

The Bushkill Hidden Rhododendron Sanctuary

By
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In Bath “ you can’t get there from here,” Pennsylvania, I am visiting my Cousin Judith, whose back nine consists of pristine woods, bordered by the Bushkill Creek. The deer, which live here, have mapped the land and created pathways for us humans to enjoy. Today, on my walk, I noticed a huge wall of rhododendron along the far bank of the Bushkill, close to two hundred feet wide and thirty feet high. Behind this grove of bright, deep green, healthy bushes is a steep embankment ninety feet high. No paths, no access, nothing that could explain what the rhodys were doing here. But the wood sprites knew and they decided to channel the story through me.

In 1727, Samuel J. Van Nord, a widower, married the widow Ursela Van Stemple. Ursela’s family offered a large dowry as they needed her room for their growing brood. Truth was, they could have worked it out, but she was driving them crazy – she knew too much and talked too much. Samuel needed the money. He was a farmer and owned a hundred acres northwest of Philadelphia. An early to bed and early to rise, dower man, if it didn’t have to do with planting seeds, harvesting crops or running the farm, he wasn’t interested. He took care to divide the everyday duties, fairly he thought, so she could share equally in the farming experience.

Samuel was a man of few words. Consequently, through no fault of his own, he forgot many of those he did not use, figuring they would come to him if it was important. He called his wife Woman, as in “Woman, cook dinner,” or Thee, as in “Did Thee cook dinner” or simply nothing, as in “Dinner?” Over time, he forgot her name too. Ursela, seemingly unperturbed by her new circumstances, learned patience and took refuge in her books, literary guild meetings, quilting bees and church.

“Thee, what is-eth that?” he said, at breakfast one morning.

“What is-eth what?” she said.

“On the window uh, uh, umm ...,” he said, pointing.

“Doth thou mean-eth ‘sill’?” she said.

“What is-eth it, Woman?” he said.

“We have-eth received-eth a gift,” she said.

“Of what?” he said.

“A plant,” she said.

“I see-eth that,” he said. “What kind?”

“It is-eth a baby Rhododendron,” she said,

“Doth thee eat-eth it?” he said.

“No,” she said.

“Is-eth it fodder for animals?” he said.

“No,” she said.

“Doth it make-eth soap?” he said.

“No.”

“Kill-eth bugs?”

“No.”

“Shine-eth leather?”

“No.”

“Seal-eth wood?”

“No.”

“Make-eth furniture?”

“No.”

“What then?” he said.”

“It grow-eth in shade,” she said. “It hath ornamental qualities and it stay-eth green all year. It love-eth an acid soil. It flower-eth in the spring. Trim-eth it after blossoms fade-eth to stop-eth it from getting-eth leggy. It will get-eth tall and wide and it will be-eth beautiful.”

“A good-for-nothing plant,” he said, unable to make sense of her words.

“It pleasure-eth the soul,” she said.

“Not now,” he said, pointing. “Sun rise-eth.”

“The plant, Samuel,” she said. “The plant pleasure-eth the soul.”

“Dump-eth the umm, uhh...,” he said.

“Rhododendron,” she said.

“Weed,” he said.

“Gift,” she said.

“Toss-eth it,” he said..

And that was-eth that.

Ursela took the young plant to the back of the house, to the edge of the cliff and tossed it into the abyss. It fell short of the creek, its root ball catching in the tangle of tree roots and mud, where the overhead canopy screened out the sun. Alone, unfertilized, untrimmed, uncared for, the little Rhody managed to thrive. Over time, it became a full grown rhododendron -- the forbearer, and current member, of The Bushkill Hidden Rhododendron Sanctuary.