

Bog Summer

July.

Light like lemonade on the ash trees quivering against blue sky. Fragile blue. With clumps of cotton-candy clouds. One fatter, flatter than the others, seemed to be riding a current, like a tide in a sea high above.

“Rain,” my mother murmured.

“You think?” said one of my cousins, buried in a book.

We were sprawled on the porch of our big, grey house, fields all around, apple trees by the vegetable garden, pines and maples down the drive, while beyond us to the west where the sun was lowering itself, a beaver bog glistened in its glacial scoop. We could hear the brook purling in the dark as it tottered over boulders, dark because of lilac and honeysuckle bushes gone to riot.

My mother was sitting upright in a wicker chair fanning her face with the comics section of the Sunday newspaper. “So hot,” she sighed, her apron starched, and a bowl of string beans in her lap waiting to be snapped. Cousins Fern and Maude were cutting costumes out of old, discarded curtains. “Look, Aunt Flo. Look here, Aunt Flo.”

“Yes, dears.”

Scissors, spools of thread and buttons were strewn on the slick, grey-painted planking of the porch, and Ellen was crumpling patterns drawn on faded newspaper pages. We were going to produce a play out in the barn... although we didn’t know the lines. Not yet: I hadn’t written them.

“Get off the patterns, silly!” Maude complained.

“What patterns?” Ellen mumbled, who was slow.

“Oh dear! Now what...?”

“Don’t worry,” Mother said. “I’ll draw some more. It’s all right, Maude.”

She hated her name, my cousin did, because it belonged to Great Aunt Maude Hyacinth Louise who had married Great Uncle Charles Benjamin E. James, who had been nerve-gassed in the First World War before any of us were even imagined. She thought she had a right to be herself rather than someone’s memory.

I agreed. I watched her cutting, oh! so carefully, glared at Ellen who had made a face but was crawling over to hold an end of fabric, suggested that Ed and Joly might help a little... if they really wanted to be stars... and watched a Ruby Throated Hummingbird shoot past to thrust its thin, long beak into one of the opened Runner Bean flowers... thrusting at it over and over as if it couldn't get in far enough.

Ouch! I thought. *Does it hurt?*

My mother shifted.

"See its color!" Joly said.

"Iridescent!" Fern remarked.

"What's this play goin' to be about?" Ed murmured, dawdling on the bottom step.

"Dunno yet," I replied.

The hummingbird shot past again, molested another blossom, made it quiver.

"Oh, how cute," said Maude.

"You think?" said Joly.

"Here comes Nellie Sue," said someone.

"Yes. Where's Ellis?" Mother asked.

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It was summer. I was eleven. My cousins were with us once again because my parents were firm believers in sharing wholesome country living.

"Get them out of the sinful city," my mother explained. "Get them into trees and fields where they can learn something useful." She was determined, my mother, and as she said, "The cows are next door, and the horses, and the brook is here where the kids can swim, and the bog where they can fish, and the house is big enough, and strong enough, even if it's old." And she never complained about all the extra sheets and towels and socks and underpants and shirts and shorts and cooking and cleaning and psychological counseling for occasional warring factions. So seven of us, not to mention a neighbor or two, were noisily in residence.

"Where's Ellis?" she said again.

"Oh... in the bog," I said. "Caulking his boat, I think."

"Fishing!" snorted Fern.

"Stuck in the mud!" said Maude.

"Well, he'd better come back soon," Ed complained.

“Why?” said Joly.

“To set up the tent.”

“What for?”

“We’re sleeping out, you nit, don’t you remember?”

“Please mind your words,” said Mother.

“But he never listens, Aunt, and we’ve planned for days!”

“That’s right,” she said.

“Ellis and Ed never tell me anything!” Joly whined.

“Oh, yes, we do!” Ed sputtered, “You...”

But Mother spoke up calmly. “Joly, you and Ed go get the bedding, and find the ground sheet, and pull down the big tent from the garage... not the little one, the big one... and cut some stakes and decide where you’d like to camp... probably down there in the pines... and, Ed, you use the hatchet, and Joly, you can have a cookout in the rock ring. And pack some brownies to snack on later.”

“Oh!” They set off eagerly.

Mother sighed again.

“But they’ll get all the brownies!” Fern complained.

“And be quite busy while we girls make ice cream,” Mother said.

We grinned.

#

I was wearing loose white shorts made of cloth called ‘sharkskin’ which was popular just then... something tough and rather pebbly... and a light blue halter tied at waist and neck, and leather sandals. With metal buckles. It was hot. I kept pushing my red-brown curls off my sticky face, trying to concentrate on lines and scenes and who would play what part and how many pennies we could charge my parents and an uncle or two and maybe some aunts, if they’d only arrive in time, and if Ed could really be the fox and Joly the boy who saves his little sister from... well... Fern could play a lamb... or maybe we should have a chicken chorus to make a racket... that would be fun... or maybe a wolf... Ellis would make a fine, bad wolf... so serious! All of it analogy, of course (was that the word?), analogy for human interaction. Someone, after all, had actually stolen our canoe, our sixteen-footer, just a week ago, which explained why Ellis was trying to build a boat.

“I think,” I said, “I’ll go down to the bog. Who wants to come?”

No one.

“Nellie Sue?”

“Not me.”

Mother looked at clouds. “I think,” she said, “it won’t rain after all. But don’t be late.”

“I won’t.”

I loved the bog. Loved the way the brook curled down the falls to wallow through it, loved the Joe-Pye-weed, the ivory Turtle Head, the spikes of sky-blue Pickerelweed, the yellow lilies; loved the beaver dam that backed the water up to form a pond, the way the Button Bushes swayed to dip themselves. I loved reflections. Loved the smell... of mud and frogs and snapping turtles and the lurking bass and... ooooh... the eels!

Ellis had beached his boat part way up a beaver run. It was a box, hardly boat at all. Funny, really. But he was proud... even if it didn’t float.

“How’s it coming, Ellis?” I’d picked my way across the field, forced myself through mud and clumps of alders, squatted on a big, flat stone.

“Good!” he said.

And I was glad. Mother’d said he was her sister’s problem child “because his father never listened”. Watchful eyes. Calluses on palms. Splinters. He was just fifteen, tall and thin. “Like a rake,” Nellie Sue described it. Nellie Sue, my friend.

“Some boat,” I said poking at a sunfish. “Think you’ll finish it? Look! Look at the little ones! They shine like gold!”

He was leaning over my shoulder, “Only when the sun hits,” tweaked the neck bow holding up my halter.

“Yuh.”

Shadows in the bog made snake shapes in the current.

“Think the fish would be afraid,” I said. “Maybe they are... the little ones. They give me the willies, shadows like that.” (standing up) “Time to come back and put up the tent, Ellis. Ed and Joly--” (smirking) “--they’ll put it upside down... if they can figure it out at all. Bottom on top.”

“Think so?” He’d moved away a little, placed a foot on the boat, sort of hitched around.

“Yuh. Don’t you?”

“I like to be on top.”

“What? Look! Oh, Ellis, look! The Perch are biting! See the circles? There! And there! Like golden wires! Crowns! Oh, look!”

I slipped a little, pointing, and he caught my hand, held on.

“Oh! Thanks--”

And then I saw it, something escaping from his swim trunks... *like a sausage!*... held in check by clothing, half of it, working to get out, forcing. And then I saw his eyes and they were considering. He squeezed my fingers. Tight. And pulled. And I felt myself begin to float, like a baby sunfish, watched as he pushed me at the hot, red, bulging thing that seemed to throb.

“For crying out loud!” I blurted, snatching away my hand, and leapt, not understanding anything because everything was new... although a curled-up claw had settled in my stomach. “We’ll be late!”

I did a mad hop past the boat, his legs, into the alders, up the muddy bank, began running for the field where it was light, wanting light, seeking sun, and...

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Nellie Sue was saying, “Your mother is some worried. Where you been? You know what time it is?” She was slapping mosquitoes with a fern. “They ate at seven! Joly couldn’t wait! Ellis said--”

And I must have made strange noises because she stopped, slid further down the rocks where the falls began. Where I was washing. In the brook. Sitting in the place we called the bathtub where the stones had ground out hollows in the ledge.

“You hear me? What’s the matter? What you doin’?”

I couldn’t speak. Kept splashing, pouring water on my head, down my belly, sloshing up and down.

“Honey?” She was older than me, the minister’s daughter from a church in the village. “What’s happened?”

I couldn’t speak.

Eight o’clock, and the moon, like a silver grin, was slipping low into peach-colored ribbons over the pines. Glimpses of it twinkled when the ash leaves shivered: glitter falling into water, on her hair. She was wearing a sleeveless, cotton blouse and soft, full skirt, and somehow placed her sandals noiselessly on leaves, climbing down. “Honey?” Holding out her hands.

Words wouldn't come. She touched me and I stood up slowly, plucking... I think she used that word much later... plucking at the light blue halter straggling down my back, one fist in my crotch, legs crossed.

“You... Where's your... Where are your shorts!”

I pulled my hand away so slowly, like a sunfish floating, and she saw the darkness on it, saw the wet. “Oh, Jesus.”

I could feel it trickling, just a little, down one leg.

“Oh, Jesus help us now!”

But all I could see was the hummingbird poking at the fragile Runner Bean flowers over and over as if it couldn't get enough. And Ellis saying, “If ya tell, I'll do it again!”