

# The Blueberry Pail

Marjorie Kilbourne peered upward through the thick pine branches, desperately hoping for a glimpse of the elusive mid-summer sun. How on earth had she managed to get herself into such a desperate situation? The idea of enjoying a few days respite in this remote wilderness area had seemed like such a wonderful idea, and then when her husband, Roger, suggested they spend the morning picking wild blueberries, she was quick to agree.

It turned out to be the ideal day for a car ride deep into one of the world's most primeval forests. The winding dirt road through miles of bush was absolutely exhilarating, so much so that it was almost a let-down when they finally arrived at a large clearing just teeming with blueberries.

But now she was lost. It had only taken a few moments of distraction as she'd picked her way through the patch, focussed solely on filling her pail, and in that short bit of time she somehow had managed to get herself separated from Roger. Then instead of remaining where she was and waiting for him to find her, she had panicked. Confident that the road was only a stone's throw away, she had made things much worse in her floundering attempts to find it. And now she was completely turned around. Roger, the experienced woodsman, would be furious with her.

She knew she had to stay calm and try to get her bearings, yet the wilderness absolutely refused to cooperate . . . And what on earth had happened to her blueberry pail? She must have left it sitting on that old stump the last time she'd stopped for a rest. Filling that pail - even to the half-way point, had been tedious and back-breaking, and now she had nothing whatsoever to show for all her hard work. One thing for sure, she knew she would

never see it again – not in this forbidding terrain. She shook her head in frustration.

Misplacing that pail of blueberries was almost as disheartening as getting lost itself.

Once again she looked up into the tall stands of pine and spruce that formed an almost impenetrable ceiling above her. It was so hard to get a sense of direction when she could barely see the sun . . . and everything around her looked exactly the same – for mile after mile.

“Roger!”

Her cry was immediately absorbed by the surrounding evergreens.

“Roger!”

Surely by now he would be on her trail, putting his wilderness skills to work in tracking her down. He was quite good at that sort of thing.

The absolute stillness of the forest was perhaps the most disturbing element of being lost. She knew that the barely-passable dirt road which had brought her here was the only route into the area. And the only community for miles around was the small town of Lapointe, home to their bed and breakfast - and it was at least seven or eight miles away.

Right now her main goal was to find a clearing in the forest where she would be more visible and wouldn't feel so claustrophobic. That way if they sent a spotter plane to look for her, she might have a chance of being seen. But so far she hadn't passed so much as a swampy moose pasture.

Onward she stumbled, a sob catching in her throat as she fought to push the panic from her thoughts. Then, from somewhere directly in her path she heard the unmistakable *crackle* of a breaking branch. She froze, holding her breath for what seemed like an eternity, her ears straining for some indication as to what might have caused the sound. She was about to call out to Roger again, but then thought better of it. What if it was a bear – or a

timber wolf?

Finally in not much more than a whisper, she called his name. "Roger."

Nothing.

She turned and eased herself away from the direction of the sound, then broke into a run, tearing through the tag alders and dense underbrush. Finally, after several minutes and her lungs almost bursting, she collapsed onto a fallen log and fought for her breath. She was hot and absolutely desperate for a drink. She had been keeping an eye out for a stream or pond for some time now but had come up empty on that front too. She did recall the owner of the bed and breakfast mentioning that there hadn't been any rain in these parts for more than two weeks, so it was likely that any streams traversing the area had already dried up.

Hopefully they would find her before nightfall. She couldn't imagine spending the night alone in the wilderness . . . Despite the warmth of the summer day, she shivered.

If only there was a way to signal Roger . . . to let him know where she was. She scavenged through her pockets, tossing several items onto the forest floor at her feet as she took inventory . . . a few loose coins, two sticks of gum, a half-pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She eyed the items thoughtfully.

Perhaps she could light a signal fire to attract attention. She remembered reading about a lost couple who had done that very thing under similar circumstances.

A renewed sense of hope filled her as she realized afresh the importance of finding an open area – preferably on a high piece of ground. . . . yet she couldn't even remember passing a hill, let alone climbing one.

She got back to her feet. At least now she had an immediate goal – finding a hill in this forest of trees.

It was almost an hour before she became aware that she was ascending a slight

grade. It was almost imperceptible at first, but gradually became more and more apparent. It was definitely a hill, and a fairly substantial one at that. Upward she climbed, and in only a few minutes stepped from the forest into a clearing atop a high hill. Without pausing to catch her breath, she began collecting all the dry branches and small sticks she could find and stacking them near the edge of the hill. Within minutes she had a pile that reached almost to her waist. Then, at the base of the pyre she cleared a small cavity into which she stuffed several handfuls of grass and small dry twigs. Pulling out her lighter, she carefully set the flame against the grass then stood back and waited until the fire climbed halfway up the pile of branches. Finally she set two thick spruce boughs on top of everything else. As soon as the flames reached the evergreen branches, great billows of smoke rose into the cloudless sky – smoke that she knew would be visible for miles.

Finally she sagged down onto a shelf of rock and gazed out over the vast forest, grateful for the refreshing breeze which she felt against her face. Surely Roger would see the smoke and come to her rescue. It shouldn't be long now.

It was then she realized just how much the wind was picking up, and initially felt a sense of relief as it fanned the flames and ensured the continued success of her handiwork. But in almost the same instant she saw to her horror, several smoking branches blown from the fire into the dry grass that fringed the hillside. This was immediately followed by a shower of sparks which exploded from one of the greener branches and cascaded outward. In only a few short seconds the grass and underbrush surrounding her signal fire were ablaze, the flames spreading so quickly that it soon covered the entire area.

Her first instinct was to find something with which to beat out the flames, yet she realized at the same time that the situation was already hopeless – the entire hillside was on fire – the smoke billowing skyward, flames licking up everything in its path.

It was some consolation, at least, to see that the wind was blowing the flames away from her – down the hill and onto the forest floor.

For an eternity she did nothing but stand and gaze in dismay at the fire, its flames now reaching high above the tops of the evergreen trees.

And so she remained at the edge of her high vantage point for the remainder of that day. She was still there when the water bombers appeared on the horizon, dropping their loads of fire-retardants. She knew, too, that by then there were probably dozens of firefighters from Lapointe battling the flames on the ground.

As darkness finally fell, it became evident that the forest fire had run its course. The wind had long-since died away and a light rain had blown in from the east.

Too frightened to descend the hill lest she get lost again, she remained where she was for the night, still living with the hope that Roger or one of the firefighters would come for her.

When the first light of morning appeared above the trees, she crawled out from under the bushy spruce where she had spent a sleepless night, and sat down once again at the edge of the hill. Her unblinking gaze remained fixed on the ruined forest before her, and there she stayed until the morning was half-spent.

Only dimly was she aware when the first of the firefighters arrived. There were four of them. As a tall man wearing some kind of uniform approached, she slowly climbed to her feet.

For a moment he just stood there looking at her and taking in the remains of her signal fire.

“Are you alright, Ma'am?”

She drew in a deep breath without responding.

“Looks like the fire got away on you,” he observed, handing her a bottle of water.

Marjorie nodded helplessly and took a long drink from the bottle. “I got lost. I tried to

signal for help.”

“That's what we figured.”

“Where's my husband?” Marjorie asked.

The man glanced back at his three companions and cleared his throat awkwardly.

“He was out looking for you,” he said, his eyes avoiding those of the woman. “It appears your husband actually tracked you all the way to the bottom of this hill - to within about a hundred yards of this very spot. That's where the fire caught him. We came across his body on the way here.”

Marjorie continued to stare wordlessly at the man.

Her rescuer took a step closer and said in a soft voice, “I'm real sorry, but the police are gonna want to ask you a few questions. Maybe you didn't know, but because of the draught, this whole region is a restricted fire zone. No outdoor fires are permitted for any reason.”

Marjorie nodded as the man reached out and took her by the elbow and led her down the hill. Once more she looked out at the smouldering forest stretching far into the distance in every direction . . . the destroyed trees . . . the patches of smoke still hovering above the ruins. Her thoughts turned to her husband's last dreadful moments before the fire engulfed him. And strangely she thought of the half-filled pail of blueberries that she had abandoned somewhere in the forest. She shook her head as the memory filled her with an even deeper sense of despair.

“We told our friends back in the city that we would bring them some wild blueberries,” she said. “But I lost my pail somewhere down there.” She drew in a long, ragged sigh as she continued down the hill through the sentinel of blackened trees. “They are going to be so disappointed.”

