

Blackberries and Honeysuckle

By Patrick Costello

"Wait... Is that a path?"

Amy peered where I was pointing. If you looked closely enough, there was a deer path in the waist-high grass off the curb.

The picnic grounds at Manassas Battlefield National Park were around the corner from our apartment. It was a quiet place Amy and I could go for a quiet evening snack, feeling far away from the traffic and noise of Northern Virginia. We both loved the spot, but there was nothing exactly special about it. A parking lot and some picnic tables. Not much else.

I climbed out of the car without a word. Amy fretted for a moment before cautiously joining me at the beginning of the path.

She knew I was going to follow the trail. There was no way I could walk away without peeking. She said that we would get covered with ticks walking through the grass.

I arched my eyebrows. "Checking each other over when we get home is the best part of the hike."

I kissed her and took her hand. We walked into the grass laughing.

The grass was high enough to obscure our view in some spots. We made jokes about The African Queen, taking turns with bad Bogart and Hepburn impressions as we marched through the brush.

After a short distance, we found ourselves at the edge of a small pond, invisible from the parking lot. Ringed by cattails buzzing with dragonflies and damselflies, lily pads dotted the dark water. Frogs chirped and darted about. A willow tree stood on the far edge, across from us. In the branches caressing the water, a green heron was fishing.

Amy kissed me happily. We could have sat there forever. It was peaceful and beautiful and almost perfect.

The trail did not stop at the pond. It continued through the grass. Amy knew I wanted to go further before I said a word. We held hands and walked on.

The picnic grounds fell out of view behind us. We came to the fragments of an old farm fence lined with pine trees. A hedgerow had sprung up along the fence. Songbirds flitted among the blackberries and honeysuckle.

We fed each other blackberries, kissed with lips sweetened with honeysuckle blossom. She wore wildflowers in her hair, lounging in a little clearing that the deer must have trampled down. Another nearly perfect place, hidden away from view, just around the bend from home.

Still, the path went on.

Amy led this time, dragging me by the hand through milkweed and thistle. Our socks catching cockleburrs. Still, the trail had brought us to two magical spots. We had to see it to its end.

The trail ended on the banks of a still creek, perhaps a spur of Young's Branch. Wide but shallow, the water moved at a languid pace. Fish swam through the clear water. The air was cooler here, maybe it was the shade or the breeze over the water. Tall trees lined the banks, with one fallen tree crossing the stream. A great blue heron crept into the brush, hoping to continue its daily fishing away from our view. The air was awash in the music of songbirds. Tree swallows darted around us, as if in welcome. A hornet's nest hissed from an overhead branch, as if in warning. Bobbing wildflowers were alive with bees and hummingbirds.

Amy was entranced. It was almost a cathedral of nature, only a stone's throw from the highway.

She asked me if I knew about this place before we started the trail.

I didn't have to answer. She knew me well enough to know. I trusted my gut. Instead, I joked that deer are smarter than folks sometimes admit.

I took her in my arms and sang old love songs. We danced alongside the creek. We scampered along the fallen tree to sit with our bare feet in the icy water. The heron did not seem to mind.

As we walked back to the car, we came upon a small herd of deer. They ignored us. We watched them graze for a bit. They jumped off into the tall grass, tawny coats blended in with the green and golden grass until they vanished. Amy's hair in the sunshine was breathtaking.

That path and the sights along it became our place, a place we went to escape and picnic in a world all our own. Amy could sit all afternoon watching red-winged blackbirds argue among the cattails. We spent many hours sitting with our feet dangling from the fallen tree, our feet cold from the stream and my heart on fire from the slightest smile or touch of her hand. I often brought my ukulele or the old banjo, putting on private concerts for Amy and any wildlife that happened by.

To anybody driving by, it was a parking lot with some picnic tables.

I won't say that every path we took led to such magical memories. The thing about whimsy is that you sometimes fall on your face. For every adventure leading to moments of transcendental beauty, you take about fifty pratfalls.

When it goes right, when the path seems faint and hard to follow, take your lover by the hand and go. Just go. Take it all in. Every bit of it. In cold February, nothing warms the heart like memories of kisses sweetened by blackberry and honeysuckle.