turned him over to the Art teacher in hope for some stimulation. Because it has worked, Danny now spends his spare time drawing. Mom still is not pleased. "Danny," she barks, "You should know that young artists starve in a garret. Get with it. Computers let you copy

everything, even your homework."

"Mom," he reassures her, "I'll manage and stop worrying about me. I know what I don't want to do and that would be sitting for hours in front of a keyboard and tapping out whatever, sense or nonsense."

"But Danny," she pleads, "What will you do?"

"I'll read," he answers and goes up to his room to a book that waits.

The stepfather, Sarge, announces one day that he is off for grouse hunting. Danny wants to go along. "Well," draws Sarge, "You don't have a gun. So what will you do?"

"I'll walk and find the country/" says the boy.

"Okay, you can come, but don't get shot. Make sure that you are back at the truck by 4:30."

Danny has a day to remember, all by himself. He wanders in far off creeks, in clay banks, and in cavernous ledges. He dawdles over rocks with fossils, millions of years old. He scrambles on land shoulders covered with the unending floor cover of plants and low bushes, some of which he recognizes from his flower books, In the huge trees, a generous oak cradles him in its flowing branches. There he sleeps until it is time to tramp back to the truck. To his surprise, he gets grunted approval for another trip.

Mom keeps pecking away at Danny. "Why don't you play with Brad next door?"

"Mom, he just wants to play video games. They are false and phony, and they are made for guys like him. He never plays real games, like soccer and baseball. He won't go to the park or the creek, and he doesn't even know poison ivy. He can't face the real world. He is wrapped up in make-believe. Do you want me to be like that?"

For once, she has no chatter. After a while, she warms up. "Danny, what am I going to do with you?"

"Just let me be. I like the out-of-doors and whatever lives."

One day, near the end of the summer, he shares with her, "Oh, Mom, let me tell you about the money I have made working for the Park Board. It is hundreds and all of it has gone into my savings account and is earning interest. The Rangers like my drawings enough to ask me to draw plants for a bunch of kids. Not photos, mind you. Guess what my classmates have? Not a nickel. They spend all their earnings and that is really more than mine; they spend every bit on the latest improvements for their electronic gear. Somehow it is never up to date."

Mom still thinks Danny is a loser, headed for nowhere. She swallows her

disappointment and pretends to be hopeful.

Some years later he confides in her. "Do you know that neat girl who has been elected Homecoming Queen? Well, I had the nerve to write her a letter, asking her to be my date for the Spring formal. She wrote back accepting and here is what she says."

"Danny, no one else has ever used hand-writing me to ask me anything. I am happy to go with you since you asked me with your own pen. Everyone else e-mails me."

Mom is pleased, but neither she nor her husband are consoled. Yet Danny understands. "I get you both, but I'll make out. Never fear. I'm a loner, it seems. I know and care about living things, life itself. I can also draw. There is not much the computer can do for me, other than make for communication. What I want to learn is out there, beyond this house and not on a screen or keyboard."

"Whenever the crowd rushes to a road, I step back and pick my own path. If I go down it, I may reach my true goal more quickly and with rewards greater than hope or time, beyond the span of day or night."

So quietly, he follows his path, as it winds its circuitous course, far from the raucous crowd and contemporary dictates.