

Woodland Treasures

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*Whatever Treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summertime, remember!
Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child.*

— Sara Orne Jewett from *The White Heron*

The pond was cool, with its vast, overhanging limbs of ancient pinoaks, and was very special to Aubrey. She was eleven and unsure about most things. Her thin, lanky body pushed forward, physical testimony to her energy and curiosity. She had a freckled, pointed face with arching eyebrows, an angular chin shooting down, and solemn blue eyes which often reflected her uncertainty. Aubrey lived several hundred yards from the sheltered pond; in fact, it belonged to her uncle, if such a place can belong to anyone. Aubrey spent her summer days at the pond, exploring its tiny lagoons, wondering at its secret depths, luxuriating in its rich mud oozing up between her toes. She observed the teeming life the pond supported, the thousands of their varieties, their minute struggles from birth to death, and, when it was near dark, she sat and listened to their sibilant voices. She saw during these still moments that she shared the pond with many other life-forms: squirrels, chipmunks, o'possum, occasional deer, even the water moccasin, leaving its tiny, deadly wake as it swam through the deep, green water. And, above all, there were literally millions of insects buzzing, shrilling, ringing, rasping, flying and crawling in a thick shroud, feeding off each other and the rich broth of the pond.

Aubrey's favorite place was an overhang on the far side of the water where the trees were thickest. There was a steep slope which jutted straight up for about twenty feet, was level for about three, and then plunged down again. At the pinnacle of this overhang, Aubrey would sit, her head close to the lowest limbs on the great trees. She could look out over her pond from this vantage and see the broad expanse of water at its widest point and the dark, slim bodies moving deep under its surface. She could see the roof of her uncle's farm house through the thick trees in the distance and the birds flying overhead. She sat there for hours on the smooth rock of the perch,

and, sometimes, when she was brave, she jumped from the overhang into the deep water below. As she swam into the darkness, finally feeling the tips of the soft grass on the floor of the pond brushing against her body, she sensed that the water held some great secret that she would never know.

"What are you doing out there all day?" asked her aunt.

"We play," was all she answered.

Her uncle would slurp his coffee and read the Dallas Times Herald while they ate breakfast.

"Says here they're trying to build a rocket that'd go to the moon," he said. "Fools. Why in the hell don't they invent me some farm machinery that's not always breakin' down, huh?"

Aubrey looked at the picture of the rocket in the newspaper. "Looks like a big firecracker," she said.

"They'll never make it," commented her aunt, "they just need somewheres to spend our tax money."

After breakfast, Aubrey visited her mother for a while. She lay in bed, her eyes opened, unmoving. Something important had popped in her head one day while she was lifting a tub of laundry. Something deep down in there had given way like a balloon swelled with too much air. And now her mother had parted with the world, a state Aubrey understood, even envied, as she got close to that pale face, peered down into those clear, blue eyes, and wondered what dreams were in progress inside her mother's head. Once, while she looked deeply into her mother's eyes, an awful expression appeared on the face, momentarily agonized, as if she had seen a repulsive sight. As Aubrey watched in horror, the face constricted for perhaps five seconds. She lurched away from her mother, paralyzed with fear, and, finally, the expression gently relaxed again into a vapid droop. After that, Aubrey had more respect for her mother's dream state.

That summer proved to be the most uncertain of Aubrey's life: sweltering months of confusion and doubt. At night, she would gaze into the dusky mirror on her dresser, squeezing the red eruptions on her forehead until the blood soaked her handkerchief. She would fling herself on the lumpy old bed, listening to the night outside, watching the moonlight creep over the worn carpet on the floor. She dreamed of being whirled away on a little piece of earth, out into the universe, watching the world becoming smaller and smaller until it disappeared forever, leaving her sweeping away into blackness, alone. She often woke up in bed with her corpse-like mother, clenching the limp hand, sweating and shivering, unable to remember the journey from one bed to another. Her aunt only shook her

grey head from side to side, perplexed. Aubrey knew they were all dying, her mother the fastest.

The days at the pond were better. Several children came to visit occasionally, and they would invent long-running dramas in varying degrees and complexities. The two girls would be lovers, kissing fervently, their opened hands shielding their lips lest they actually touch, the boys the stalking villains, the cops, the robbers, the cowboys, the rustlers, the monsters from outer space, skulking behind the trunk of the huge oak. Aubrey found herself tied up rather often, or hiding in the briars and brambles around the pond, trying to stifle her giggles and the threat of urine streaming its way down her skinny little thigh. She hid well and was rarely discovered.

One day, she was hiding in a small trench about twenty yards from her special place atop the towering overhang when she heard footsteps which were not those of the boys or her best friend, Suzanne. As she peeped out from her vine-covered hole, she saw a tall young man in jeans, naked to the waist, striding toward the bank of the pond. His blond hair glistened under his small work cap. He had the broadest shoulders Aubrey had ever seen, his muscles flexing as he walked unhurriedly through the brush. He knelt at the bank of the pond, swept some water up with his hand and mopped his face. He removed his hat, splashed water over his head and shoulders and then shook off the water like a dog after a bath. Aubrey's heart began to beat faster as she watched the sparkling drops of water coursing down the man's smooth face and shoulders. She knew he must belong to the construction crew which was building a new asphalt road that would serve the farming community where she went to school. She had not realized the road would be so close to her pond.

As she watched, the man began to look intently at the jutting rise across from where he squatted. He got up slowly and walked with easy grace toward the overhang. Aubrey was mystified as he began to climb up and over, then turn and climb over again, the jutting edge sheltered by the thick sheaf of oak leaves overhead. He then sat exactly in the center of Aubrey's special place and began to run his hands over all the bumps and ridges of the stony ledge. Finally, he knelt on all fours and crawled down the entire length of the hillock, caressing all the irregularities as he went. His face was tense with concentration. Aubrey covered her mouth, feeling she could burst with amusement and curiosity. He was the most beautiful creature she had ever seen.

She stiffened as the man turned and walked right toward her hiding place. She had given up and was ready to be discovered when

he stopped. He had his back to her and was looking again at the gentle curve of the overhang, now reflected in the still water of the pond.

"My God, I can't believe it," she heard him whisper.

Then he turned and began to walk away from the pond, shaking his blonde head and running his long fingers through his hair. For several minutes, Aubrey crouched in her hole, gazing at the ledge upon which she had so often sat. It was bathed in the dappled sunlight, gold and green, deep gray in the shadows. Its curve seemed unremarkable to Aubrey, but she felt a tug of uneasiness deep inside.

That night when she changed her clothes to go to bed, Aubrey noticed her undergarments were soaked with blood. Suddenly weak, she quickly hid her panties and shorts under the bed and then, trembling, lay on the floor under the window. As the cool night breeze swept over her, she hugged her body, feeling the little breasts under her arms, her knees shielding her abdomen where she imagined bloody rivers forming to spill out of her in floods. She felt some inarticulate yearning, some incalculable grief, and it was spine-tingling. As she listened to the chorus of night sounds, sung by the myriad throats, she faced the reality that they were all whirling together and that time is the enemy, getting them all older, and older, and then, finally, dead. She lay rigid as the wind moaned under the eaves of the old house, and gradually, she relaxed, let go, and fell asleep.

"It's the curse of being a woman," said her aunt the next morning.

She handed Aubrey a bright pink and white box, and a ribbon of elastic, "You'll get used to it. You better, anyway, cause you're going to have it most of your life."

Aubrey looked down at the paraphernalia in her hands and felt she had reached the very lowest depths of despair.

She spent most of the morning with her mother, combing the dull hair and washing the limp hands. She sat on the bed beside the still body and read aloud a story from a copy of her aunt's Ladies' Home Journal. It was about a family who grieved when they had to put their ancient pet dog to sleep. Aubrey used the corner of her mother's sheet to wipe her eyes and nose as she read.

At twilight, as Aubrey sat listening to Gogi Grant singing on the TV, she heard a knock on the screen door. She was astonished to see the young man she had seen the day before as she hid in the woods. He stood on the front porch, neatly dressed in slacks and a

short-sleeved shirt. He held several thick books under his arm.

"Hello," he said. "What's your name?"

"Aubrey Brock," she answered, opening the door for him. He had a clean odor which crossed her nostrils momentarily.

"Can I speak to your father?"

"My father is dead. My Uncle Ramsey is out back. I'll get him."

Aubrey ran through the rickety old house, banging her hip painfully against the kitchen counter on the way, and called to her uncle to come in.

"Good evening, Mister . . .," said the young man when her uncle entered the room. Her uncle was a small man, slumped over, a stubble of beard across his face. Aubrey suspected he had been drinking while sitting on the swing under the peach trees in the back yard.

"Oglesby, Ramsey Oglesby," he said, and they shook hands.

"I'm Patterson White, sir," said the man, and then looked at Aubrey. "And you're Aubrey, right?" She nodded.

"Well, Mister Oglesby, I've come with some important news for you, for all of you." He looked behind him at the sofa and made as if to sit. Her uncle just stood and watched him.

The young man laughed nervously. "So," he said, "I work for the highway department. We're building FM 45, you know, down from Sherman?" he gestured north.

"Really, I'm a student over at Denton, at the University. I just work in the summers to finance my education." Aubrey saw her uncle shift on his feet. She hoped he would let the man finish.

He went on, "I came on your pond yesterday as we were surveying and found something that was very surprising. You see, I'm a paleontologist and I think I saw evidence of an incredible find out by your pond."

"A . . . find?" said her uncle.

"Yes. Something absolutely remarkable. I can't be sure until I've done some digging, but it looks like . . ."

"A paley — what?" asked her uncle.

"Oh, a paleontologist. That's someone who studies animal life which has been extinct for millions of years. Look," he held out the books. Her uncle took one and opened it. Aubrey saw brightly colored pictures of lizard-like animals crouching and creeping across the glossy pages. Her uncle considered the pictures. Aubrey remembered studying about the creatures in school, but, with the blond man standing so close beside her, she felt mute.

"Is one of these things around here?" asked her uncle uneasily.

"Yes, but I can't be positive which kind until I do some more looking. I can be sure though that it's some kind of sauropod," he took the book and turned the pages until he found a picture. "I believe it's going to be something like this, judging from the size of the shoulder bone I saw out there yesterday."

Aubrey and her uncle looked at the picture of the great long-necked beast, its belly swollen and grotesque, its four legs bowed and squat under the tremendous bulk. Trailing behind was a long tail that tapered off to a tiny point.

"Something like this?" asked her uncle, pointing to the picture with his gnarled finger, its nail caked with years of tractor grease and black East Texas soil.

"Yes, something like that," answered the young man, his face glowing, his voice reverential, expectant.

Her uncle still regarded the picture. They looked at him for several seconds. Then he said, "Well, hot damn! Let's go see him!"

His interest soon flagged, however, when he saw that the spectacular monster pictured in the book was embedded in a massive mound of stone and dirt rising up on the edge of the pond where he had lived and worked for fifty years. Aubrey was transfixed by the young man's discovery as well as the young man himself as he pointed out this or that knob representing the various skeletal remains of the animal.

"Of course most of the important bones will be buried inside this mound, probably all through it. But you can detect the outline of the shoulder blade here," he traced the curvature of a smooth, rounded edge embedded in hard-packed dirt and stone.

"God, the size of it," he said softly. "Look, Aubrey," he quickly lay down, stretching out his smooth body alongside the ridge of bone. "I'm over six feet tall, Aubrey, and this piece of bone is still longer than me. Can you imagine an animal of this size, living and walking on the earth, right here by this pond?"

Aubrey could not. She had used the smooth edge as a hand-hold many times.

"Well," said her uncle, "you say he's here. So?" He squatted on a piece of rock atop the mound.

"If I could, I'd like to get some people up here from the school to dig him up, put him in boxes, and put him up in the Caruth-Byrd Museum in Dallas. You see, nothing like this has ever been found this far south before. It'll be on every scrap of paper about him that he was found right here on your property."

"No money in it?" asked her uncle.

"No, I'm afraid not. You have the right to refuse us. But I hope you won't."

"Let's go back to the house now," said her uncle. "It's getting dark."

Back in the house, Aubrey held her breath until her uncle finally consented to let the young man and his friends come back to dig. He picked up his thick books and left in a hurry, stepping up into a battered pick-up that roared and smoked away.

Aubrey watched until she could not longer see him. A strange feeling had come over her, as if she were falling in on herself, the walls of her body caving in until she was completely gone. She looked at herself in the halltree mirror. Her image was warped, but she was all there. Her long, skinny legs and arms, freckled and knobby, hung out of her clothes. Her hair was limp. As she watched herself, she made a grotesque face to the mirror, contemptuous of her own reflection.

Late that night she awoke shivering. A sudden and terrible realization came to her: they would come tomorrow and dig up her place. She rose quietly and pulled on some shorts and a blouse. Outside the moon was full as she walked toward the pond. She was aware of the intensity of the night noises, the crickets screeching, night birds calling, the rustle of the suspicious little animals as they busied themselves in the continuous search for food. The whole nocturnal mechanism was whirling and clicking like the inside of a clock. The trees around the pond were silhouetted against the moonlit sky, their dark limbs swaying gently. She walked quietly around the curving inlets of the water until she reached the mound. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she saw the shape of the massive pile of stone and soil. She acknowledged the presence also of that other element in the mound, that assortment of remains piled helter-skelter throughout. Slowly she climbed up the steep side of the mound and then lay very still, her cheek against a broad plate of bone. She felt the residual warmth of the sun emanating from it, a pulsating tremor as of a rush of air in the night. She closed her eyes and saw nostrils three feet across, eyes glinting under a wedge of bone as big as her body. She hugged the high point of the mound and felt the great sides heave, the seventy-foot backbone flex. The mighty jaws opened underneath her, and nubby, flat teeth glistened moistly in the moonlight. The huge lungs expanded, and as air rushed past four-foot vocal tendons, Aubrey heard a deafening roar. The cry was never-ending, its echo reverberating through the woods as she covered her head with her arms. It was a death cry, universally

recognized by all things living since the beginning of time, and it filled her with a visceral sense of great loss. The colossal tail thrashed under her, huge plumes of dust swirled up and then died down as the giant lizard breathed a last mammoth sigh and was forever still. Aubrey felt the last tremor of life shuddering away. She lay still for a long time and then began to weep deep, guttural sobs.

At dawn, Aubrey visited her mother. The pale eyes fluttered open, pools of gelatinous light-sensitive tissue, pupils black, no one there. Aubrey stared into them.

"They're coming today to dig up the mound by the pond, mother. There's a brontosaurus in there. It's been there for sixty-five million years, he said."

Her mother's eyes registered nothing.

"He said it died out there because it turned cold and all the water dried up. Dinosaurs could only live in a warm, wet place like a swamp, so it died," she paused.

"And it's been out there all these millions of years, mother."

The enormity of it engulfed her, and she lay back on the bed, her head resting on her mother's wasted legs.

Later that week, her mother died. Her aunt found her dead. The only difference in her mother's general demeanor was that she breathed no more. After the small funeral, Aubrey went to her room and sat on the bed in the sweltering summer heat, in her Sunday dress with the flower pinned to her bodice. She stayed there grieving all day and would not even see the blonde young man when he came to give his condolences. ♣