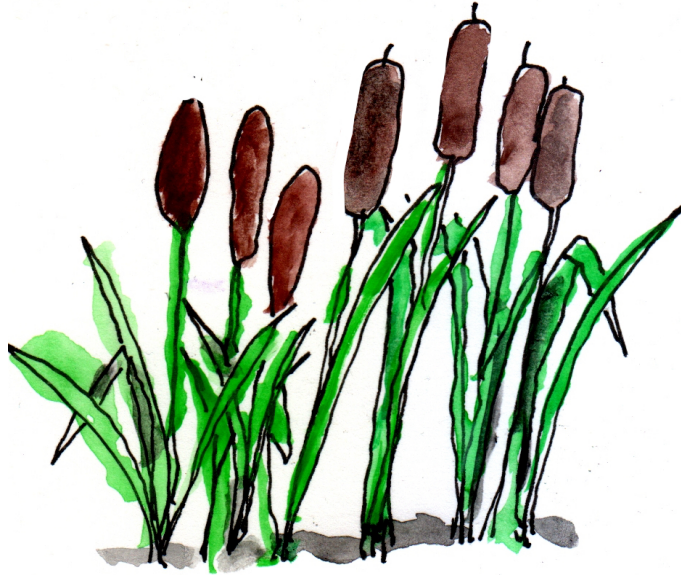




BEVERLY'S WATCH

By Douglas Evans

Beverly's sneakers sank into the stinky muck, painting her ankles black. She held out her arms and plowed through the tall reeds, rushes and sedges. Fuzzy, brown cattail tops swayed above her head.

"I'm sunk," she said. Somewhere in the vast marsh, she had lost her new digital watch, a birthday gift from her mother.

With a shutter, Beverly recalled her mother's words that morning. "I trust you are old enough to care of a watch like this. When you go to the marsh, your mind wanders. Now you have no excuse for being late for dinner. Don't forget, I want you home by seven o'clock tonight."

Before leaving for the marsh, Beverly strapped the plastic watchband

around her wrist. She pushed the silver button on the watch to set the alarm for six-thirty. That would remind her when it was time to head home.

“But now I’m sunk,” Beverly said, continuing her search. “I can’t go home without that watch.”

Her gaze swept side to side, never leaving the soggy ground. Once, a glint of light caught her eye. She took three sloshy steps forward, only to spy the shiny wet back of a muskrat slithering through the cattails.

Ahead, half buried in the muck, lay a fallen tree. Beverly climbed the old snag and walked its length. Leaning against the gnarly roots, she had a clear view over the green carpet of reeds, rushes, and sedges. A short distance away, two wood ducks bobbed among lily pads on open water. On the far shore, a buttery ball of a sun was melting away.

“It will be dark soon,” Beverly told herself. “The watch will be impossible to find at night. By tomorrow, the foul water will have ruined it.”

Beverly listened. The marsh was full of sounds. Bullfrogs spoke in low voices. Red-winged blackbirds, perched on cattail spikes, piped their evening songs. Somewhere, a carp splashed.

As the sun vanished, a breeze fluttered Beverly’s brown, wispy hair. As if the sunset were a signal, the marsh creatures grew silent, and colors disappeared.

Beverly slid off the log onto the seat of her jeans. Already the light in the weeds was dim. “It’s hopeless,” she said, and started toward home.

A full moon hung overhead by the time Beverly reached her house. She sat on the back steps. How could she face her mother without the watch? *Careless, irresponsible, absent-minded.* Her mother had said all those words about her before.

The porch light went on, and the screen door opened.

“Back in time. Good for you, dear,” came her mother’s voice. “So you’re putting that fancy new watch of yours to good use.”

Beverly tugged the sleeves of her sweatshirt over her wrists. “Mom, about that watch...”

“Well, the alarm must beep loud and clear to attract *your* attention, dear,” her mother broke in. “You seem to notice every sight and sound in that marsh.”

A thought struck Beverly so fast she jolted. “What’s the time, Mom?” she said.

“A little after six, dear.”

Without another word, Beverly leaped to her feet and bolted from the backyard.

Ten minutes later, she was back at the swamp. Without a pause, she tore into the weeds. Moonbeams lit the cattail tops like auto headlights, but below where Beverly ran, all was inky black.

Squoosh! Squoosh! Squoosh! Her leaping steps made great splashes of invisible water.

Breathing hard, she finally stopped. She crouched on the soggy ground and listened. Except for the thumping of her heart, all was silent.

A minute passed, another and another. Was she too late? Was this the right spot? She waited some more. Then it came. Out of the black stillness floated a faint *beep, beep, beep*.

Beverly cocked her head. "There," she whispered.

She sprang up and took a dozen steps to her right. She froze and listened. Yes, the beeping was louder. But how much time did she have before it stopped?

Blindly, Beverly leaped through the cattails. Again, she froze. This time the watch beeped once, twice, and then went silent. The sound, however, had come from her feet. She reached down and felt around. Yes, her watch lay on a clump of dry grass.

Beverly raised the watch and pressed the light button. "Six-thirty!" she said. "It's time to head home. I must not be late."