Camping by an Adirondack lake, a woman seeks, if not complete solitude, at least some kind of nothing.

What I really want to do is take the dog. We win head off into the woods by the lake; she will be my scout, my guide. She will chase rabbits and flush grouse. I will wade out into the water at noon and float on my back, shielding my eyes to look at her treading water like an otter, barking like a seal. Just after dusk we will sit in the lee of the fire, listening to the bullfrogs grumble, and the owls. When it gets cold I will let her into the tent. I will sleep in her.

If only I weren't as weak as a new convert, unable to bend the rules. Taking a dog along on a solo camping trip--isn't that like a hermitage with a phone? John Burroughs' brief essay on solitude is not yet known to me. "If Thoreau had made friends with a dog to share his bed and board in his retreat by Walden Pond, one would have had more faith in his sincerity," says Burroughs. "The dog would have been the seal and authentication of his retreat." I take a copy of Walden and leave the dog at home.

My husband sees me off. We are a mile down the eastern shore of a lake where our friends' Adirondack guide boat is beached. Hybrid canoe or hybrid rowboat depending on your orientation, a guide boat sits low to the water on a narrow keel. This one is no more than six feet bow to stem, with a wingspan oars fully extended, that's maybe twice as long as that. I take yawning, rangy strokes, going south. In a minute I turn a bend and lose sight of the landing. I hear the cough and rattle of our old car as it heads out, and then I hear it no longer. It is an exquisite summer day. It's about 78 windless degrees. I am not the only one out on the lake in a boat, but I am the only one rowing. I glide past a tree stump, 200 yards out, before I see atop it the harbormaster, a great blue heron who nods my way with a shiver of feathers.

It is a dogleg lake, three and a half miles top to bottom, and I am rowing to the spur, where there is a spit of land shielded by an arc of pines whose soft brown needles cover the ground. It takes 20 minutes plowing through the water to reach it, and another 20 to set up the tent. Afterward I open up my raccoon- and-bear-proof cooler and scrounge around for lunch. Everything I packed not more than two hours ago now looks remarkably dull, or worse. Sardines in tomato sauce? Hard-boiled eggs? What was I thinking? I settle for apples and cheese and the opportunity to wield my Swiss Army knife like an authentic camper. I look at my watch. It's 12:17. The day stretches out before me.

"Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from..."
sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, midst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time, " I read in Walden. I look at my watch. It is 12:19.

Two fishermen in a Boston Whaler make the turn into this part of the lake, cut the motor, and drift. I have chosen this spot to be alone, but not so alone that someone would not eventually hear me if I yelled for help. The edge of the wilderness is not the wilderness, though, and here come my fellow nature lovers to prove it. Propped against a tree, I am not visible, but my tent is, and so is my boat. They know I am here, so I feel they can see me, that they are watching. I don't want to be part of their consciousness, part of what they carry away from this scene. I don't want them to know I am here by myself.

All week I have been following the trial of three teenagers who are part of a gang accused of beating and raping a woman who had been jogging through Central Park at night. What was she doing there, people asked each other—didn't she know better? This peculiar distaff knowledge—of the danger of untraveled roads, unpeopled train compartments, empty houses, open fields, and dark streets—follows women into the woods. Once, 11,000 feet up the side of a mountain, my husband and I stopped to catch our breath at a Park Service hut and read in the visitor's log an entry from a woman who had to stay overnight in bad weather with four men, all strangers. "Spent a fitful night worrying about the one-eyed trouser snake," she wrote the next morning.

In the broad daylight I am not afraid of the fishermen, just annoyed. They have every right to be here, of course, but my annoyance is extrajudicial. "I have my horizon bounded by woods all to myself; a distant view of the railroad where it touches the pond on the one hand, and of the fence which skirts the woodland road on the other. But for the most part it is as solitary where I live as on the prairies," Thoreau writes. I look up and see two men in an outboard, their lines slack, reeling in. I see them cast, port and starboard. Their lures charge toward the water like meteors. I see the men reel in again, snagging a patch of water lilies. I am annoyed because I expected to see something else, some kind of nothing.

Another boat chugs into the bay. I pull myself up and walk deeper into the forest, bushwhacking in as straight a line as possible so as not to get lost, until the water is no longer visible, not even the glint of it. The outboards fade until they're smudges, not fingerprints. I share a log with a colony of termites and a red squirrel that clucks like a bird. "Why does a virtuous man delight in landscapes?" asks Kuo Hsi, an eleventh-century Chinese watercolor artist, in his Essay on Landscape Painting. Because "the din of the dusty world and the locked-in-ness of human habitations are what human nature habitually abhors; while, on the contrary, haze, mist, and the haunting spirits of the mountains are what human nature seeks, and yet can rarely find. " A plane grinds overhead. It is true that affluence brings solitude and privacy in the form of for instance, country cottages, cars, and personal aircraft. But only for a minute. Then rural property values increase, houses are built on smaller parcels more closely together, and the highways and airports dog with commuters heading for the hills together. No matter how far I go into the forest today, that plane will still be grinding overhead.

The fishermen retreat a little before five. I follow the throttle and whine of their engines, moving back toward camp as they dim. A wind comes up and passes through the trees on the opposite shore, which rustle in succession like baseball fans doing a wave cheer. The trees are teeming with thrushes. Their voices fill the basin, yet the birds themselves are nowhere seen. So many of our perceptions are learned, not intuitive. I mean, why don't I think the trees are singing?

I shed my shoes and walk into the water, pulling the boat behind me. I know this lake better than I know any other body of water, better than I know the pool of land surrounding my house. I have taken its temperature and measured its pH; I have swum it side to side, skied its circumference, paddled and rowed it end to end. I have climbed the mountains that grow a few thousand feet above its shore. I have done these things in the gray of winter and at the start of June when the hardwoods hang their damp new leaves out to dry. I have been here at midnight with the beavers, and at dawn with the perch. It is easy to get carried away. "A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature. The fluviatile trees next the shore are the slender eyelashes which fringe it, and the wooded hills and cliffs around are its overhanging brows," Thoreau tells us. So easy to get carried away.
Rowing forward, I nose between the remains of what was once the beavers’ dinner, many nights running, and is now their leftovers. The lake is so shallow here I can palm the bottom. The warm water rings my wrist like a bracelet. Red-winged blackbirds spy on me and tell the other birds what they see. I am happy-relieved—to be out in the open again. I feel, I think, like a deer at dusk on the last day of hunting season.

PEOPLE TALK ABOUT the silence of nature, but of course there is no such thing. What they mean is that our voices are still, our noises absent. Tonight when my fire failed, I sat on a rock and followed the course of a cloud that looked like a trillium, watching as its whorl broke apart. The frogs were honking like ducks; the ducks were laughing Eke women. I could barely make them out, but just before the light faded they rose from the lake, and for a moment their white breasts hung above the water like moons.

In the dark, in the tent, every sound is amplified. Individual mosquitoes demand to be let in. Pine needles fall one by one. A beaver sharpens his teeth on an aspen nearby. Bears on either side of the lake hoot lustily; it is time to mate. I feel safe inside this thin nylon skin, for no apparent reason. So safe, in fact, that once I have drawn in my world between its walls, I grow fearful of what’s on the other side. A porcupine screams in the distance. Coyotes bray The world of night is primal. I am frightened because fear is one of the few instincts that has not been bred out of me. But the world of night is vast, too. It ignores me. After a few restless hours I fall asleep.

A MAN WAKES ME UP. He is standing in an aluminum boat 40 feet from my bed, baiting a hook. The sun is aloft, barely. He waves to me when I emerge from the tent with the bonhomie of one who has been awake since before dawn. If he wants to chat, I give him no opportunity, abandoning my camp for the shore due west where the beavers have carved a rogue obstacle course. Sitting on one of their benches, I notice millions of cobwebs strung from the trees to the water. When the sun shines on them they look like lines of fish wire being pulled in at once. The man in the aluminum boat leaves the neighborhood pursued by a cloud of greasy blue smoke, and I am alone again, and not sure what to do.

If the forest were a room with a door, I’d probably be inside, reading. But the open wood demands something else. A hike up the ridge, an hour with the chickadees—something like that. Solitude would appear to be defined by place as well as dependent upon it. What passes for being alone at home, say, wouldn’t pass here. You don’t pitch a tent to curl up with a novel.

But this is just an aesthetic. Place is of consequence only to the extent that it encourages or demands the confrontation of the self by the self, which is solitude’s true vocation. There is the solitude of experience and the solitude of despair, which can happen anywhere. There is the solitude of the jail cell and of the sickbed and of the hermitage, which differ by degrees of isolation. And there is the solitude of darkness, my grandfather’s solitude, which was absolute.

He was 59 when he went blind. Actually, he didn’t lose his sight so much as his sight left him, the way a lover might, first in spirit, then in fact. When it was gone for good, friends encouraged him to go to a social service agency, to learn how to be blind. He resisted, memorized the number of footsteps from his apartment to the elevator, from the elevator to the courtyard, from the courtyard to the bus stop. Then, having nowhere to go, he gave in. He was told to report to the Lighthouse for the Blind for aptitude testing.

"My first day there, my wife brought me down, packing a two-sandwich lunch as the cafeteria was under construction," he wrote later, in an essay titled "I Hate Institutions." "After inquiring, we were told where to report, and I found myself in a large noisy room that contained a carpenter's shop, noisy with power machines and noisier semi-blind adolescents, and a basket-weaving shop with blind men and women speaking in many different tongues, that to a neophyte like me sounded like the Tower of Babel. The instructor sat me at a bench between a retarded 5-year-old blind boy and a man of about 25 who did not speak English, while I did not speak his language, so our conversations were held to a minimum.

"Then it was time for lunch. I gathered up my sandwiches, which were lying on the bench all morning, and was ushered down to the cafeteria and was left on my own, stumbling, ailing, until I found an empty seat, unwrapped my lunch, and ate the sandwiches in silence, all the time feeling tears welling up in my eyes. I recall having seen such scenes in the movies, and now I was the leading actor and I did not relish the part. Since it only took me 15 minutes to finish lunch, and having no one to talk to, I wandered out into the...
vestibule and asked someone to direct me to a phone booth. I called my wife, and as she was asking me about my activities, I broke down and cried. To think that at 59 years of age, having worked all my life, now to face a most difficult future at best. My wife, sensing my disappointment, wanted to come down and take me home, but I warned her off and told her it was a challenge and I was determined to go through with it. This testing went on for five weeks. I kept protesting until I was sent to typing class."

The essay, which was sent to me by a relative who found it when she was cleaning out her desk, is typed.

I RETURN TO WHAT I have begun to think of as my front yard and defiantly open Thoreau. "We need the tonic of wildness," I read, "to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and meadow hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe." Chastised, I put down the book and survey the great outdoors. An ample, flat-bottomed boat with a blue-and-white-striped awning is steaming into view. Three people lounge on its deck chairs, one wearing a hot pink sweat suit, one in orange-and-blue shorts, the other wrapped head to toe in lemon-knit sportswear. This is wildness of a different order. Shortly, a motorized canoe rasps into the inlet behind them, and then come two more canoes, powered by five actual canoeists, who look to be in their sixties. The three women wear fluted bathing suits and have zinc oxide on their noses and shoulders. One of the men wears a Red Sox cap.

My grandfather hated the Red Sox, like any loyal Yankees fan. He adored the Yankees. Even when he couldn't see a thing, he would go to Yankee Stadium and sit there with a transistor radio plugged into his ear, just to cheer. During baseball season, when he came to visit us in Connecticut, he would lie outside in the hot sun, hatless and shirtless, listening to that radio from the first pitch to the last. His scalp would redden, and the sweat would dam on his eyebrows and run into his ears. My mother, his daughter, would try to get him to come inside, or to move under a tree, as if he didn't know exactly what he was doing or where he was. But he knew. Sometimes he would ask me--I was about six--to hold a newspaper in front of his face, and then to take it away, so he could see the light.

"ARE YOU GOING TO Denver and then to San Francisco, or are you going through Sacramento?" a woman in one of the canoes asks a man in the other. I don't wait to find out. Vowing to return in a different season, I collapse the tent and stow my gear in the hull of the guide boat, which I pilot past all canoes, paddled and powered, and the floating porch too, rowing home.

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Illustrations (3)

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SUE HALPERN lives in the Adirondack Mountains of New York State. Her new book, Migrations to Solitude, from which "Solo" is excerpted, looks at the experience of being alone--in the woods, in cities, in families, in communities. She has also written for Rolling Stone, The New York Times, Ms., and Sports Illustrated.

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