

The Fall

by Linda McCuen

“Do you want to see something *awesome*?” The blue eyes of my husband, Jim, shone electric. He didn’t even wait for me to get out of my car; his head popped in to meet mine as I opened the driver’s side door. The afternoon sun framed his silhouette.

Eventually, he stepped aside so I could extricate my heavy body from the soft seat. Ugh. I had just arrived home after a long day of work. Clearly my enthusiasm didn’t match his. I felt like a worn-out paper bag, recycled a few too many times, dried out and ready to break. Where did he want me to go? I hoped it wasn’t too far.

“Well, it’s awesome and terrible,” he conceded. The emphasis on the magic of his surprise hung there in his anticipation. The concession of *terrible* seemed to be an afterthought, and an unconvincing one. I could see the features of his face imploring me to go with him. *Please just put down your bag and come with me*, his gaze begged. Even the edges of his mouth began to form a positive response to my assumed acquiescence. I lifted the bag strap from my shoulder.

“Great,” he said, “Oh, and we don’t have power.” I set my bag down on the car seat and shut the door. Jim led the way, and my gait fell in behind his. The fact that we didn’t have power wasn’t of much significance. We live in Hubbardton, Vermont on a dirt road which is one of the main access points to Lake Hortonia. The lake is a summer destination for just a few seasonal neighbors, and my husband and I are the last year-round residents on the road. Electricity is lost often and it usually takes us a long time to get it back. Jim and I have never been bothered by this. We happily take the trade-off of a lack of neighbors for not being able to count on modern conveniences. A candlelit night, heat from our woodstove and a meal cooked on the gas range tonight actually sounded soothing. An excuse to sit, sip wine, and snuggle. I just needed to follow him wherever this walk was taking us and then we could relax for the rest of the evening.

Jim moved ahead of me pretty quickly. He followed the beginning of our ski loop into the woods, but then began to peel off and push through the brush. “You can see it from further down the trail, but this way is the best view,” he told me—again with a twinkle in his eye.

My gaze trained on the ground. I followed Jim’s steps as we bushwhacked through the dense and dead fall brush. A burdock had already attached itself to my work slacks and I eyed

my shoes with suspicion. . . I usually like to wear my tall boots in shrubbery like this to save myself from ticks, but I knew Jim didn't want to wait for a wardrobe change.

I mention the fact that I was looking down because I really didn't see what we were coming upon until we were right in front of it. When I looked up, my throat caught. "Oh God," I said.

"I know," Jim grinned. "Isn't it crazy?" He looked like he was about to burst into laughter. A thinly veiled bubbling of excitement surfaced and waited for me to join in.

I couldn't take delight in the view, though. Instead, when I took in the scene the word TERRIBLE sunk in to my chest. What lay before us was a picture of devastation. Trees lay end over end, and it looked as if everything I used to know about this area of our land had been brought down in an afternoon's windstorm. Our beaver pond is surrounded by mountains on all sides but one, and these served to funnel the wind from the high peaks into the area below with one powerful gust. That thin swath of land that lay in the storm's path was possibly only 100 feet wide, but it stretched the full length of our ten acres. This was the reason for our loss of power. The sandy loam beneath the trees could not hold our forest in its place, so they had buckled under the wind's push. Many seemed to simply let go of the ground and crash into the plant life below, their naked roots pushed up into the air. New rocks and boulders were uncovered and large sod masses clung to the base of tree trunks. Most of these hulking trees had toppled entirely. Others snapped at their necks, a testament to the wind's intensity and sudden speed.

I could understand Jim's awe, but my own sense of amazement took a different tone. I was saddened, angry at what had happened. We had lost hundreds of valuable trees. Moreover, the mess left behind took away our access to part of our land. My initial response was one of disbelief, but this was quickly drowned in my usual pragmatism. "We need to clean it up," I told my husband. "We need to hire a logger to come and get this wood out of here." My dismay extinguished Jim's thrill. What he had seen as proof of Nature's uninhibited power, I regarded callously as having created a pile of refuse. His flush of eagerness faded. "I want to make our forest what it was," I added as we walked quietly back to our dark home.

It's not entirely true that I thought of the fallen trees as refuse, but I was trying to see them as such. Destruction. Death. Those images were what gripped me in that first moment. Limbs splayed, perfectly healthy trees splintered: our verdant, breathing forest's composition suddenly cut down. The only way I could find my words was with the plan for a clean-up project. I couldn't voice my true emotions about the blow-down. In that quiet walk, I thought about how this is often my assumed role. If a friend is sick, I'll take him a meal. A diagnosed illness? I'll encourage loved ones to seek a second opinion. I even want family members to take a notepad with them to their doctors' appointments and write down what is said. When conflict and disease present themselves, I look for the *best* steps to take. I always want to find ways toward recovery.

After weeks of pressing Jim, we finally called a logger. He agreed to work our land, remove the downed wood—keeping most of it for himself as payment, but paying us for any that

came in above his bid price. I didn't care about the logistics of the transaction. I just wanted things to return to the way they used to be. Okay, I knew a *full* recovery wasn't entirely possible; of course the woods wouldn't be exactly what they had once been, but I wanted to assuage my sense of loss. We had lost so many of our trees, but maybe a professional logger could redeem this once beautiful forest spot.

In short, the logger didn't work out for us. He began working steadily. Logs were dragged out for several days, and an access path into the woods was beginning to take shape. I was even impressed with the man's gentle touch concerning the land. He didn't rip up the forest floor, and he made clear efforts to work only on the damaged area without impacting the healthy trees nearby. But one day he didn't show up, followed by several other no-show days. Jim called him to ask what was going on, and he called us back, expressing the fact that he had a very busy schedule "but hadn't forgotten us." Five days later, though, I came home to find that his tractor was gone. It is never good when a worker moves his tools from the worksite. I tried to remain optimistic, but the logger didn't come back. We never got the full story; Jim called a couple of times, but eventually we gave up. This episode was enough to take the wind out of our sails and our (or my) mission to reclaim our land.

Now, several years later, when I look at this windswept area "devastation" is not the word that first springs to mind. The area is still a tangled mess in terms of trying to walk around, but new growth has pushed its way in. Bright green leaves glisten in the abundant sunlight. What's more, some of the toppled trees are actually still alive. They grow at strange angles, like something Dr. Suess would have dreamt up. The important fact, though, is that I can see beauty here. I can find things to appreciate. Yet, it is a qualified appreciation; there is still a sense of loss.

Today, when I walk the property, the trees that catch my attention most are the broken, standing dead that refuse to come down in the winter's weight of snow or during spring's feisty squalls. There is, for example, a forty-foot birch tree at the end of the yard where our lawn stops and the forest reaches in. Its crown is entirely missing. Over the years, a woodpecker has happily chipped away at it. A pile of chips mulches its base. Holes cover its trunk. Its disintegrating frame provides sustenance to critters but none to itself. This tall birch stands like a Jenga puzzle defying gravity. Its presence often gets the better of me while weeding the roses below. A shadow might drop on my shoulder, or a little shaving of hallowed-out trunk might find its way to the nearby ground. These are just enough of a reminder for me to nervously glance at the bulk above. At these moments my heart flutter-kicks; sometimes I even speak aloud to quell my fears. "Stay where you are!" I tell the birch.

I used to look at these types of trees with a bit of sadness, watching them slowly deteriorate with time, but I have also begun to respect their power. Limbs broken, bark removed, termite-riddled and hole-pecked, and yet the weather can't take them down. Now, in them, I can see purpose, resolve. Having seen loved ones manage to hang on to their lives in the face of incurable illnesses and grave prognoses, my mind keeps going back to that day of the windstorm and my reactions to it. This image of so many dead trees lying upon the ground stuck with me even after we pushed out of the tangled forest and through the tall weeds. Nature's destruction of trees has brought me perspective.

Some of us are waiting to fall, while others can be knocked down in a brief instant. Still others hold on. Trees drop onto one another, sometimes managing to stay alive despite their perilous condition. Some even learn to grow sideways. Or, they might disintegrate piece by piece. Slowly and eventually, though, they all become part of the forest's compost. There is no course of action that we can take to fix or avoid this. I am comforted to know that the dead become soil. Out of this soil new life will grow. That life, though, does not erase the tragedy of death. This path to becoming soil is, to use Jim's words in reverse, both terrible and awesome. My sense of loss over the trees that have fallen in my life pervades, but now I also know there can be beautiful elements embedded in the fall.

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