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The Memory Place

This is the kind of April morning no other month can touch: a world tinted in watercolor pastels of redbud, dogtooth violet, and gentle rain. The trees are beginning to shrug off winter; the dark, leggy maple woods are shot through with gleaming constellations of white dogwood blossoms. The road winds through deep forest near Cumberland Falls, Kentucky, carrying us across the Cumberland Plateau toward Horse Lick Creek. Camille is quiet beside me in the front seat, until at last she sighs and says, with a child's poetic logic, "This reminds me of the place I always like to think about."

Me too, I tell her. It's the exact truth. I grew up roaming wooded hollows like these, though they were more hemmed-in, keeping their secrets between the wide-open cattle pastures and tobacco fields of Nicholas County, Kentucky. My brother and sister and I would hoist cane fishing poles over our shoulders, as if we intended to make ourselves useful, and head out to spend a Saturday doing nothing of the kind. We haunted places we called the Crawdad Creek, the Downy Woods (for downy woodpeckers and also for milkweed fluff), and—thrillingly, because we'd once found big bones there—Dead Horse Draw. We caught crawfish with nothing but patience and our hands, boiled them with wild onions over a campfire, and ate them and declared them the best food on earth. We collected banana-scented paw-paw fruits, and were tempted by fleshy, fawn-colored mushrooms but left those alone. We watched birds whose names we didn't know build nests in trees whose names we generally did. We witnessed the unfurling of hickory and oak and maple leaves in the springtime, so tender as to appear nearly edible; we collected them and pressed them with a hot iron under waxed paper when they blushed and dropped in the fall. Then we waited again for spring, even more impatiently than we waited for Christmas, because its gifts were more abundant, needed no batteries, and somehow seemed more exclusively *ours*. I can't imagine that any discovery I ever make, in the rest of my life, will give me the same electric thrill I felt when I first found little righteous Jack in his crimson-curtained pulpit poking up from the base of a rotted log.

These were the adventures of my childhood: tame, I guess, by the standards established by Mowgli the Jungle Boy or even Laura Ingalls Wilder. Nevertheless, it was the experience of nature, with its powerful lessons in static change and predictable surprise. Much of what I know about life, and almost everything I believe about the way I want to live, was formed in those woods. In times of acute worry or insomnia or physical pain, when I close my eyes and bring to mind the place I always like to think about, it looks like the woods in Kentucky.

Horse Lick Creek is a tributary to the Rockcastle River, which drains most of eastern Kentucky and has won enough points for beauty and biological diversity to be named a "wild river." The Nature Conservancy has chosen Horse Lick as a place to cherish particularly, and protect. The creek itself is 16 miles long, with a watershed of 40,000 acres; of this valley, 8,000 acres belong to the Forest Service, about 1,500 to the Nature Conservancy, and the remainder to small farms, whose rich bottoms are given over to tobacco and hay and corn, and whose many steep, untillable slopes are given to forest. The people who reside here have few choices about how they will earn a living. If they are landless, they can work for the school system or county government, they can commute to a distant city, or they can apply for food stamps. If they do have land, they are cursed and blessed with farming. It's rough country. The most lucrative crop that will grow around here is marijuana, and while few would say they approve, everybody knows it's the truth.

Sand Gap, the town at the upper end of the valley, is the straggling remains of an old mining camp. Gapites, as the people of Sand Gap call themselves, take note of us as we pass through. We've met up now with Jim Hays, the Nature Conservancy employee who oversees this holding and develops prospects for purchasing other land to improve the integrity of the preserve. I phoned him in advance and he has been kind enough, on a rainy morning, to show us the way into the preserve. Camille and I jostle in the cab of his pickup like pickled eggs in a jar as we take in the territory, bouncing around blind curves and potholes big enough to swallow at least a good laying hen. We pass a grocery store with a front porch, and the Pony Lot Holiness Church. JESUS LOVES YOU, BOND WELCOMES YOU, declares a sign in another small settlement.

Jim grew up here, and speaks with the same hill cadences and turns of phrase that shaped my own speech in childhood. Holding tight to the wheel, he declares, "This is the hatefulest road in about three states. Everybody that lives on it wrecks." By way of evidence we pass a rusted car, well off the road and headed down-hollow; its crumpled nose still rests against the tree that ended its life, though it's hard to picture how it got there exactly. Between patches of woods there are pastures, tobacco fields, and houses with mowed yards and flower gardens and folkloric lawn art. Many a home has a "pouting house" out back, a tarpaper shack where a person can occasionally seek refuge from the rest of the family.

Turner's General Merchandise is the local landmark, meeting place, and commercial hub. It's an honest-to-goodness general store, with a plank floor and a pot-bellied stove, where you can browse the offerings of canned goods, brooms, onion sets, and more specialized items like overalls and cemetery wreaths. A pair of hunters come in to register and tag the wild turkey they've killed—the fourth one brought in today. It's opening day of turkey season, which will last two and a half weeks or until the allotted number of carcasses trail in, whichever comes first. If the season was not strictly controlled, the local turkey population would likely be extinct before first snowfall.

Nobody, and everybody, around here would say that Horse Lick Creek is special. It's a great place to go shoot, drive off-road vehicles, and camp out. In addition to the wild turkeys, the valley holds less conspicuous riches: limestone cliffs and caves that shelter insectivorous bats, including the endangered Indiana bat; shoals in the clear, fast water where many species of rare mussels hold on for their lives. All of this habitat is threatened by abandoned strip mines, herbicide and pesticide use, and literally anything that muddies the water. So earthy and simple a thing as *mud* might not seem hazardous, but in fact it is; fine silt clogs the gills of filter-feeding mussels, asphyxiates them, and this in turn starves out the organisms that depend on the filter feeders. Habitat destruction can be more subtle than a clear-cut or a forest fire; sometimes it's nearly invisible. Nor is it necessarily ugly. Many would argue that the monoculture of an Iowa cornfield is more beautiful than the long-grass prairie that made way for it. But when human encroachment alters the quality of a place that has supported life in its particular way for millions of years, the result is death, sure and multifarious. The mussels of Horse Lick evolved in clear streams, not muddy ones, and so some of the worst offenders here are not giant mining conglomerates but cattle or local travelers who stir up daily mudstorms in hundreds of spots where the road crosses the creek. Saving this little slice of life on earth—like most—will take not just legislation, but change at the level of the pickup truck.

Poverty rarely brings out the most generous human impulses, especially when it comes to environmental matters. Ask a hungry West African about the evils of deforestation, or an unemployed Oregon logger about the endangered spotted owl, and you'll get just about the same answer: I can't afford to think about that right now. Environmentalists must make a case, again and again, for the possibility that we can't afford *not* to think about it. We point to our wildest lands—the Amazon rain forests, the Arctic tundra—to inspire humans with the mighty grace of what we haven't yet wrecked. Those places have a power that speaks for itself, that seems to throw its own grandeur as a curse on the defiler. Fell the giant trees, flood the majestic canyons, and you will have hell and posterity to pay.

But Jackson County, Kentucky, is nobody's idea of wilderness. I wonder, 10 as we bounce along: Who will complain, besides the mute mussels and secretive bats, if we muddy Horse Lick Creek?

Polly and Tom Milt Lakes settled here a hundred years ago, in a deep hollow above the creek. Polly was the county's school teacher. Tom Milt liked her looks, so he saved up to buy a geography book, then went to school and asked her to marry him. Both were in their late teens. They raised nine children on the banks of Horse Lick. We pass by their homestead, where feral jonquils mark the ghost-boundaries of a front porch long gone.

Their main visible legacy is the Lakes family cemetery, hidden in a little glade. Camille and I wander quietly, touching headstones where seventy or more seasons of rain have eroded the intentions of permanent remembrance. A lot of babies lie here: Gladys, Colon, and Ollie May Lakes all died the same

day they were born. A pair of twins, Tomie and Tiny, lived one and two days, respectively. Life has changed almost unimaginably since the mothers of these children grieved and labored here.

But the place itself seems relatively unaltered—at least at first glance. It wasn't a true wilderness even then, but a landscape possessed by hunters and farmers. Only the contents of the wildcat dumps have changed: the one I stopped earlier to inventory contained a hot-water heater, the headboard of a wooden bed, an avocado-green toilet, a playpen, and a coffee maker.

We make our way on down the valley. The hillside drops steeply away from the road, so that we're looking up at stately maple trunks on the left, and down into their upper branches on the right. The forest is unearthly: filtered light through maple leaves gives a green glow to the creek below us. Mayapples grow in bright assemblies like crowds of rain-slick umbrellas; red trilliums and wild ginger nod from the moss-carpeted banks. Ginseng grows here too—according to Jim, many a young man makes his truck insurance payments by digging “sang.”

Deep in the woods at the bottom of a hollow we find Cool Springs, a ¹⁵ spot where the rocky ground yawns open to reveal a rushing underground stream. The freshet merely surfaces and then runs away again, noisily, under a deeply undercut limestone cliff. I walk back into the cave as far as I can, to where the water roars down and away, steep and fast. I can feel the cold slabs of stone through the soles of my shoes. Turning back to the light, I see sunlit spray in a bright, wide arc, and the cave's mouth framed by a fringe of backlit maiden-hair ferns.

Farther down the road we find the “swirl hole”—a hidden place in a rhododendron slick where the underground stream bubbles up again from the deep. The water is nearly icy and incredibly blue as it gushes up from the bedrock. We sit and watch, surrounded by dark rhododendrons and hemlocks, mesmerized by the repetitious swirling of the water. Camille tosses in tiny hemlock cones; they follow one another in single file along a spiral path, around and around the swirl hole and finally away, downstream, to where this clear water joins the opaque stream of Horse Lick Creek itself.

The pollution here is noticeable. Upstream we passed wildcat strip mines, bulldozed flats, and many fords where the road passes through the creek. The traffic we've seen on this road is recreational vehicles. At one point we encountered two stranded young men whose Ford pickup was sunk up to its doors in what they called a “soup hole,” an enormous pothole full of water that looked like more fun than it turned out to be. We helped pull them out, but their engine only choked and coughed muddy water out the tailpipe—not a good sign. When we left them, they were headed back to town on foot.

When Tom Milt and Polly Lakes farmed and hunted this land, their lives were ruled by an economy that included powerful obligations to the future. If the land eroded badly, or the turkeys were all killed in one season, they and their children would not survive. Rarely does any creature have the luxury of fouling its own nest beyond redemption.

But now this territory is nobody's nest, exactly. It's more of a playground. The farmers have mostly gone to the cities for work, and with their hard-earned wages and leisure time they return with off-road vehicles. Careless recreation, and a failure of love for the land, are extracting their pound of flesh from Horse Lick Creek.

A map of this watershed is a jigsaw puzzle of public and private property. The Conservancy's largest holding lies at the lower end of the valley. We pass through Forest Service land to get to it, and park just short of a creek crossing where several tiny tributaries come together. Some of the streams are stained with iron ore, a deep, clear orange. I lean against the truck eating my sandwich while Camille stalks the butterflies that tremble in congregations around the mud puddles—tiger swallowtails. She tries to catch them with her hands, raising a languid cloud of yellow and black. They settle, only mildly perturbed, behind us, as we turn toward the creek.

We make our way across a fallow pasture to the tree-lined bank. The water here is invisibly clear in the shallows, an inviting blue green in the deeper, stiller places. We are half a mile downstream from one of the largest mussel shoals. Camille, a seasoned beachcomber, stalks the shoreline with the delicate thoroughness of a sandpiper, collecting piles of shells. I'm less thrilled than she by her findings, because I know they're the remains of a rare and dying species. The Cumberland Plateau is one of the world's richest sites of mussel evolution, but mussels are the most threatened group in North America. Siltation is killing them here, rendering up a daily body count. Unless the Conservancy acquires some of the key lands where there is heavy creek crossing, these species will soon graduate from "endangered" to "extinct."

Along the creekbanks we spot crayfish holes and hear the deep, throaty clicking of frogs. The high bank across from us is a steep mud cliff carved with round holes and elongated hollows; it looks like a miniature version of the windswept sandstone canyons I've come to know in the West. But everything here is scaled down, small and humane, sized for child adventures like those I pursued with tireless enthusiasm three decades ago. The hay fields beyond these woods, the hawk circling against a mackerel sky, the voices of frogs, the smells of mud and leaf mold, these things place me square in the middle of all my childhood memories.

I recognize, exactly, Camille's wide-eyed thrill when we discover a trail of deer tracks in the soft mud among bird-foot violets. She kneels to examine a cluster of fern fiddleheads the size of her own fist, and is startled by a mourning cloak butterfly (which, until I learned to read field guides, I understood as "morning cloak"). Someone in my childhood gave me the impression that fiddleheads and mourning cloaks were rare and precious. Now I realize they are fairly ordinary members of eastern woodland fauna and flora, but I still feel lucky and even virtuous—a gifted observer—when I see them.

For that matter, they probably *are* rare, in the scope of human experience. A great many people will live out their days without ever seeing such

sights, or if they do, never *gasp*ing. My parents taught me this—to gasp, and feel lucky. They gave me the gift of making mountains out of nature's exquisite molehills. The day I captured and brought home a giant, luminescent green luna moth, they carried on as if it were the Hope diamond I'd discovered hanging on a shred of hickory bark. I owned the moth as my captive for a night, and set it free the next, after receiving an amazing present: strands of tiny green pearls—luna moth eggs—laid in fastidious rows on a hickory leaf. In the heat of my bedroom they hatched almost immediately, and I proudly took my legion of tiny caterpillars to school. I was disappointed when my schoolmates didn't jump for joy.

I suppose no one ever taught them how to strike it rich in the forest. But I know. My heart stops for a second, even now, here, on Horse Lick Creek, as Camille and I wait for the butterfly to light and fold its purple, gold-bordered wings. "That's a morning cloak," I tell her. "It's *very rare*."

In her lifetime it may well be true; she won't see a lot of these butterflies, or fern fiddleheads, or banks of trillium. She's growing up in another place, the upper Sonoran desert. It has its own treasures, and I inflate their importance as my parents once did for me. She signals to me at the breakfast table and we both hold perfectly still, watching the roadrunner outside our window as he raises his cockade of feathers in concentration while stalking a lizard. We gasp over the young, golden coyotes who come down to our pond for a drink. The fragile desert becomes more precious to me as it becomes a family treasure, the place she will always like to think about, after she's grown into adult worries and the need for imaginary refuge.

A new question in the environmentalist's canon, it seems to me, is this one: who will love the *imperfect* lands, the fragments of backyard desert paradise, the creek that runs between farms? In our passion to protect the last remnants of virgin wilderness, shall we surrender everything else in exchange? One might argue that it's a waste of finite resources to preserve and try to repair a place as tame as Horse Lick Creek. I wouldn't. I would say that our love for our natural home has to go beyond finite, into the boundless—like the love of a mother for her children, whose devotion extends to both the gifted and the scarred among her brood.

Domesticated though they are, I want the desert boundary lands of southern Arizona to remain intact. I believe in their remnant wildness. I am holding constant vigil over my daughter's memory place, the land of impossible childhood discovery, in hopes that it may remain a place of real refuge. I hope in thirty years she may come back from wherever she has gone to find the roadrunner thickets living on quietly, exactly as she remembered them. And somehow, I hope, will be keeping downy woods and crawdad creeks safe for me.