



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Friday morning, Wardle Family YMCA...

Here I am again, hoping to kindle a column while burning some calories. It happens a lot. Whether I'm dealing with "weighty" issues, striding away on the elliptical machine, or going nowhere fast on the treadmill, there's something about physical exertion that causes my writer's brain to kick into high gear.

Unfortunately, it often downshifts to "idle" when I get back to my computer. All those brilliant insights tend to evaporate, like so much sweat from my brow.

This morning, however, there are no brilliant insights coming. Not a one. While marching up and down on a machine whose name I keep forgetting – it also goes back and forth – I scan the various morning shows on the tiny TV screen before me, desperate for inspiration, deadline bearing down.

Everybody is talking about Elliot Rodger, our crazed killer du jour. Something's very wrong when I can even think that phrase – "crazed killer du jour" – much less commit it to print, but these massacres have become so commonplace now that there's something ho-hum about the media coverage that follows. The conversation is so predictable. We will talk about gun control and mental health and "the culture" . . . and everybody will have an answer to the question "why?" while nobody really does.

Marching on . . . There is also news about the war in Afghanistan. The president has announced that we'll be out of there by 2016, with only about 10,000 troops remaining in 2015. According to the guys on Morning Joe, the *Wall Street Journal* is critical of this plan – (too much, too soon!) – and so is the *New York Times* – (too little, too late!). Again, the discussion is predictable. Everybody's an expert, none of those experts agree, and it all reeks of politics.

On a less-serious-but-still-curious note, it seems Gwyneth Paltrow has said something rather innocuous again, and again, people are furious. That woman can't open her mouth without bringing an avalanche of ire down on her head. A whole industry has sprung up around hating Blythe Danner's daughter – seriously, there are dedicated websites! – and I just don't get it. It occurs to me that if you're spending a significant portion of your day thinking, writing, or talking about how much you hate a celebrity you don't actually know, you probably need a new hobby. It's just not healthy. Let it go.

So, I'm still on the marching machine watching Morning Joe. The sound is down, and I'm reading the closed captions. And then... I'm *not* reading the closed captions. Something has clicked in my head, and I've zoned them out, made them a blur. Now I'm just watching these faces with their moving mouths.

Blah blah

blah.... yack yack yack.

Up and down I march, up and down go their lips. What words are they forming? Does it matter? Isn't it just the same old stuff? Suddenly, I realize I'm completely indifferent to whatever it is Mika, Joe and Mike Barnacle are discussing. I just don't care what they're saying. They said it yesterday and they will say it tomorrow and they will still be saying it a year from now. I can catch up any time I want. Or not.

And it dawns on me that I am deeply, utterly bored. These current affairs – some important, some not so much – hold less and less allure for me lately. (A song from *Wicked* pops into my head, "Something has changed within me; something is not the same.") Beyond my tiny TV screen, through the large window spanning the YMCA wall, the cypress wetlands fan out before me in panoramic majesty. Deep-green vines twisting up gnarly tree trunks, honeysuckle weaving and surely wafting, snowy egrets fluffing their feathers, blue herons swooping and soaring through space... And they all seem to say, "Here... this is where it's at, baby... this is the

hot spot ..."

So I'm off the marching machine and out the door as fast as you can say, "Later, Joe."

The very first thing that happens on the Cypress Wetlands Trail is this: A little brown rabbit crosses my path. "Good morning, Peter," I say, as br'er rabbit scurries into the briar patch on my right, and I'm already glad I came. I wasn't wrong about this place – it's humming with action, bristling with life. There's a squirrel convention in town, for one thing, and a conclave of cardinals is convening in a water oak. The sounds here are as vivid as the sights – a lush symphony of buzzing and chirping, rustling and cawing. At a bend in the trail, I hear a strange, rumble groan that may be a gator's. I've yet to see an alligator here in the wetlands, but there are signs posted everywhere alerting me of their presence. "Remember, a fed gator is a dead gator," they warn. In my case, the admonition is quite unnecessary. I have no urge to feed an alligator, and frankly, when I consider encountering one, *his* mortality is the least of my worries.

It feels right and good to be here, even with invisible gators looming, and I'm filled with new energy and razor-sharp focus. My thoughts have turned from murder and war and Hollywood haters to people and events in my own little world. The Chamber of Commerce Civitas Awards are tonight, and my friend Pat Conroy's receiving a special tribute; I look forward to being there. Suddenly, I'm thinking about 'The Prince of Tides'. . . and the first time I read it . . . how the prologue made me cry . . . *"My wound is geography. It is also my anchorage, my port of call . . ."*

And I'm thinking about my daughter's dance recital tomorrow – and especially the dance called "Tomorrow," with its heart-stopping lyricism. There are few things I love as much as watching my child leap and turn across the stage, her gift for dance – one she didn't get from me – astonishing me over and over again . . . Then I'm thinking of how she aced her end-of-course algebra exam, how the mysteries of mathematics unfold for her so easily, while they never have for me. *Who is this changeling child? How did she come to be mine?*

And now Sunday's choir anthem is running through my head – Psalm 100 set to a canon by

Mozart. *"Make a joyful noise to God all ye lands . . . serve with gladness . . . draw near to God with a joyful heart . . ."*

In the wetlands rookery, the congregation is growing: egrets, herons, ibises, who knows what else? (Note to self: Brush up on your bird names. Show some respect.) From a high leafy perch, a lone Great Egret presides over it all, splendid and preening; I nod from the boardwalk, though a bow seems more appropriate.

And still I'm walking and watching, my eyes peeled for river otters, diamondback terrapin, and my favorite creature, the barred owl.

And Sunday's anthem is still on my mind. With a cacophony of birdsong to accompany me, I silently chant . . . *"Come before God's presence with singing . . . into his gates with thanksgiving . . . his courts with praise . . ."*

And I know that I am already there.

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