

The Christmas Tree Hunt

A selection from *Personal Mythologies*

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It seems strange that of all my childhood memories of Christmas, only one seems to come readily to mind. Memory is an adept changeling, a play of light and shadow over the heart. A night sprite who is both the stage and the shadows that walk it. The well-rehearsed shapeshifting of a dancer's body, the performance ever so slightly different each time. And as she exits stage left, she casts a coy grin back at me, knowing I'm a willing partner in the conspiracy.

My father and I have gone out in his Forest Service truck as part of our annual hunt for a Christmas tree. My sister stays home with Mom to help bake and decorate shortbread Christmas cookies and other delights of the season. Hunting for a suitable tree seems a mundane enough task. But to me at age 12, it's an honour. A privilege my father grants with his typical lack of pomp or pretension, in a few quiet, humble words. "*Guess it's time to get the Christmas tree again, huh?*" I resonate with pride to be Dad's right hand man, upholding the family tradition.

Not for us the tacky fakeness of artificial Christmas trees just new on the market. Besides, what would Christmas be without the white wilderness adventure of a boy and his Dad? My father has spent his whole life walking the pine and fir-scented paths, working to protect the forest. Only a real tree will do. If possible, he takes a sickly tree rather than a healthy one, provided it's not too scrawny to hold up the bells and stars.

We seem to be going out into the early darkness of a winter afternoon, which is odd. Another memory-changeling? My father's wilderness savvy is legendary. "*Never start into the bush after dark.*" Late home from work, maybe? We say little, listening to the animal whine of four-wheel-drive gears, pulling the faint thread of a forestry road through the snow. For all I know, we could be just outside town. Yet in my mind, we're hundreds of miles away from home. Snow drifts down in elfin-sized fistfuls. Indistinct gobs speckle the darkness, spring into shape in the truck's headlights, then disappear.

It's cold enough for breath to leave its fleeting wraiths but not toe-numbing frigid. My feet are always the bellweather of the cold. The first prickly bite a reminder I wasn't cut out for a northern climate. Mom's California genes, I always like to say. Unlike my father, who seems insensate to the cold. He used to sing that snatch of old song, "*At twenty below zero the lumberjack buttoned up his vest / at forty below zero he put on his coat...*"

Winter is not winter without whiteness. Snow-hunched trees hold up a gunmetal sky. A magic more burnished and brilliant than the most balmy midsummer day. Our unspoken understanding is that Dad gets out of the truck first. The Canadian wilderness is sparkingly beautiful, but potentially deadly. Respect it, and you can come out alive. He takes the axe from the truck bed. I open my door, slip off the seat into the snow and turn my face upward. My cheeks are struck by icy soft, outspread hands. I swing the truck door closed. *Aaaahhh—my finger!!*

My father responds with the quiet of an alpine lake under stars. I grasp my wrist tenderly, my finger screaming with pain. I grit my teeth but my sensitivity gets the better of me: tears! Dad looks at the finger. Sure enough, it's swelling into a throbbing bouquet of purple. "*Are you okay? Do you want to go home?*" If there's disappointment in his voice, I can't hear it. But I'm determined not to give in. Dad's face is concerned, but impassive. "*Pack some snow on it to take the swelling down. We can sit in the truck for awhile if you want.*" My breath is still coming in gusts. I nod my head and we climb back inside. What seemed mildly cool weather just minutes before now seems bone-chilling cold. Dad turns over the engine and switches on the heater fan. "*Geez, Dad. It really hurts.*"

"*Oh, come on. It's not that bad.*" He chuckles, disappointed maybe. Or is he just tempering me into manhood? It's the same old story in our family when I get hurt. After a quick, subtly anxious check, the tone turns mocking. Words sting long after the cuts and scrapes heal. Yet the edge in Dad's voice fades quickly to his native kindness.

My father walks alone into the frosted gingerbread landscape. With him gone, shame eclipses physical pain and the tears stream openly. How could I have been so stupid? How could I have let him down like that? He'd reassured me it was fine, I went with him every year. No big deal if

he had to get this year's tree on his own. Besides, he said, as far as Mom and Kim are concerned, just my going along made it a team effort.

Time begins to play its tricks on me. Seconds strung like lead weights. I'm alone, in a truck in the northern wilderness, in winter. Where's Dad? Anxiety gnaws at my guts. Pain gnaws at my finger. What if he gets lost? No, no—that's stupid. Not *my* Dad. Get lost, in the forest? Never. Not like the 'hobby hunters' from the States, "Yahoos," he used to call them. They shoot at anything that moves—including each other. And *then* sometimes get lost, forcing a muttering rescue team out into the bush. Snow is clumping the jagged treeline. I watch. Still no Dad.

Finally his shoulders reappear, piled with snow like the tree he drags behind. Time telescopes back into miniature. God, what a relief! I roll down the window and lean my head out. As he nears the truck he holds the tree up to standing height, shaking off the icing. Dark green boughs rebound to life. "*What do you think? Think Mom and Kim 'll like it?*"

The drive back and our reception at home slide into the murk that surrounds all memories. This story may be as much wishful thinking as what actually happened that winter day. But does it matter? Isn't it the spirit—the heart—that moves the organic machinery of memory to suddenly stop, wheel on a dime, and say, "Wait—this is worth keeping." Who can say what makes that Christmas tree hunt more memorable than all the others in my childhood? A boy's hurt pride? The pain of a finger pinched in a truck door? That I recall this tiny adventure with my father and nothing of the gifts I got that year is absolutely, utterly right.