

LUNCH TIME FOR ALL

Children of the forest have a ringside seat in nature's theater. I know. I was a member of this privileged class. But some of the performances I would rather not have attended.

Most of those experiences were enjoyable. But we were also required to witness nature at her vilest at times. Wild animals also must eat. But most of them are hopelessly inept in the area of euthanasia. Nor do they conduct themselves with any degree of consideration for their fellows.

In the area where I grew up, near Venosta, Quebec, there was hardly a day that I didn't have to venture into the woods for some reason. To search for milch cows, to gather wood, or to pick wild fruit to preserve for the winter larder. There was hardly a day that I didn't have some interesting, and sometimes, uncomfortable encounters.

On one such occasion, the journey started out uneventful enough. It was my younger sister's and my assigned task to deliver the noonday lunch to my father and older brothers, who were building a cottage for some lucky city dweller, on our lake a mile away. We were well into the woods when the shrill echo of baby-like screaming, rang through the forest. My six year old sister, Carmel, didn't wait to apologize for leaving. She dropped her basket, and unwisely, she headed the longer distance toward home.

The code was, naturally enough, never to desert a younger member of the family in the bush. Carmel, my chicken sister, relieved me of this responsibility so fast that, within seconds, I couldn't see her anymore. My calls for her to follow me were useless. But I felt sure that she would follow the road home.



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The woods became silent. But the underbrush in the area of the screams was still moving. Then complete stillness. My mind was in turmoil. So much was happening that I was having trouble deciding what to do. To go after my sister? To gather the lunch together? Or to investigate to see if it was my kid brother over in those bushes. He had tried to follow us on other occasions.

My mind was developing suitable theories, as the young mind will, in situations like that. I convinced myself that my sister and brother were safe at home. But I wasn't about to trust whatever was in the bushes. I moved to the crest of the nearby hill to decide what to do, and to ready myself for the dash downhill to the lake, if the situation worsened.

I knew that I had to retrieve the abandoned basket or be in deep trouble with my hungry brethren.

I made my way back, cautiously, to the other half of the lunch. It was surrounded by a gleeful family of raccoons. All else forgotten, I waded in, yelling, and with arms flailing. The baby raccoons scrambled into the bushes, but Mom and Pop had

other ideas. They had no intention of leaving this bonanza. They stood their ground. I didn't.

When Poppa raccoon snarled and snapped his teeth, I retreated to a safe distance. I gathered a pile of stones together, and began to pelt the raccoons. After a few well-placed missiles, the animals decided to leave the decimated lunch. I retrieved the basket, but nothing else was salvageable. I turned just in time to witness the final blow. The front wheel of a car was crunching my last basket. With this latest mishap came the tears. Frustration and defeat had taken a firm hold.

As I sat on a stone, trying to stem the flowing water, the cottage people invited me into their car. We drove to the farmhouse to check on my sister, as the kindly city dwellers assured me that they would return to the lake, to prepare a lunch for the hungry workman. I know that everyone, including my mother, expected me to stay at home. I mumbled something about having to return to the lake. It worked. I had no intention of missing that lakeside lunch.

Do you remember when, at that age, any meal, anywhere else, always tasted better than at home?

Of course, I had another reason for returning to the lake. I wanted to investigate, in the company of adults, the source of the screaming, that I had heard in the woods.

When we reached the spot, we saw the weasel still lapping the blood from the rabbit's throat. Even with the group of five or so, staring at him, the weasel moved only about ten feet away from the carcass, and stood there glaring at us. My companions, timid at best, decided that it was better to keep our blood, and continue the journey.