

Jagens in the Appalacians

After getting his thermos handed back through the drive-thru window, Aberama took a dime and pushed it to the sill with conviction. He returned the thermos to his lunch can and drove off without looking for a thank you from the unenthusiastic hostess.

It was never a long drive to the forest's solitude when living in the Appalachian interior, not with a motor carriage that is. Compared to earlier times, a trek like this on a horse would take days. And did.

Aberama never planned exactly where to go. He simply peered over his map the day before going and viewed a general area that he hadn't seen in a while. From then on, it came down to pure intuition. No different than fishing or hunting, some days were a bust- others, bangers.

He left the pavement behind him, meandering his way around. He turned branch road after side road, not paying any attention to finding his way back. That was never a worry.

At length, the truck rolled to a stop. He got out, taking his lunchbox with him. He purposely left the key in the ignition. He lost them once, in the woods like this, and had to walk his way out. Fool him once.

With his free hand he reached into the box of the truck and grabbed a bucket and long handled scoop net.

With his nose up high, he looked around. Then headed east into the thicket. He came across the odd bee, dead on the moss and soil, with signs of puncture wounds and torture. Anything except natural causes. Things were looking up.

There were countless mushrooms on his walk, some of which were chanterelles, and depending on his luck today he thought he may grab some on the way back. They went great with butter and steak. And other things too. There was a large stump, and he decided this spot to be as good as any to set up shop. He had a seat on the stump, opening his lunch box beside him. He poured himself a full cup of coffee and unfolded a napkin unveiling a handful of butternut cookies. His doctor had warned him to cut out the extra calories, but his doctor wasn't there. He threw one of the cookies to the ground in front of him. With coffee in hand and the napkin and remaining cookies on his lap, Aberama waited.

When he was a boy in Bavaria, his father used to take him in the woods on expeditions just like this. "Jagens", he called them. And though his father advised him he would also someday take his own offspring to show the ways of his people, Aberama never did marry or have son or daughter of his own.

By all appearances, he looked like an any old man in the winter of his years. Yet Aberama was older than he looked. Much, much older.

He couldn't run as fast as he once could, and with the walking he would put in today, his knees would be swollen come evening. And like most other elderly people, with his age came a deepened appreciation for the world around him. Whereas his nose and ears were also filled with the excessive hair one encounters with observances of old

people, Aberama was built with some differences too. Instead of losing his senses as he got older, some of Aberama's senses, if anything, improved. With olfactory receptors comparable to a dog, and hearing capabilities more like a bat than human, one could think Aberama could and should be doing these woods excursions full time instead of every other weekend when he wasn't a custodian at the school for events. Unfortunately, romping through forests didn't pay the rent.

Aberama stopped mid sip on his coffee and listened. The birds had stopped chirping. With great deliberation he put his cup and napkin of cookies down and picked up his net.

A distant fluttering, debatable even on its very existence, slowly worked its way towards him. It got louder and nearer at a painfully slow rate.

Aberama sat as motionless as a stone.

A fairy, fluttering and flitting as fairies tend to do, worked her way in a zig zag fashion towards where Aberama sat. She was only six inches tall, so everything in the forest was a potential threat. Except bees. Bees, known to the other forest dwellers as happy though dim witted, were a scourge she was happy to rid the world of. She kept her eyes scanning the landscape and ears peeled as she explored.

She saw it before she smelt it, (which says more about her eyesight than her sense of smell)- a piece of buttermilk cookie, discarded on the ground like an unwanted piece of refuse. The ants hadn't even noticed it yet, and they saw everything.

She couldn't believe her good fortune, and as she was nearing the cookie she realized there could be more to the cookie than appeared. She alit on a tree branch and not unlike Aberama, also sat as still as a stone.

For two hours, this dance of wills continued. Neither moved, with Aberama relying on sound and smell, the fairy more on eyesight and sound.

Finally, almost as much out of contempt for the forest ants as her own desire for a rare buttermilk cookie, the fairy had satisfied herself that it was safe to venture forward.

She could have picked the cookie mid-flight hence increasing her chances of living through the rest of the day, but even fairies sometimes let their guard down. She flew to the cookie and after looking around one last time, she landed to pick it up.

The moment she touched the cookie Aberama struck, and the fairy heard the net cut through the air as it descended on her. Aberama was quick, but the fairy was too. She dodged the net by sheer miracle, dropping the cookie.

She stayed low, where it would be easier to duck in and out of the flora, rather than going high in a straight line to the open air. She still wasn't sure exactly what was after her but knew her chances were better staying low.

For twenty minutes she fluttered to and fro, over and under branches and leaves. She was zigzagging for her life. Aberama kept on her, barely missing her with every swing as he nimbly jumped after her.

It was as much due to luck as it was skill, that at last the net came down over her, bringing their dance to an end.

She struggled to claw her way out from the net, but it was no use. She hissed at him as she turned around and reached for her small knife at her side, but he stepped on her through the net, driving her into the moss. Her struggle to breathe became her primary concern.

Aberama was rough and fast, to keep her disoriented. Fairies gave a dirty bite, prone to infection, and were known to dip their knives in animal droppings to cause further infection to their foes.

Aberama shifted his boot just enough to grab the fairy by the lower legs, then flipped her over. This exposed the fairy's back, and by default her wings, and then put weight on her again. From his holster on his belt he pulled out a set of pliers. The change in pressure on her allowed her to breathe again and she turned her head as she spit out dirt and moss. The fairy's slight increase in comfort didn't last long, however. Her cries for help became cries of agony as Aberama, his foot still on her, twisted and wrenched with his pliers. There was a sound of a dislocation from a socket, then a squishing sound, as first one wing, then three others, pulled off.

Aberama opened and flicked the pliers with each wing, and they fluttered to the ground. He had learned long ago not to touch the wings directly, as the pixie dust was hard to wash off and his hands would glisten and attract unfavorable attention of wasps, fairies' only ally, for days.

With the act of violence complete, Aberama took his foot off the fairy. Aside from being in shock, as they all are after this, she certainly wasn't going far without wings.

Aberama was breathing heavily from the chase and the excitement but would rest once he was back at his stump. It was still early, and he may even catch another one or two of the forest nymphs.

It didn't need to be this way. He could easily have disoriented her by drugging the cookie or going for a head shot with his slingshot, but Aberama had learned long ago with the pigs while growing up that the heightened level of fear released toxins in the body which affected how they tasted. "The fever", his father had called it. To most, the flavor of the meat had been altered to the point of taste being spoiled, but to Aberama and his bloodline, this 'fever' only heightened the taste.

The fairy was barely conscious, and Aberama picked her up. He pulled each of her hands out, stretching her as if she were crucified, and nodded to her with a curtsy. In his head, "Waves of the Danube" by Ivanovici, began to play, and he waltzed with the fairy, leading of course, over the moss as he sidestepped roots and rocks.

Though they remained hidden, He could feel the animals of the forest's eyes on him as he moved about, leading his unwilling and barely conscious partner through the dance, and he wondered if they could hear the music such as he.

At the end of the song, he curtsied again, offering a deep bow of his head, then gently set her into the net. Then, resting his net over his shoulder like a hobo, he went back toward his stump.

It was a great day.

He pulled the lid off his bucket and dropped the fairy in it. He took a piece of his buttermilk cookie and dropped it in. The cookie had cost her dearly, and the least he could

do was let her have some. He snapped the lid back on. The lid had several air holes punched in to it, and he planned to be out of the woods before it got too warm inside.

Aberama picked up his cup to examine if any bugs had gotten it. Then, before he knew what was happening, dropped his cup and put both hands on the sudden pressure in his chest. He fell, dead from a massive heart attack before he hit the ground. He landed on the forest floor almost as fast as his spilled coffee from his mug.

There was nothing for a long time. Then, one by one, the creatures of the forest warily edged their way to examine things closer.

Six bees, two deer, a gopher, then a bear, and eventually three wolves sat and watched Aberama with his open but lifeless eyes. They then turned their attention to the fairy in her bucket as it warmed with the rising of the sun. The air holes weren't enough to curb the stifling heat and the fairy, injured as she was, begged to be let out.

The only animal in the forest that could have easily helped her was a racoon, and had one been on site, would have chosen to watch the ordeal as the other animals did. Fairies brought nothing but grief, menacing everything in the woods with their knives and treachery. Anytime one left the earth, good riddance, was how the racoons and almost everyone else saw it. Coloring books and kid's movies were a lie.

It took a while, but eventually the ants came. Knowing they had a job to do, they walked past the buttermilk cookie on the ground and climbed up the bucket one after another in a line, entering an air hole in the lid. The fairy, weak from heat exhaustion and blood loss from the exposed wing sockets, drew her knife and held them off as long as she could, cursing at them in defiance. But the ants were too many.

Had the wasps formed a vanguard against the ants, things could have been different. More fairies may have come and a truly respectable battle taken place. But they either didn't know what was taking place or pretended not to. Acquaintances as they may be, wasps are not to be trusted either.

The sounds of battle inside the bucket stopped, and one by one, the groups of animals left. They sniffed and showed their respects to Aberama as they went by. They knew Aberama's death brought with it great change in the Appalachians. The Age of Terror on fairies had ended, allowing the Age of Terror on the forest creatures to begin.

They walked away, knowing the ant's attention would soon turn to the buttermilk cookies, then to Aberama. Ants don't discriminate, and food is food.