

The Secret Place

RECKIN A MILLION little critters live along the spring branch.

If you could be a giant and could look down on its bends and curves, you would know the spring branch is a river of life.

I was the giant. Being over two feet tall, I squatted, giant-like, to study the little marshes where trickles of the stream eddied off into low places. Frogs laid eggs; big crystal balls of jelly that had pollywogs dotted all through them . . . waiting for the time to eat their way out.

Rock minnows darted to chase musk bugs scuttering across the stream. When you held a musk bug in your hand, it smelled real sweet and thick.

Once I spent a whole afternoon collecting some musk bugs, just a few in my pocket, for they are hard to catch. I took them to Granma, as I knew she loved sweet smells. She always put honeysuckle in her lye soap when she made it.

She was more excited about the musk bugs than I was, might near. She said she had never smelled anything so sweet and couldn't figger how she had missed out on knowing about musk bugs.

At the supper table she told Granpa about it before I could, and how it was the brandest new thing she had ever smelled. Granpa was struck dumbfounded. I let him smell of them and he said he had lived seventy-odd years, total unaware of such a smell.

Granma said I had done right, for when you come on something that is good, first thing to do is share it with whoever you can find; that way, the good spreads out to where no telling it will go. Which is right.

I got pretty wet, splashing in the spring branch, but Granma never said anything. Cherokees never scolded their children for having anything to do with the woods.

I would go far up the spring branch, wading the clear water, bending low through the green feather curtains of the weeping willows that hung down, trailing branch tips in the current. Water ferns made green lace that curved over the stream and offered holding places for the little umbrella spiders.

These little fellers would tie one end of a thin cable to the fern branch, then leap into the air, spilling out more cable in an umbrella and try to make it across to a fern branch on the other side. If he made it, he would tie the cable and jump back—back and forth—until he had a pearly looking net spread over the spring.

These were gritty little fellers. If they fell in the water, they got swept along in rapids and had to fight to stay on top and make it to the bank before a brook minnow got them.

I squatted in the middle of the spring branch and watched one little spider trying to get his cable across. He had determined that he was going to have the widest pearl net anywheres up and down the whole spring branch; and he picked a wide place. He would tie his cable, jump in the air and fall in the water. He'd get swept downstream, fighting for his life, crawl out on the bank and come back to that same fern. Then he'd try again.

The third time he come back to the fern and walked out on the end and laid down, crossing his front arms under his chin, to study the water. I figured he was might near give out—I was, and my bottom was numbing cold from squatting in the spring branch. He laid there thinking and studying. In a minute he got a thought, and commenced to jump up and down on the fern. Up and down. The fern got to rising and falling. He kept at it, jumping to move the fern down and riding it back up. Then, of a sudden, when the fern rose high, he jumped, letting out his umbrella—and he made it.

He was fired up proud and leapt around after he made it, until he nearly fell off. His pearl net become the widest I ever saw.

I got to know the spring branch, following it up the hollow: the dip swallows that hung sack nests in the willows and fussed at me until they got to know me—then they would stick out their heads and talk; the frogs that sung all along the banks, but would hush when I moved close, until Granpa told me that frogs can feel the ground shake when you walk. He showed me how the Cherokee walks, not heel down, but toe down, slipping the moccasins on the ground. Then I could come right up, and set down beside a frog and he would keep singing.

Following the spring branch was how I found the secret place. It was a little ways up the side of the mountain and hemmed in with laurel. It was not very big, a grass knoll with an old sweet gum tree bending down. When I saw it, I knew it was my secret place, and so I went there a whole lot.

Ol' Maud taken to going with me. She liked it too, and we would sit under the sweet gum and listen—and watch. Ol' Maud never made a sound in the secret place. She knew it was secret.

Once in the late afternoon me and ol' Maud was sitting with our backs against the sweet gum, and watching when

I saw a flicker of something move a ways off. It was Granma. She had passed not far from us. But I figured she hadn't seen my secret place at all or she would of said something.

Granma could move quieter than a whisper through wood leaves. I followed her and she was root gathering. I caught up to help and me and Granma set down on a log to sort the roots out. I reckined I was too young to keep a secret, for I had to tell Granma about my place. She wasn't surprised—which surprised me.

Granma said all Cherokees had a secret place. She told me she had one and Granpa had one. She said she had never asked, but she believed Granpa's was on top of the mountain, on the high trail. She said she reckined most everybody had a secret place, but she couldn't be certain, as she had never made inquiries of it. Granma said it was necessary. Which made me feel right good about having one.

Granma said everybody has two minds. One of the minds has to do with the necessaries for body living. You had to use it to figure how to get shelter and eating and such like for the body. She said you had to use it to mate and have young'uns and such. She said we had to have that mind so as we could carry on. But she said we had another mind that had nothing at all to do with such. She said it was the spirit mind.

Granma said if you used the body-living mind to think greedy or mean; if you was always cuttin' at folks with it and figuring how to material profit off'n them . . . then you would shrink up your spirit mind to a size no bigger'n a hickor'nut.

Granma said that when your body died, the body-living mind died with it, and if that's the way you had thought all your life there you was, stuck with a hickor'nut spirit, as the spirit mind was all that lived when everything else died. Then, Granma said, when you was born back—

as you was bound to be—then, there you was, born with a hickor'nut spirit mind that had practical no understanding of anything.

Then it might shrink up to the size of a pea and could disappear, if the body-living mind took over total. In such case, you lost your spirit complete.

That's how you become dead people. Granma said you could easy spot dead people. She said dead people when they looked at a woman saw nothing but dirty; when they looked at other people they saw nothing but bad; when they looked at a tree they saw nothing but lumber and profit; never beauty. Granma said they was dead people walking around.

Granma said that the spirit mind was like any other muscle. If you used it it got bigger and stronger. She said the only way it could get that way was using it to understand, but you couldn't open the door to it until you quit being greedy and such with your body mind. Then understanding commenced to take up, and the more you tried to understand, the bigger it got.

Natural, she said, understanding and love was the same thing; except folks went at it back'ards too many times, trying to pretend they loved things when they didn't understand them. Which can't be done.

I see right out that I was going to commence trying to understand practical everybody, for I sure didn't want to come up with a hickor'nut spirit.

Granma said your spirit mind could get so big and powerful that you would eventually know all about your past body lives and would get to where you could come out with no body death atall.

Granma said I could watch some of how it worked from my secret place. In the spring when everything is born (and always, when anything is born, even an idea), there's fret and fuss. There's spring storms like a baby borning in blood and pain. Granma said it was the spirits

kicking up a fuss at having to get back into material forms again.

Then there was the summer—our grown-up lives—and autumn when we got older and had that peculiar feeling in our spirits of being back in time. Some folks called it nostalgia and sadness. The winter with everything dead or seeming to be, like our bodies when they die, but born again just like the spring. Granma said the Cherokees knew, and had learned it long ago.

Granma said I would come to know that the old sweet gum tree in my secret place had a spirit too. Not a spirit of humans, but a tree spirit. She said her Pa had taught her all about it

Granma's Pa was called Brown Hawk. She said his understanding was deep. He could feel the tree-thought. Once, she said, when she was a little girl, her Pa was troubled and said the white oaks on the mountain near them was excited and scared. He spent much time on the mountain, walking among the oaks. They were of much beauty, tall and straight. They wasn't selfish, allowing ground for sumach and persimmon, and hickory and chestnut to feed the wild things. Not being selfish gave them much spirit and the spirit was strong.

Granma said her Pa got so worried about the oaks that he would walk amongst them at night, for he knew something was wrong.

Then, early one morning, as the sun broke the mountain ridge, Brown Hawk watched while lumbermen moved through the white oaks, marking and figuring how to cut all of them down. When they left, Brown Hawk said, the white oaks commenced to cry. And he could not sleep. So he watched the lumbermen. They built a road up to the mountain over which to bring their wagons.

Granma said her Pa talked to the Cherokees and they determined to save the white oaks. She said at night, when the lumbermen would leave and go back to the settlement,

the Cherokees would dig up the road, hacking deep trenches across it. The women and children helped.

The next morning, the lumbermen came back and spent all day fixing the road. But that night, the Cherokees dug it up again. This went on for the next two days and nights; then the lumbermen put up guards on the road with guns. But they could not guard all the road, and the Cherokees dug trenches where they could.

Granma said it was a hard struggle and they grew very tired. Then one day, as the lumbermen were working on the road, a giant white oak fell across a wagon. It killed two mules and smashed the wagon. She said it was a fine, healthy white oak and had no reason to fall, but it did.

The lumbermen gave up trying to build the road. Spring rains set in . . . and they never came back.

Granma said the moon waxed full, and they held a celebration in the great stand of white oaks. They danced in the full yellow moon, and the white oaks sang and touched their branches together, and touched the Cherokee. Granma said they sang a death chant for the white oak who had given his life to save others, and she said the feeling was so strong that it almost picked her up off the mountain.

"Little Tree," she said, "these things you must not tell, for it will not help to tell them in this world that is the white man's. But you must know. And so I have told you."

I knew then why we only used the logs that the spirit had left for our fireplace. I knew the life of the forest . . . and the mountains.

Granma said that her Pa had such understanding that she knew he would be strong . . . where he would know, in his next body life. She said she hoped soon she would be strong too; then she would know him, and their spirits would know.

Granma said that Granpa was moving closer to the understanding without knowing it, and they would be together, always, their spirits knowing.

I asked Granma, reckon if I could get that way so I wouldn't be left behind.

She taken my hand. We walked a long way down the trail before she answered. She said for me always to try to understand. She said I would get there too, and I might even be ahead of her.

I said I didn't care a thing in the world about being ahead. It would suit me might near total if I could just catch up. It was kind of lonesome, always being left behind.