

Little Miracles

All morning the sun swelled. Tongues of sedge hung limp. Though subject to the least influence, quaking aspen declined to wave their oval fans. Wild raspberries blistered amongst their thorns. To temper the extreme heat, turkeys sought shadows, nestling among the nettles. Into brown, natural soup the pond thickened.

Hornets and wasps had no heart to go a-stinging: In hollow stems of elderberry, in crannies of cracked earth, in the whorl of tiger-lilies they tucked their wings alongside their bulbous bellies. Black flies and ladybugs ducked into the corrugated bark of butternut. Worker ants, undeterred, scurried in and out of mounds of fine blond sand.

Cottontails, generally a gregarious bunch, had become uncharacteristic, crouched at eye-level in ragweed; it was not sneezes but their elongated ears which gave them away. A water snake had uncoiled on a slab of smooth-grained shale, bearing its true colors. Close-cropped red squirrels stared out of knotholes, sapped of enthusiasm. Snapping turtles, clamped to rocks, luxuriated in beams older than their kind.

With no thrush's sweet staccato to mark them off, the moments melded one into another: a seamless tapestry of summer's time.

At noon a water strider, upheld by four faint filaments, skated exquisitely upon liquid pillows of the marsh, round and about stolid spears of bulrush, rotted stumps of sumac. When no one else came out to play the strider scooted under a wand of fern, anchoring its hind legs in algae.

Exposed by ill-timed grunts, a lumpy bullfrog wallowed in slime, moistening its parched, camouflaged jacket. A sleek, copper-skinned salamander, finding no relief under a toadstool, crept to pond's edge and wriggled into primeval slickness.

Spiny-backed bass, pensive beneath a sodden log, did not stir from their holding pattern, waylaid by daydreams of caddisflies and leeches drifting into their gaping mouths. Sharp-toothed pickerel grinned complacently beneath the heart-like leaves on the pond's ceiling. Nothing on a crayfish but its antennae moved.

Searing sunrays gilded the pods of milkweed, and filled the interstices between crosshatched needles of white pine, a confluence of which stood at attention to the north. Shriveled huckleberries became nuggets of black gold. The shade of drooping willows settled velvety upon the dips and rises of the woodlands beyond Concord.

In pawed-out dens, in crevices between boulders, fox and coyotes languished, considering their next adventure. A slender weasel grew edgy, humped its back toward the burnished sky. Through crumbs of earth the moles blindly made their way upstairs, wriggled pink noses, agilely retreated into their basements.

Mouse-faced bats had hung around all afternoon in the eaves of caves, anticipating their dizzy dash about the glory of a dying day. Now they squinted in the gathering dimness, listening acutely.

A thousand feet above the expansive pond a squadron of geese honked, honked. Downy woodpeckers tap-tapped into shagbarks; chickadees chattered; wrens chipped, chipped; blue jays raised a ruckus. A detachment of shoe-polished crows strutted across a clearing, the huskiest of them squawking orders.

Clouds swept in, charring en route, churning into dense spirals. Star-shaped sugar-maple leaves began to shiver, bearing their pale, ribbed underbellies. A balsam crotch creaked. Top-heavy cattails, cushioned to the core, leaned against each other for support.

A tawny-coated deer sprinted over loam, a prickly porcupine waddled to its bristly nest, whiskered otters dove to pond's floor. Water rats paced back and forth in their soiled hideouts. A beaver steered straight toward its jaw-crafted duplex. Woodchucks stumbled out of their own way, while a mink, low slung, undulated along the banks before vanishing in thin, cooling air.

The heat dropped away so swiftly it was as if the atmosphere had broken asunder, releasing chilled air saved up from winter. An intermittent patting sounded on wide and narrow leaves and petals, causing them to dance sprightly. Golden rod nodded. Thistle glistened. Bark darkened. Bald stones developed freckles. As each drop exploded, a fine spray was dispersed--quickly harvested by emerald-toned paddles of winter berries and nets of ground-clutching strawberries.

Lightning scratched out of the sky, dividing the sheath of vapors into fractured, marbled sectors. Thunder unloaded from the clouds. A bold flash struck something brawny: The limb of a red oak, headquarters for dozens, collapsed onto the forest's patiently accumulated compost, leaving a raw, fleshy gash aloft.

A man with a sallow face and wiry dark hair at his chin, who had been hiking the solitary, nature-strewn trail, lengthened his pace. When he reached the crude hut he had built beside the pond, he closed the door behind him and went to the rough-cut opening to watch the rain descend on the woods.

As he stared out, lightning etched the copse in bas-relief. Beech leaves swirled furiously. Raindrops became pot-bellied and profuse, raising the pond to a boil, drumming the knoll, flattening the fields, eroding banks, refilling the stream which found itself unable to resist emptying into the pond. The closing act of nature's performance was dramatized by the toppling of a long-standing tamarack with a calamitous crash, exposing an embroidery of roots.

In the last sparks of dusk the skies grew somber, the wind quit howling, and the rain withdrew into the altostratus. Only the dripping off leaves onto the forest's bedding could be heard in the stillness.

The blemished bark of paper birches had been scrubbed whiter. Fungus, dampened, was better prepared for its moldy subsistence. Grasslands smelled unearthed, rampant with slugs, pill bugs, earthworms, centipedes. Soon, sphagnum moss began sponging moisture out of the earth's sumps.

Once again, the pebbles of the stream sang. Fingerlings were swept from the sandy beds of their birthplace into the cowl of the pond. Where the stream rushed into the larger basin, a congregation of rainbow trout became optimistic.

A much-punctured hemlock had snapped in two, sending hooters out on a nearby limb. A gray mouse was stranded, safe for the time being, on a muddy clump of sorrel. A garter snake didn't fare as well, its supple back crushed by an up-heaved stone. The doorway of a family of skunks had been sealed by misappropriated twigs. More than one species of sparrow couldn't locate their nests.

Hickory nuts had been knocked loose and distributed equitably. Puddles of sweet water were set out. Blackberry seeds had been scattered throughout the bent-over, disheveled rye. Dented crab apples were pressed into the soggy ground by fallen branches. Rainwater seeped through the soil, reawakening grasshoppers and crickets entombed in clay. Sunfish had more places to go, yellow perch more places to fan their fins. Pollen was stuck to everything.

The forest eased toward sleep, silvered and silent, and in the pallor of a fulsome moon skimmed by wispy clouds, each hawthorn spike retained a pearl at its point.

From the window of the hut the man with deep-set eyes had taken it all in. Now he backed off into the lightless shelter, found his way to the pine mat which had cushioned his body for nearly two years, and followed the creatures of the woods, great and small, into sleep.

At first glimmer a pair of snowshoe hare, parents of untold progeny, emerged from their burrow and surveyed the bent-over fields; reassured, they began nipping tufts of moist, tenderized clover. A chipmunk scampered along an outcrop of rocks, popped an acorn into its cheek, and escaped down a trail known only to itself. A moose stepped out from under its thicket-roof and gazed, bemusedly, into the cleansed forest.

Mosquitoes had taken to hydroplaning the replenished hollows. Furry moths, flustered, fluttered to air out their wings. Butterflies followed their example, resplendently. A scarab beetle crept out from under an abandoned mussel shell in search of breakfast. But the recluse spiders were patient in their suspension, waiting for breakfast to be served in bed.

The bees had grown moody in their trunk-embedded hives, which had been shaken and tilted. Irascible, at sunrise they zoomed into the meadows to bury their faces in the delicate, succulent larkspur, and to brush up the dust of proliferation. Having stuffed their abdomens with golden syrup, they were docile again.

In the doorway of the hut sat the solitary man, in patched trousers and shirt, stinking of perspiration and wood-smoke, watching, listening, smelling, thinking, writing on a tablet of paper with a pencil made by his own hand.

As the light and warmth swelled anew in the woods, the wild asters genuflected the morning away, their soft blue eyes winking in the rain-scrubbed breezes. And the sycamores wrapped their splotchy arms around the afternoon, offering balls of seed to any passersby. That night the opossum, hung by taut white tails, slept tranquilly in a cascade of pearly moonlight, ever more innocent of another day, another heat wave, another storm rolling closer with every revolution of the wheel of life.

Next morning, seated cross-legged on a boulder between the hut and the pond, the man sharpened a point onto his pencil with an oak-handled knife, and resumed scripting the words that would remind us, across centuries, of the little miracles which await us each day in the forests of the earth.

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