

*All That Is Wild*

By AnnaMarie Seiler

Very few who visited Oxford County knew about the wild patch of blueberries that sprouted up each spring near the junction of East Saxton and Amberdam, though the locals knew just where to find it. As a child, Ingrid had plucked a few branches from the patch when her mother was still alive and able to explain the differences between that and wild huckleberry. During her life, her mother called huckleberry *blueberry's kissing cousin* for their resemblance, and said it would surely tie your stomach up in knots if you forgot its contrariety and ate the wrong one out of the bushes.

Ingrid planted those branches into her own patch at the base of the rolling hill beneath her mother's bed sill window; close enough, now, to see her mother's burying place shaded beneath the swaying tendrils of a willow tree while she gardened. She promised her mother never to forget that huckleberry had exactly ten seeds and needed to be baked into a pie to be eaten without sickness.

Ingrid had herself one daughter, just like her mother had with her; lost her husband, just as her mother had, on her twenty-third year (with her daughter barley skimming the end of her fifth). The little girl's first word was *Mama*, and for too long that name seemed like the only sound in their two-bedroom cottage aside from Ingrid's sighs and the prattling of cookware on the stove near dinnertime. If it weren't for the mailman's greetings through the kitchen window every Tuesday, Ingrid might've very well forgotten her own name in the lonesome repetition of it all.

The little girl kept her Mama busy enough; always getting into one thing, always dirtying another. If the little girl hadn't took hold of all Mama's birthing parts on her way out so few years ago, Ingrid might've considered having another just to entertain the first.

In the springtime, once the warmth brought budding leaves and fields of clover, the little girl frequented the outskirts of Mama's blueberry patch — but never dared pass over the grassy knoll into the tilled dirt of the garden. Each time she tried, Mama would call out from her window place to keep away from it. So the girl remained along the edges of curiosity, thoughts tangled up with the low growing vines of sweet, dark berries, wondering when she might get to taste them for herself.

Mama only collected the berries after the little girl ventured into town for day school, keeping the private act to herself and her mother's memory. Mama, with the little girl's help, turned the berries into all kinds of specialties; jams and cakes and spreads for crusty loaves of bread, sometimes a pie, which was often cut to share at church on Sundays. The little girl loved church on Sundays.

When the next spring came, the little girl shot up out of all her fitting clothes (*like a weed*, Mama had quipped). The little girl knew that Mama, who had already clicked

her tongue a number of times at the cost of replacing her daughter's linens, could not be burdened with yet another expense. Not after the last heat of August, after the girl caught a rattling cough that almost had the local doctor convinced of the county's third case of dust pneumonia (it was not, but Mama had to pay the doctor's note, anyway).

The girl went to day school in dresses that rode up her knees; made sure to wear long stalkings even as the sun grew hotter and hotter, tried not to concern Mama so much with her weediness. But even as she tried to pluck herself down, Mama only grew further into her troubles, the lines on her face deepening each passing day. The jams and spreads and Sunday pies stopped appearing on the kitchen table that next spring — the fruits ripening and rotting on the branches, giving way to winter again.

Once, during the following growing season, the girl tried to slip into the patch while Mama busied herself with laundry on the porch. If she could just help, just *do* something to ease her Mama's mind, maybe those sweet traditions would return to their routine. She got as far as to feel the damp soil beneath the soles of her feet before Mama thundered down the rickety wooden steps, calling to her child in a way that made the girl want to run the other direction.

And again, the next year, the girl sat at the kitchen table without spread for her crusty bread, watching Mama fiddle with the stove flame. Ashy-gray streaks twisted into Mama's braid now, and she almost always wore a shawl despite the early spring heat. The girl tried, as she did each spring, to ask Mama about the bushes, the tartness of blueberry feeling like a forgotten midsummer dream.

Those fruits out there aren't better than stones," Mama clicked her tongue, her back turned from the breakfast ham sizzling on the stove, prepping the stems of her most recent rose clippings for hanging. "They'll ruin your mouth if you get too eager."

When, Mama?" The girl asked, counting the thorns protruding from each stalk. She found four on most, but one had six, and she wondered why.

When they are ripe and ready to be picked." The ham began to burn. Mama muttered a gentle curse and spun with enough flourish to ruffle the fragile silk petals of her roses.

The girl knew she would not pick them. "Can I help this year, Mama?"

From the stove, Mama's braid wriggled around like an angered garden snake as she shook her head. "Leave them alone, girl. Those fruits aren't for you. Hell," The kitchen filled with the scent of blackened meat. The girl wrinkled her nose but knew better than to let Mama see. "Only crows would eat those stone fruits this time of year. Ain't good for nothin 'but bird seed."

And that was that.

But the girl lay awake at night, the window beside her bed propped open to offer some relief from the nighttime humidity, dreaming with her eyes open about what stone fruit tasted like as a jam, or baked into a Sunday pie. She had yet to try a fruit she didn't like; peaches and wild crabapples, strawberries in a bowl of cool milk; that was one of

her favorites. Stone fruit couldn't be much worse than old leathery figs, and she had eaten those as a dare in the schoolyard once. Mama hadn't sent her to the market for fresh fruit since the previous summer months, and she missed the sweetness against her tongue.

It ached deep in her belly, that devilish burn of desire. Lying in bed, the scratch of linen on her backside — and another itch, one she couldn't seem to scratch, crawling up her spine and making her squirm above her sheets. Tried to fight it, the urge that crept in, intrusive thoughts that always tended to come out to join the call of the midnight coyotes. But she couldn't hold out another summer watching those small blue pearls wither on their vines — she would die before she let that happen again.

And that was that.

Before the sun could rise and alert her to the stray dogs that visited for meal scraps, she slipped from her woven bedspread and felt her way to the field by moonlight. The familiar crescent of light hung low in the sky, threatening to wake the sun herself with each passing heartbeat. The girl counted that thudding in her chest as she crept: fifty-eight before her toes sunk into the soil of the blueberry patch.

Running fingertips across the low growing bushes, she let the moisture of the leaves cling to the hem of her nightshirt. How peaceful a feeling, to be utterly alone with the thing that for so long carried uncertainty, but feeling so certain of it now.

When she could no longer see the candle in Mama's window, she crouched low, bringing the scents of musk and stone fruit nearer than they'd been before. Her fingers shook as she extended only two into the dark, as if any more and the vines might vanish into a lucid mist.

In the dirt she found the first fruit; solid and smooth against her fingertips, just as Mama had said. It came free of its brush easily; much easier than she'd anticipated, with almost no sound at all. How simple this felt, how right.

At the touch of the fruit her patience waned and wilted. Placing the small thing onto her tongue and letting it roll around there, cold and damp with the early morning dew, she felt it clatter against her teeth, stone against stone. But — Oh! — the closing of her jaw sent a shallow wave of sweetness to the roof of her mouth, flooding her cheeks with the bitter flavor of earth and iron and answers. And then, without thought, she swallowed; the seeds and fleshy bits of fruitless question she'd only dared to imagine once Mama's back had turned slipped into her empty belly. The tip of her tongue, stinging from her secret, tasted the roughness along her lower lip — the grains of sod giving way to what she'd done.

A crow cried her a warning from the rustling branches of the nearby willow tree. But she could not see it from where she knelt, and after a moment more of nothing but the thrumming of her own heart in her ears, she'd convinced herself that she'd made it up entirely and returned to her exploration of the garden.

Her thumb and forefinger plucked another fruit from the vines, enthralled in the weather-packed soil. Bigger, this one, with a jagged edge where the stem clung too tightly to its host. It made no difference to her as she pushed it passed her lips, inviting the divinity that comes only from great moments of indulgence, hidden amongst the rows of wild things, beneath the shimmering patterns of starlight.

The berries were too small, dissolving into nothing between her teeth before she knew they were there. And after they were gone, so, too, was their sweetness. So, too, was the extravagant release, the crescendo of pleasure from giving oneself entirely. *The moment*, she marveled, *remind me again*.

And so she pulled another from its bed place, gathering three or four in the crease of her palm and holding her hand — cupped as though for water — to her lips. She drank deeply the wicked freedom of those fruits. When her knees began to stiffen she fell to them, sinking into the soil like a widow in prayer. She ignored the guilt of stains the dirt would leave on her nightshirt, surely ones Mama would find and ask the origin of come morning.

The threat of daybreak bored into her, filled her with a bright green haste. Feverishly, she devoured the stone fruit, tossing fistfuls into her mouth. She did not slow when the crow cooed to her once more; a forbearing subsong of apathy. She did not notice as her belly swelled, pregnant with the weight of the pilfered. Surely, she might devour every row, leave nothing for the crows but the same intrusion of thought she'd once harbored to herself. *Remind me again. Again.*

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The sun found the girl much later, amongst the now-barren branches of Mama's blueberry bushes, arms darkened brown to the crook of her elbows and hair crusted with smut. She'd swallowed up every last berry, tasted every inch of the plant until her fingers found nothing else and she lay looking upwards, the crows spinning webs in the sky, circling the way vultures do when vultures see something so weary and lost. If she spoke, she might've used Mama's words to curse them for their boundless liberation of the earth. She might have, if she could have.

The weight in her middle kept her tethered to her place between the garden beds. Surely Mama would find her there, stomach full of stolen fruit. Tears welled in her eyes at the thought, bright and glistening in the sunlight. How Mama would scold her, right there amongst the weeds, fill her with a shame much heavier than what she already carried.

The smallest of the crows dropped from the sky, catching itself as it landed at her feet with a great flash of oil-slick wings. The girl lifted her head, peered over the roundness of her belly, sending those loosened tears swirling into mud on her cheeks, and met the button eyes of the feathered creature.

She dare not move, withheld wiggling even a single toe lest the modest thing be scared off. It tilted its beak at her — not with disgust or scorn, the way Mama might,

but with a gentle curiosity that frightened her. Then, with a bob of its head, turned and plucked a plump berry from its vine in the unforgiving brightness of daylight. It found a second, looked back at her as if to say, *remember?*

The crow hopped along the upturned soil, recently tilled by misguided hands, finding more and more fruit the girl had missed. But oh, as she looked, there were so many left! Bright bits of blue-green winking at her from their branches. Could it be she had missed them, in the shroud of night? No, she'd made sure — she'd run her hands through each vine — dug into the dirt, even, to find the ones she'd dropped!

Another crow fell from the sky to land beside her, then another. They plucked from the tresses of green shrubs, juggling berries in their beaks, flashing her looks of pity from where she lay. In her mouth she tasted nothing but dirt; granules of rock and root catching in her teeth. She parted her lips to speak but found her throat too scored to do more than croak mournfully. And with great trepidation, she realized the tiny stones that filled her belly were exactly that: stones.

The sun craned higher overhead, dashing away the shadows that canvased what she had done. Mama would be out soon to look for her, calling her to put out water for the stray dogs before day school. But she would not come; could not move from her resting place in the soil. She would be found like this, rounded by guilt and gluttony, unable to run and hide the way she once used to. Then the whole world would know what she had done.

Or, perhaps, she wouldn't be found at all. Perhaps Mama might not think to check the garden, the place her abiding daughter had been so clearly scolded against trespassing. Mama hadn't been out this way herself in some time — years, even. The girl would surely parish there, under the brazen heat of starlight, unable to crawl her way home. Unable, even, to cry out, to make a sound. When she tried, the tenderness of her throat allowed her only a weak caw of forgottenness.

In a great show of plumage, the first crow took to the air, spraying loosened gravel onto the bare feet of the girl. She watched in anguish as it mounted higher, wondering if, for a moment, she'd only imagined its look of expectance from the sky as it flew. The other birds followed swiftly. She closed her eyes against the sudden rush of wind and tried to imagine herself joining them, sprouting thick plumage the color of soot. Tried to imagine herself looking through the button eyes of a bird, bounding into the atmosphere, away from the stone fruit and sin. Away from summer stockings and the sizzle of burnt breakfast ham. Away to someplace where fruit grew in wild abundance, where she might eat in plenty without binding her soul to such transgression.

*Remind me*, she pleaded, the rush of air beneath her carrying her higher, higher still into the starlight, delivering her from the stones. They sank back into the soil, the anchorage of being young and fearful of the wild honesty that comes with freedom.