

# The Jersey Devil walks into a bar

By **Pia de Jong** - November 28, 2016

*Illustration by Elaine Gerrits*

Fifty miles from my home in Princeton is a place distinguished primarily by its emptiness. It is the Pine Barrens, which occupies the same physical and literary space in New Jersey that Lapland does in my native Europe. It is the wilderness next door, hiding in plain sight under the turned-up nose of the bustling population centers of New York and Philadelphia.

In 1967 John McPhee wrote a masterful book about the Pines, which are located in the exact center of most densely populated state in the country. The Pine Barrens are empty of most everything but sand, pygmy pitch pines, and cranberry bogs.

The few people who live there are called “Pineys” — a name that they acknowledge is both an epithet and a badge of honor. As a result, the area has a reputation for being quirky and antisocial. Most Americans in the Northeastern Megalopolis drive in a big circle around the Pine Barrens and never see it. The New Jersey Turnpike has no exit there. Local legends seem designed to further discourage visitors. According to folklore, the New Jersey Devil can be seen there — a kangaroo-like monster with the face of a horse, the head of a dog, wings like a bat, horns, and a tail. One resident told me that the Jersey Devil is the result of a government experiment in genetics that went bad.

The area is environmentally protected because of the rare orchids and carnivorous plants that grow there. There is

also a huge aquifer under the sandy soil that holds some of the purest water in North America.

“Hillbilly country,” says a friend when I told him that I wanted to visit the Pine Barrens. “Are you sure you want to go there?” I do. So on a beautiful fall day I soon am driving down an empty dirt road less than an hour from Princeton. There are few signs or milestones or billboards. My cell phone has no signal. I’m lost in Lapland, New Jersey.

After several miles on the dirt road, I arrive at the deserted Emilio Carranza Memorial, a stone obelisk honoring the “Lindbergh of Mexico.” In 1928 the 22-year-old Emilio Carranza Rodriguez was a hero of Mexican aviation. Inspired by Charles Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight the previous year and his subsequent flight to Mexico City, influential businessmen in Mexico built an exact copy of Lindbergh’s Spirit of St. Louis and announced that Carranza would fly from Mexico City to New York and back again.

The flight to New York was done in stages and went smoothly. But the return flight was going to be a non-stop test of endurance. Carranza delayed his departure for three days because of bad weather and then abruptly took off on the evening of July 12, 1928, in the teeth of a thunderstorm.

Carranza only got about 50 miles south before his flight ended in the Pine Barrens. His body was discovered the next day by some locals picking blueberries.

Sobered by the memorial, I drive on to Chatsworth, the center of the Pine Barrens, passing many Trump signs

and cranberry blogs along the way. The only restaurant is boarded up. A man in a pickup truck sends me to the local bar. “They have chili and good whiskey.”

Billy Boy’s Four Mile Tavern is located next to a garage with a single gas pump. Inside, I am regarded with curiosity by the clientele: a friendly, ruddy-faced woman of about 60 behind a beer mug, a man with a red nose behind a glass of whiskey, and a messy 40-something holding a bottle of Pinelands Beer. I’ve landed in a painting by Edward Hopper.

“Chili, please,” I say to the pale girl behind the bar. “Billy Boy, the lady wants chili,” she calls out to the kitchen.

“Where are you from?” the man with the bottle in hand wants to know. When he hears my answer, he shakes his head. “You came all the way from Holland to see the Pine Barrens? All the way from Holland?” he repeats. He has never been out of the Pine Barrens and is not planning to. The woman says she is also born and bred “on the sand.” It’s Paradise, she says.

I am visiting a few days before the presidential election. When an image of Hillary Clinton appears on the television, I notice the mood of this amiable group changes.

“What do you think of her?” I ask.

“Uh, oh,” says the bartender as she slides the chili in front of me. “In a bar you should never talk about politics or religion.”

“You will not find anyone here who’s for Hillary,” says

the 40-something man who orders a new bottle of beer.

“She wants to take away our weapons.”

He taps on his pocket. “Say, you’re not a Democrat, are you?”

I take a few bites of my chili and hurriedly leave the bar. The disheveled man calls after me: “Watch out for the Jersey Devil!”

### **Pia de Jong**

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