

A Dangerous Endeavor

Miss. Lathernbee had a shrill voice when provoked that could pierce the eardrum and dig far down into the furthest regions of your brain where no man dared to poke. An oddity really for such a small, petite woman, who ordinarily spoke with measured tones that soothed and comforted. An unwed woman of mature years who spent her days in a white starched uniform and hat pinned to gentian violet kiss curls that framed a face where crow's feet crept from faded gray eyes and from the corners of thin colorless lips.

On one of the days when that cacophonous voice rang out, it stilled the sparrows' twitter, numbed the bull frogs' larynges, paralyzed the crickets' wings and us children's hearts took an out of body flight further than the moon as we sat in her mulberry tree. Not daring to accept our beating hearts' return to our bodies lest Miss. Lathernbee hear their thump thump thump, we froze on the tree limb hoping with fearful guts, mangled in a knot, that the foliage hid us well enough.

As time lengthened after her first shout, she left us with no choice but to accept our hearts back from outer space and we tried to match our breathing to the rustle of leaves as the breeze grabbed and shook them. Crouching on the branch some thirty feet from the ground restricted the blood flow to my lower legs and the paper bag filled with leaves in my clenched hand became moist from nervous sweat.

She waited for us to make a move and we waited to see if she could see us from her kitchen doorway. It was a weekly ritual during the silkworm season. It wasn't that we wanted to steal and eat the fruit. It was the leaves we'd come for. Leaves to feed our fledgling silkworms in our hole punctured shoebox. Surely a few leaves from such a leafy tree would make no difference and we only ate a few mulberries along the way.

"You think I can't see you! You with the bright red shorts! I've had enough of you hooligans stealing my fruit! I'm going to call the police and have you arrested for trespassing!" came the dreaded, chilling screech.

I was the first to make a move. After all I had the bright red shorts on. I pushed up on the branch and pins and needles seized my legs but it did not compare to Miss. Lathernbee's threat and with panic strangling me, I swung my body across the three foot gap between our property and Miss. Lathernbee's, towards the safe haven of our shed below. I heard the thunderous clamor as each one of us landed on the corrugated iron shed roof. I lay quite still, clutching my precious bag of dark green leaves and wrestling with the jabs of pins and needles. I heard the sharp slam of the screen door and the bolt shot home and I knew that Miss. Lathernbee had given up the fight and disappeared indoors.

I had another week of leaves to fatten my silkworms.

Pamela McMonagle copyright © 2009

This story is a work of fiction. Characters, incidents, names and places are part of the writer's imagination or used fictitiously. It is purely coincidental if it resembles any actual events or locations or persons living or dead.

Footnote: In South Africa the hobby of keeping silkworms in a perforated shoebox to watch the cycle of egg to worm to cocoon to moth is an annual pastime and one most children engage in, generation after generation. silkworms eat mulberry leaves (you can give them lettuce leaves but I never had success with them) and so the search for mulberry trees and their precious green cargo can be a dangerous endeavor to be sure.