

## Once Upon A Little Prairie

Life is too short to cancel trips for inclement weather. It's been raining for the last three days, really up until the moment I park my car. The first thing that Josh and I notice as we get out is a huge stinking pile of rotten carp and shortnose gar, some dragged here and there by raccoons. The discards of some commercial fisherman from the Mississippi, I suppose. We chuckle that it must be an omen, but of what we don't know.

"Good omen. Good omen for sure," I confidently decide after we walk away holding our breath.

"What makes you say that?" Josh asks.

"Not so much a special understanding of omens, but because I found this spot, and I've been here before."

Josh smiles.

We slip into the forest on a gloomy morning of drizzle and dripping leaves, trying not to get our shoes soaked in the wet grass. We follow a deer trail that angles down a steep ravine under bur oaks. At the bottom we hop across a random assortment of precarious limestone boulders before ascending the other side. We aren't even close to *The Spot* yet, but our hearts are already thumping in anticipation of the anticipation when we get there. "Holy shit, what if this really happens?" I say as we pause to rest.

"I know. It's hard to believe," Josh says.

"What's harder to believe," I say, and then lower to a whisper as if it is too good to say out loud "is that I think it *is* going to happen."

Neither of us is an expert in superstition, but we both know that when something too good to be true might be about to happen, saying more would jinx it. So we shut up and walk.

The woods is choked with garlic mustard and buckthorn, although every here and there a geranium or gray dogwood has managed to survive the competition.

"Not the kind of habitat you'd expect," I mutter—not because I'm the observant one, but because I'm the loud one. Josh just looks at me. "Don't worry, it'll change," I add. Of course, he knows that. The woods we are in looks nothing like the bluff we are headed to, which I spotted from far away, years ago. Once its peculiar vegetation caught my eye, I couldn't forget the place. It beckoned me from one morel season to the next—in my sleep, in my daydreams, and as I pored over the ragged topographical map that guides our adventures. A nagging hunch told me that the boulder-strewn bluff standing a mile ahead of us would be the culmination of a childhood fantasy that had stalked us into adulthood.

The quest began when we were fourteen. We rode our bicycles five or six hours one way with scant third-rate camping gear strapped to our backs just to look for this place. We camped without enough to eat. We pulled off ticks and scratched chigger bites. We endured the embarrassment of suspicious landowners who turned us away, thinking surely that two boys our age weren't going to all that trouble just to experience Nature. We must be up to no good, they thought. Actually, we were—but only because they put us up to it. We defied them, slipping through the strands of barbed wire to go trespassing. Our mission was serious: to find the most beautiful, elusive, awe-inspiring, persecuted, and majestic animal in America.

Awe-inspiring beauty asks a hefty ransom. In pursuit of it, I rode until I nearly passed out. I huddled overnight in the cold. I fought with my girlfriend. I dehydrated myself and then drank highly questionable water. I got yelled at by turkey hunters. I contracted Lyme disease, lost work days and gas money, tore up clothes, scratched legs, bruised shins. Once I found myself dangling by one hand from a cottonwood sapling that was rooted in a crevice, a thirty foot drop to the rocks below if my grip failed, with my sock soaking up blood running down from a deep gash in my calf.

Those are some of the best memories of my life.

When we are about halfway there, one of us spots a morel. We hunker down and put our faces at ground level, each finding a few more mushrooms. We're not really looking for morels, but we brought bags for this contingency, because we usually find them. Life is too short to do just one thing at a time. What makes foragers different from "sportsmen" is that we are interested in the whole of Nature, not just some single quarry that will bring us social status. We try to do everything all the time. A few years ago, we were looking for this spot, and we found some morels, so we filled a bag. We walked a little further and found some more morels; after that we never stopped finding them, and all we did was pick mushrooms until it was time to go home. When we ran out of bags we took our T-shirts off and cinched the bottoms shut with elm bark strips to make gunnysacks. That doesn't repeat itself today, though; we just find a half dozen small morels that Josh slips into his pack.

It rains briefly, so I pack up my camera. After it stops, I offer optimistically, "Maybe that's the rain at the end of the storm front, and now it'll clear up. That'd be perfect." I can't let go of my confidence that today we will find our Holy Grail.

As we approach our destination, the hillside gets so steep that it's hard to stand without one hand on a juniper or buckthorn. The brush is getting ridiculously thick, replete with both poison ivy and prickly ash. No wonder this is a secret spot.

Just before reaching the clearing, we pause to catch our breath and savor the moment. "I guess it's time to start being really careful," I say. And we do, stepping slowly as if stalking deer. The brush has one last hurrah around the clearing's rim: black raspberries, grape vines, prickly ash, poison ivy, and bittersweet vines tangled so thickly they seem to be wrestling me with purpose, guardians of this little bluff prairie. Only here, I can't crash through it as if I'm trying to flush a rabbit from the bushes; I have to be exceedingly careful. One deliberate step at a time.

At last we're free, in the open prairie. Josh kneels down cautiously to pluck and nibble some leaves of violet wood sorrel, a characteristic plant of these steep, open hillsides. Unlike most other *Oxalis*, this one is a spring ephemeral, and its flavor and texture are a notch above any other wood sorrel I've ever eaten. He grabs a plant that has had its root system exposed by the recent rain washing down the slope and eats the bulb after wiping it on his shirt.

When you know plants, you can see into the past. Sometimes we find violet wood sorrel in an oak woods—a clear indication that the forest was an open savannah forty or fifty years ago. This hillside is one of the last vestiges of the prairies that covered most of this region just a few generations ago, and the forest is inexorably swallowing it from all sides. When our children are old enough to come here, the prairie will probably be gone.

A few more steps in slow motion, our eyes scanning and rescanning the ground in front of us, and I point to a bushy herb with fine compound leaves and purple flowers that give it away as a legume. "That's one of the plants I wanted to show you. *Astragalus crassicaerpus*, a state-endangered species. There's only a few populations known. It's all over this bluff. Really common in parts of the Black Hills. Actually has an edible pod, like a juicy pea pod but the size and shape of a big grape." We stare at it for a minute or two and look around for more. Then we continue.

We find a fern that we can't identify, something unusual and rare. We fondle the little bluestem, the big bluestem, the side-oats grama; the grasses that built the great agricultural soils of this region are today relegated to the roughest, remotest terrain. Like this.

There is an eight-foot tall limestone ledge with one crevice running vertically and two horizontally. I put my foot in the lower crevice and pull myself to the top. Peering over, I see nothing but . . . wait a second. Gold and black bands wedged between limestone, thirty inches from my face.

"There's one."

“What?” Josh says. This is not a question, it is an exclamation. He has waited twenty years to hear me say that.

I jump down. Josh jumps up.

“Where?”

“To the left, between those rocks.”

“Oh my God, I see it,” he says, the first loud words since we got here. I watch his face—awestruck, giddy, nervous, thankful, maybe even a bit sad—as he looks into the eye of the first timber rattlesnake he has ever seen. We have arrived; after all these years, we have chased that dream right back to our boyhoods.

It’s hard to logically defend an infatuation with rattlesnakes. Why walk for miles through steep, rocky hills teeming with poison ivy and climb treacherously crumbling limestone bluffs for the dim chance of seeing a serpent that could send you to the hospital with one mistaken step? It’s like trying to explain why you should do hard labor in a wapato bed, chest-deep in frigid muddy water for an hour just to get twelve pounds of starchy tubers. You either understand or you don’t. I can’t imagine life without either.

An hour later, as we sit next to a cracked monolith where at least seven timber rattlesnakes lie coiled, we contemplate the irony of this beast’s relationship to humankind. An animal so feared and loathed that it has been systematically exterminated almost everywhere within its range. Yet so respected that it appeared on Revolutionary American flags as a symbol of our national identity. The snake had become a legend to us, a Sasquatch: an unverifiable presence cryptically watching our every move, we could feel it lurking just out of sight, frightening but inexorably drawing us toward its haunts. Today, at last, the legend became life. In strident rebuttal of our growing fear that this creature was gone from the beloved bluff country where we had sought it for so long, there’s nothing short of a pile of them coiled a few feet away at the mouth of a crevice. One separate rattlesnake rests in a loose figure-eight on top of the stone, basking in the broken sunlight partially shielded from view by a wild grape vine.

We sit for long minutes, admiring the snake and basking in the satisfaction of our accomplishment. I take pictures while Josh works up a good thought.

“This is the calmest animal I’ve ever seen. What other animal would let you do this? Just let you sit here a few feet away and not even care? It’s so dignified. This must be the most docile wild animal there is,” he marvels. “If people didn’t try to kill them every time they see them, they might realize what they’re actually like,” he adds.

We head up the treacherous slope to the top of the bluff, partly for the incredible view, but also in search of more snakes, and prairie turnip. This plant (*Psoralea esculenta*) is another rare legume in this area. Its habitat has been almost completely destroyed by agriculture and fire suppression—which allowed the bluffs to fill in with trees. Prairie turnip roots were once a staple starchy food of plains tribes, and it is a remarkably good, hearty vegetable. The tradition of gathering and eating this plant lives on today in some Native American communities further west. I have dug prairie turnips in places where they are common in South Dakota, but here in Wisconsin, where they are just barely eking by, I leave them alone.

At the bluff top, we find some prairie turnip growing right next to a pair of enormous timber rattlers that bask, entangled with each other for no apparent reason, in short grass in front of a limestone slab. To me, this juxtaposition is punctuation in an essay that is my life. When I give plant talks, I often feel compelled to explain my love of snakes or birds or skunks to audiences that think I am supposed to be a “plant guy.” Many are shocked to learn that I hunt; and hunters I meet are even more shocked to learn that I take pictures of flowers and collect herbal teas. How un-macho. But to me, there is no separation between any of this. The snake is the prairie, the turnip is the snake, the rabbit is the spiraea. What you do for one you do for the other.

On the way back, we find a dozen or so large morels. We graze on greens, filling a bag with stalks of wood nettle, honewort, and aniseroot—all in perfect season—to bring home and make a soup. We stop to look at shoots of jerusalem artichoke and giant St. John's wort, and note the location of some hackberry trees, wild asparagus, carrion flower, and pasture thistle.

"We never would have dared to imagine it this good," Josh says. "In our wildest dreams, we would have found nine rattlesnakes. Fourteen? No way."

We're going back next year.