

Bark and Needle

by Alexander Barber

The light had been occupying the room for sometime, but it was now, as the sun's rays snuck down the wall and crawled over his eyes, that he squinted them open. Outside it was cold; he could feel it on the edges and corners of the sheets, and in the air of the large bedroom.

He rolled over, and she was laying beside him under all the blonde hair, which had turned into something resembling a bird's nest. She breathed heavy from underneath it.

He eased himself out of the bed and slid on a pair of black sweatpants that were carefully folded and left on the chair beside the closet. Attempting to leave silently, he crept across the floor. It creaked under his weight but she lay asleep still, and he had made it to the outer room. The living room had a small couch, a few chairs, and a coffee table, all before a large window that took up almost the entirety of the back wall. In the corner sat a fireplace, sticking out from the wall, begging to be noticed. The once sleek, black metal now covered in a layer of dirt and ash, had hid it further into the corner. Outside, the fields, now frozen over with snow and a thick layer of ice, were in full view. On the edges of the horizon a treeline could be seen. The pines made up a forest that her family would often explore in the summer and autumn months.

He walked to the kitchen and picked up the perculator on the stove; it was filled with old wet coffee grounds. After scrubbing the inside vigorously, he stood patiently waiting for the coffee to brew. He thought about the home, and the property, as it looked in the summer light. Walking the woods and returning to have a drink on the back porch. The breeze drifting throughout the house with each window open. He hated the cold, and rarely ventured outside when it was not necessary.

The coffee was ready and he poured a cup and stood in front of the large window, his feet bare on the cool hardwood floor. The house sounded alive with its creaks, rushes from the drafts, and screeches from the pipes when hot water was drawn from any faucet. It felt as if silence was never present in the home. He thought about the empty rooms when nobody inhabited the building, and every winter when her parents would move back to their home in a little town in Arizona, leaving the place barren.

He sipped at his coffee; it was strong and the steam rose into his view as he watched the trees move from the heavy winds. The monstrous branches moved back and forth, a great battle of bark and needle.

He could hear her getting out of bed. Her feet hit the ground and she walked around the room for a few moments. There was silence, and then she walked out and down the hallway. She fell sleepily into his arms, nearly spilling his coffee.

"Good morning," she said, "another day." smiling into his shoulder and then looking up. She had started saying this the second day they awoke together. He supposed she would continue on for a long time.

"Another day." He looked back outside as he listened to her walk to the kitchen and pour a cup for herself.

She sat on the small couch once she had her cup, warming her hands.

“Could you start the fire? I am freezing.” she said, attempting to wrap herself in an old blanket that did not appear to have much life left in it.

He walked over to the fireplace and opened it. The dirty black metal was still warm from the fire burning the night before. Seeing only embers left, he closed it, turning to fetch logs from outside

“I guess I’ll be right back.” he said.

He always made a dramatic exit when he was forced into the outdoors. Huffing and puffing while donning coat, hat, gloves and boots. Describing where to bury his body if he was to never return. This time he was quiet, and the wind swallowed him up as he walked through the door.

As he stepped outside he looked to the horizon. His thoughts stopped along with time, and when it began again he remembered the logs and grabbed as many as he could carry in one trip.

Finding refuge inside he made his way to the fire place. After dropping the logs on the floor with loud thuds of wood meeting wood, he let out a sigh.

She came and sat down on the ground and got as close to the fire as possible to warm herself up.

“My brother loved to do this, but he always needed help putting the wood in or else he would end up burning himself on the edge of the fireplace.” she said.

Her hands wrapped around the mug, she raised it to her lips and stared into the fire.

Smiling, thinking about her family, “My mother would be making breakfast, always something sweet.” she said.

He had not said anything. He felt himself being quiet and knew she expected him to share something. He attempted to think of a response.

“Tell me again, how long did your parents own this place?” he asked.

“Something over forty years.”

“They never wanted to sell it?”

“No” she answered. They always wanted to keep it in the family. When they told me it was mine, I think that was one of the most amazing things I had ever heard.”

Her eyes looked up to his and he could see the flickering of the fire in them.

“I felt the same way.” he smiled, for the first time that morning.

While she stared into the fire, he walked to the door again, and when he stepped outside his eyes locked on the old axe that had frozen itself against the side of the stack of logs. His hands touched the cold wooden handle. He thought about the summer months to come, and the breeze that would float across his face, and how the sun would look, setting over the forest and the solitude that would be his. He stood still in the silence, until he heard her calling from inside.

Spring finally came to the woods, and then summer. The sun was hot, and the glass bottle was perspiring. He took a sip and stared at the lowering sun. The sky had changed to a red with highlights of orange and yellows throughout. He saw the birds take flight from the trees and they formed a dark cloud moving against the colorful backdrop.

He stood, placed his bottle into the bin beside the porch, and slid open the screen door. The floor creaked under his weight, and his bare feet shuffled across the uneven lengths of wood towards the kitchen.

Bottles clinked together as he grabbed another from the refrigerator. The yellowing beast hummed loudly and stood tall in the corner of the kitchen. Twisting the top off the drink, he placed the cap in a small baggie sitting on the counter, filled with an array of colored caps. Walking back towards the porch, his eyes met the fireplace; it had been scrubbed down, and the black metal had a luminous effect in the corner of the room. The axe lay against the cool black metal, the edge coated in a dark rust.