

“It was a Long Walk”
By
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“One two three lift!” The heavy wheelbarrow elevates onto our front porch, and, with sagging tires, soon rolls through our front door laden with fire wood.

My dad always says there are plenty of people who use a wood stove for heat in Maine, but I’m not convinced; seems to me that a whole lot of my friends don’t. Ever since I can remember, I have hated wood; that is, the sort you burn in your wood stove. The day the wood truck arrives and dumps four cords on our front lawn can be likened to the apocalypse.

I push the large load through our main hallway, past my mother’s old office and into the kitchen. Turning right, I rest the wheelbarrow in front of the wood bin which sits not a foot from the hungry stove. The very same stove that has dominated my chores since birth, the very same stove which brings the apocalypse into my front yard every year. Yet as I feel the warmth radiating out from the cast-iron mold, I cannot help but be reminded of the comfort it has brought my family over the past seventeen years of my life.

When my mother became sick with cancer three years ago, it was the wood stove that kept her warm through cold nights. Three months ago, when she decided all hope was lost, it was the wood stove by which she claimed she wanted to draw her last breath. For two months after that, she sat by it, waiting and slipping. And, every week, my father and I would fill the bin next to the stove as we had done since I can remember.

Mom’s cancer had spread from her colon to her liver by the time the doctors caught it, and thus, she wasn’t given much time to begin with; the first doctor we talked to gave her no more than a year. So, when she found a doctor who was potentially more optimistic, she ecstatically became one of his new patients. Even through the years on and off chemo therapy, I think she knew it was only a matter of time before her illness caught up with her. I think we all knew in the back of our minds, but like most who are in such a situation, we kept trudging ahead without looking back or forward, just navigating blindly through a blizzard.

When all the wood was out of the wheelbarrow, I crouched down with my hands on my knees to take a breath. I looked at the wood bin and realizing that it wasn’t even half full, I sighed and looked up my dad. “Keep going,” he said in warning voice. “It’s gonna storm tonight and the snow’s already moved in. You don’t want to have to do this in worse weather, do you?” He began to turn the wheelbarrow back through our kitchen, and I knew if I wasn’t close behind he’d have something to say. But I couldn’t move; all of a sudden I wished more than anything that my mom was alive and there helping us as she had done when I was little.

Wood stacking used to be a family chore. I can remember back before we ordered our wood, when we used to cut it by hand off our own property. Every fall my dad would spend his weekends out in our back woods cutting tree after tree. My mom, too, would be right out there

with him, piling the logs into his truck so that they could later be split and stacked closer to our house. When the snow began to fall, I can remember my mom pulling me out on a sled to where my dad was working. She would help him for an hour while I played in the snow and then she would pull me back home again. At an older age, when I was expected to contribute, my job was to be helpful enough to not be considered “in the way.” My parents had worked out a deal with me to ensure that this would happen. For every split log that I stacked on the pile next to the house, I would receive a nickel, which meant that I needed twenty logs to get the dollar. Needless to say this goal was seldom reached. My mom, however, would usually give me the dollar anyways and tell me that I had been good all week and that I deserved it.

The last two months of my mother’s life were the toughest on all of us. The winter was just starting to settle in, bringing with it a lifeless presence. As the nights grew colder, we all congregated by the stove for comfort. My mom would have to be moved in from the living room couch with assistance for she could no longer walk freely. When she sat down in the chair closest to the fire, she would stare blankly and talk about things of which neither my dad nor I knew; she was slowly drifting down to strange and confusing depths, depths where we could no longer follow. The only thing I could do was to stare intently into the glowing embers and feel the warmth of the fire surrounding us.

Anyone who has had or attempted to have a loved one die in his or her home knows that many times it will not end as originally foreseen; the movies like to play up and romanticize death, but it can get much more complicated. One expects the physical characteristics of illness and death; the loss of weight and the loss of strength are common knowledge to most. However, it is the mental aspects of illness and death that can haunt a person beyond anything.

One particularly bad night, when my mother was confused, she forgot who she was and what had happened to her. She did not want to take her pain medicine and she kept claiming that we were keeping her in the house against her will. She kept saying she was a science experiment and wanted to call the police. We brought her down into the chair next to the fire where we later made one of our most important discoveries. Mom had grown past the solace of the house and the stove; she had moved on and needed to be as comfortable as possible. Being in the house with her family was just making her want to hold on longer when she couldn’t; it was confusing her.

It was two weeks in a hospital and then two weeks in a hospice center before she finally passed. My mother never did want to go back home by the fire; she had passed beyond those things and she knew it. Instead, every morning my dad would make the journey from Freeport to Scarborough where she was being cared for, and every night he would come home, sit by the fire, and give me a report. On weekends, I would go with him and each time she would be a little further away until she was gone all together.

It’s funny how someone can move so far beyond what he or she had once been consoled by. At first, this idea may be chilling to us. Perhaps, however, the person is just moving into a higher realm of acceptance where one is no longer bound by earthly comforts. The only thing we can do is to go about living as we have done; enjoying the things that still comfort *us*, carrying

out the jobs that need to be taken care of, and always remembering how these things had once comforted our loved ones.

I drew myself up to face the sitting area by the fire once more. I looked at the chair where my mother had sat. It was a long walk through the cold outdoors back to the wood pile and the snow was coming down hard now. I turned and began the walk out of the kitchen, past my mother's old office, and through the main hallway. I stepped out our front door and onto the porch, putting one foot in front of the other. It was a good day, the snow was falling, I was stacking wood, and the house would soon be warm.