

FED BY NATURE

by Emma Rose

I try to bury my heartbreak with found treasures. The kids place all sorts in my hands. The mundane items - a shiny rock, a colorful leaf - are unceremoniously thrown back into the water, but the more mysterious things must be thoughtfully examined. I smile at the growing pile of the river's abundance. A white, rubber fish with a rusted hook melted to its head. A miniscule pine cone, smaller than my second grader's fingernail. A heart-shaped rock, its edges smoothed by the tumbling waters.

The children scream, "Mama! Mama! Mama!" Their constant voices are exhausting, but I try to find joy in their joy. I smile at their jeans wet from exploration, driftwood boats, and the blackberry stains that speckle their clothes. I want to be present for their lives, even when it constantly interrupts and drains mine. They stuff wild fennel into my purse. "For dinner!" they scream, excited to help with my daily chores, before sneaking it out again to stuff in their mouths.

Instead of focusing on all the ways I am exhausted, I take a deep breath and list the things I am grateful for.

I am grateful for nature's wild growth and the changing seasons of life.

For the children's shrieks of joy.

For these children, who have survived abuse and the foster care system.

I am thankful that I am under the trees, a moment of respite before I have to tell our newest arrival that he will soon move to a different foster home.

Some of the fennel made it home, and I ask my second grader if he would like to wash and cut it for tonight's dinner. "I picked this!" he exclaims proudly from the sink, washing his hands. "I thought you would like it for dinner!"

“It’s going to be delicious.” I outwardly smile, but it doesn’t reach my heart. Tonight I have to tell him that he will leave next week.

“Can I chop it?” he asks.

“A wonderful idea.”

I often ask new children to join me in the kitchen. Hands small and large cut mushrooms, hold measuring cups, and mix batters. I show them how to find wild grapes, mint, fennel, and figs at the river, and then transform them into meals. The kitchen teaches them of the abundance of nature, that a mess can be cleaned up, and that mistakes can be delicious little accidents - a moment for celebration rather than degradation.

He starts to chop with a butter knife, and soon the kitchen is perfumed with fennel. “It smells like outside.” He puts his face close enough for some fennel to stick to his nose, and takes a big whiff.

I join him. I lean close, our bodies touching over the cutting board, and inhale. I close my eyes, suddenly feeling the peace of the sun shining through the trees and tall fennel plants swaying slightly in the wind. I imagine the fresh air surrounding us, reminding me to be grateful for this time we share, and resisting the urge to let my mind wander to my anxieties about the short amount of time we have left.

“I’m going to pick fennel every year,” he says proudly. “And then when I’m old enough I’ll make the potatoes myself.”

I imagine him as an adult plucking fennel from the forest floor. Will he remember our short time together fondly, or with contempt for me being another cog in a failed foster care system? I know it’s of no importance how he remembers me - or if he remembers me at all. It’s the lessons that matter. I hope he remembers how to magic food from a forest, and how to find beautiful mysteries from river beds. As long as he knows that nature is a healing treasure, I’m certain he will - one day - find his own way to feed his body and soul.