

BLACKBERRY BLOCKADE

In the wildest, most unnavigable section of the wood, amidst the piles of brush and fallen elms and poplars, blackberries make their way into the world. The largest berries are hidden in the center of the blackberry patch surrounded by replicas that are not as sweet. The berries themselves are protected like royalty with bramble-armed soldiers who prevent a successful raid by the inexperienced berry picker. I arm myself with a bucket and a flannel shirt and pants of thick, almost impervious denim.

I march ambitiously through a field of tall grass and stone-laden clods of earth as the fiery sun envelopes me in a wave of heat. Ahead I can see the edge of the forest and the shade-giving protection of the oaks and maples, the coolness beckons to me as I wade through the stalks of unrestrained timothy. Each wheat-like head brushes my unfeeling clothing as I pass. I escape the wrath of the sun and follow the recently mowed path, my body tense with excitement at my soon-to-be task. I spot my target and veer off toward the voices of the blackberries. When necessary, I side step and leap over the well-rooted stumps and natural deposits of dirt and rocks that block my path. Then I stand in determination as I prepare myself for the rigors of war.

I stop to pick the visible, unprotected berries before I begin the battle for the juiciest, most flavorful prize at the center of the blackberry patch. The tentacles of thorns reach out for me as I break through the front line of bramble troops. I pause methodically to scoop the nearby fruit into my pail: my first handfuls are eased gently into the container so as not to squish the ripe, globular masses. The ripest berries hang precariously amidst the thorns: they tumble into the underbrush at the slightest quake of movement. Each time I hesitate, my clothing becomes entangled with thorny branches. Tips of thorns snap off, firmly imbedded in my clothing. I press on, every movement snagged by each separate branch of bayonets as they rise up in defense. As each bramble is unhooked, another replaces it. Painful scratches etch my hands. Only the thought of the flavor of blackberries pushes me to continue through the blockade.

I have a brief period of relief as I balance on a fallen tree trunk much too wide to harbor the growth of a blackberry bush yet able to support striped colonies of fungi and a thin layer of moss. I am overwhelmed by a persistent craving to eat some of my already captured berries, but I restrain myself from such self-indulgence to focus on my balance, and to avoid the casualty of a fall off the slippery timber. As I peer ahead into the shadows, I can see the queen of the brambles. Thorn-like swords jut out at all angles to protect her from assassins while she boosts morale on the battle ground. Succulent, thimble-sized berries hang temptingly out of my reach, each cluster of kernels so plump I can almost taste the juice.

The memories of a previous summer flash before me as I plan my path through the brambles ahead. The trip through the woods seemed faster before when my five year old feet ran joyously down the path. I remember my mother and grandmother had followed behind with colanders roughly cut out of plastic milk cartons. The berries seemed larger that summer, but perhaps it was because I was so small. As a child I only concentrated on the fruit I could eat. I was only able to grab berries from the lower parts of the brambles,

and I gathered as many as could fit in my mouth. The dark purple juices formed rivers on my chin and streamed down to reappear as pools of violet stains on my T-shirt and overalls. By the end of the afternoon my fingers would be sticky and scratched. I chuckle at my childhood antics and focus on myself in the present.

I continue on, refreshed, my final destination in sight.

I pass through the final line of troops, my body contorts to avoid as many snags as possible. I am the conqueror, the objects of my desire are finally within my reach. I gently pluck one luscious fruit from its stem and place it purposefully onto my tongue. I slowly savor the sweetness as a river of rich juice flows past my palate and down my throat. The transparent skin of the berry melts in my mouth, and the small brown seeds make a final struggle against me trying to imbed themselves into the hidden crevices of my teeth. I reach for another berry, and yet another. I gather alternate handfuls to eat and save, filling my bucket to the brim.

I glance from side to side, satisfied with my accomplishment. Only unripened berries still hang nearby, green and underdeveloped, waiting for a battle at a later time with a Blue-jay or perhaps a black bear. I start my trek back to civilization. As I break my way through the conquered soldiers, their defeated bayonets still reach out toward me now unable to stand in their original position of defense, I firmly grip the handle of my weighted bucket.

As I emerge victorious I feel a sense of relief, knowing that my battle is finished for today. In the distance I can hear the sounds of a car engine on the nearby country road. The lights of my grandparents' house shine against the curtain of dusk as it encloses the final edge of the sun. I realize that my life at this moment on this summer day is a success, and none of the busy city life or lazy country life could change anything that happened in my own small battle. I totter home where my wounds will be healed and my treasure will be enjoyed by my family as a topping for dessert at the evening meal where the family gathers, not just to eat, but to discuss the meaning of life as it spells itself out to us every day. Tomorrow we will pool our gathered fruit and create jellies to save the taste of summer for the dead of winter, when the sun is not shining and the bramble soldiers are broken skeletons against the bone-white snow.

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