

Hello! My name is Ben Burchard, and I am a freshman at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. I am, as of now, planning to major in business, which will hopefully allow me to pursue a career in either one of the two fields into which I could see God leading me: law or ministry. My aspirations for the past few years have been to become a lawyer and/or a judge, but recently I have felt what could be a call to ministry. Whether that call involves mission work, pastoring a church, or even becoming a professor of theology, I cannot yet tell.

My interests outside of school include volleyball, politics, and listening to music (any genre; my taste is purely based on each song). Also, while I do love to curl up on the sofa with my family or friends and enjoy a well-made film, I have always felt drawn to the outdoors in some capacity. A trip to the mountains is never complete without a fulfilling hike to (or just near) the top of a mountain, and a trip to the beach of any body of water (lake, river, ocean, etc.) is never complete without actually getting into the water. My essay concerns a slightly simpler outdoor experience than these examples, but I suppose that we all long for the kind of simpler times I will be presently describing.

Blackberries

Slap!

A mosquito had landed on my arm, but I was able to swat it before it completed its blood-sucking mission. As I brushed away its remains, I turned back towards my grandfather and our intended destination: the blackberry bush at the edge of his backyard.

I use the term “backyard” loosely, as his property extended far past the bush and the wooden fence behind it. I looked beyond the fence into the field, which was bursting with white bulbs of raw, soft cotton, ready to be plucked from where they stood. Grandpa leased this field out to a farmer who lived close by.

“Lemme tell you somethin’, Benjamin,” he said. I go by Ben to most people now, but he has always used my full first name. “These blackberries are gonna be big and juicy today – all this rain we’ve had will’a made them nice and plump.”

It was a hot and humid summer afternoon, and I was eight years old, soon to be nine. My mom had driven me out to my grandparents’ old house in rural Dinwiddie County for a sleepover with them. It was one of my favorite summer activities; I loved going for a night to the country, where I could go outside and feel like there were only a few simple things going on around me, where, in a sense, I could feel free.

As we moved closer to the bush, I began to see the clusters of blackberries that were weighing down the branches. They were ripe for the picking – each one was a deep black clump of juicy bulges, and only a few exhibited any of the unripe red color.

My grandfather’s house is situated on a hill, and it has a long driveway that snakes up the incline to the front of his house. There are trees all around the driveway, but once one reaches the house and backyard, there are only trees on the left side. Multiple arrows that I had misfired from

my bow had landed in those trees, and to go get them was a very itchy and prickly endeavor. Mostly, though, I was skilled at hitting the targets on the refrigerator boxes that Grandpa set out for me. At the far-left corner of his “backyard” was a grapevine that climbed up a small structure likely built a significant time before I was born. I must admit, I did not enjoy those grapes nearly as much as I enjoyed the blackberries, since the grapes had large seeds in them that were difficult to pick out in my mouth, and they did not taste sweet enough to be worth the work.

Once we arrived at our destination, Grandpa handed me a plastic bag and we began picking – and eating – the berries. Eating at least a few always came before putting any in the bag. They burst open in our mouths in gushes of sweet, sticky nectar that instantly brought a smile to my face. Some I rolled around in my mouth with my tongue before I bit them so that I could feel their bumpy texture. Others I placed onto my tongue and then sucked the liquid out. Most, however, I just tossed into my mouth and crushed with my teeth. Each made a satisfying (although inaudible) *pop* when it exploded inside my mouth and caused my taste buds to fire a frenzy of sweet sensation to my brain.

Of course, we had to watch out for the thorns. They covered the branches far more than the blackberries did, and although they were not horribly long, they were indeed sharp; they were nature’s way of telling us that the bush did not particularly like what we were doing.

“Watch out for the briars, Benjamin,” Grandpa said. “They’ll gitcha good if you’re not careful.” I was certainly “gotten good” by the thorns multiple times that day, but the small scratches on my hands and forearms were a negligible price to pay for our reward.

The bush was not enormous; it covered only about eight feet by three feet of ground area, and it was perhaps only three feet tall. However, Grandpa and I picked a heap of berries off of

the bush that day. We filled our bags with nearly as much as was possible for the bags to hold, and we ate at least that many straight from the bush, talking and laughing as we did so.

Once in a while, I paused my picking to take in my surroundings. Cicadas and other insects screamed at us from all around, and vultures soared overhead as they scanned the ground for anything dying or dead. Sometimes, I would look over by the woods and see a rabbit or a deer taking a brief, relaxing walk (or hop) in the torrid afternoon.

Sweat began to drip profusely into our eyes, and I can still remember how it would blind me and cause me to stick my hand directly into a group of thorns. At last, we decided that it was time to head back to the house to show Grandma our well-earned spoils. As we began to make our way, we passed the colossal “Christmas Tree” (as Grandpa dubbed it). It was a cedar close to thirty feet tall and fifteen feet wide at the base. I have had some memorable experiences around that tree, and it is always one of the first things I think of when my grandparents’ house comes to mind.

Fwoooooomp!

The familiar noise of the screen door opening greeted me first when we walked into the cool sunroom, and it was followed quickly by Grandma asking how we fared on our journey.

“Did y’all get a lot of blackberries? If you did, I’ll put some in the pancakes that we’ll have for breakfast tomorra mornin’.”

Yes, Grandma. Yes, we did get a lot of blackberries.