

Pines

by Caolinn Sullivan

I peel my shirt off my sticky chest and wipe my face. My cousin, Frankie, standing there beside me in the desolate quiet of the woods, does the same, his strong forearms bulging beneath a white t-shirt. One. Two. Three. We grip the sticky trunk of the last chopped pine tree and haul it up onto the pile. I can hear my dad and my Uncle Shawn with their chain saws in the backyard, and the buzzing makes my head hurt. It sounds like whining. It sounds like an entire childhood being chopped up and hauled away and burned in a big bonfire somewhere deep in the woods of New Hampshire.

We come out into the new clearing behind the cabin, Frankie and I, an unwelcome beam of sunlight burning our freckled Irish skin. We are used to it being shady back here; we are used to the dense cover of towering, ancient pines.

My uncle says we have to do it, and since he usually gets his way, he will get his way this time, too. He is all business, just like Frankie says he is, trading his businessman's suit for a worn-out pair of jeans for one sweltering July Saturday. He says we need to cut back all this dense brush so the old house can breathe a little, so we can slap a new coat of Kelly green on its shingles and take a nice picture for the listing brochure. And Frankie, ever so the image of his father, valiantly hauls the chopped trees into the woods, while I follow dutifully behind. My dad mourns discreetly. I can see the tears welling up in his eyes as he patches screens and fixes leaky faucets and anticipates selling his childhood home. He is the softer one of the brothers. I have always been more like him.

It is getting almost dark, as it is nearing nine o'clock and the sun is melting slowly into Lake Kanasatka. We sit on the porch, just one more time, the three men with their eyes closed and Frankie snoring softly. My dad is humming "Toora Loora Loora" in a dreamlike state. He opens his eyes and smiles sadly at me. He says he will pay me forty dollars for all my hard work today, but I don't want forty dollars. I just don't want to forget this feeling.

Silently, so as not to wake his sleeping brother and nephew, my dad rises from his chair and walks off the porch, back into the woods. He motions for me to follow. I try to be quiet as I settle into step behind him, the ground cover snapping incessantly beneath my feet. My dad stops when he reaches the enormous pile of pines about a quarter mile back. He kneels down in front of it and closes his eyes as the tears start to spill out. I do not like to see my dad cry. But I know he is crying for good reason. I know that he is crying for more than the trees. He is crying because his own father planted these trees after he built this house, after he swam in the crystal Lake Kanasatka and climbed the formidable Red Hill and fell in love with the green mountains in summer and the red foliage in fall.

He planted them before he watched his children grow up here, swinging in the hammock and off the rope swing, running barefoot and wild down a dirt road, their soles hardened from lack of shoes and their hair snarly from lack of shampoo.

He planted them before he watched his children's children grow up here, before he held their small hands, sticky from caramel apples at the Sandwich Fair. Before he taught them to swim in fresh water and drive a boat and press leaves in wax paper between the pages of a book. He planted them there for what he thought to be all eternity, and my own father, with the swing of an axe and the hack of a chainsaw, brought them all down. And as he sits there with his face in his hands, I can tell he is thinking about how much my grandfather loved those trees, nursed from twiggy saplings to strong, tall trunks with a botanist's gentle hand. I can tell he is thinking about how high up their branches were, how my grandfather loved them for the ample room they provided to play pick-up football on Columbus Day with a ragtag bunch of grandchildren.

And so, my father weeps, because now he thinks he should not have listened to that slimy listing agent with his slicked-back hair and shiny car, to his older brother who has always been harder than him, who feels no remorse for the atrocious thing he has done.

My father uses a small handsaw to take two perfect rings off the bottom of one of the pines. I can see his shoulders trembling, my big, strong father shaken by a loss so profound that I cannot begin to understand. He gives a ring to me, like he used to give me the small stump of the Christmas tree every January before he hauled the dried-up, crackly thing into the woods after the holiday. My father, the soft one, forever unable to let go.

I hold the small stump in my hand, tracing the rings on the inside, counting the number of years it had been alive. I hold it in my lap all the way back to Massachusetts, turning it over and over, trying to sear into my memory the picture of a small green house and a shiny lake and a figment of a white-haired man firing a football around under the shade of a hundred pines.

My dad keeps his piece of the tree in his fourth floor office in Framingham, high up on a shelf with his most treasured possessions, among them an Arlington High football, a vial of dirt from the original infield of Fenway Park, and a framed picture of himself and my grandfather leaning against a car, their arms crossed over their chests in unison. And, sometimes, when I go to see my dad at work, I climb like a little kid up on a chair and smell the little stump and remember. But it makes me sad, too.

That is why I gave my piece away. I gave it back to the man who planted its seed and tended its roots. I put it on my grandfather's gravestone in downtown Arlington Cemetery, where my grandmother and some of my cousins go now and then and add to the collection; a pebble from the shores of Inch Beach, a lucky penny with the year 1928, a rosary from Saint Camilla's church. I have watched the stump fade in color, I have watched it warp and rot from the elements, but it seems to always retain that sharp pine smell, like the smell of childhood and crisp autumns and caramel apples. For me, it smells like home. I hope it does, too, for my grandfather, wherever he may be.