

“Big Trees”

by Crissi Langwell

I made a vow of silence against my father. For the whole drive to Big Trees, I studied the passing cars on the freeway, the slow turn of the Altamont Pass wind turbines, and the looming mountains that still had snow on top even in June, all while Pearl Jam blasted through my headphones. Dad tried to initiate conversation, asking how finals had gone and about my summer plans before my senior year, and I met him with stony silence. I even ignored him when we reached the halfway point in Lodi as he asked what kind of burger I wanted.

“Whopper with cheese, it is,” he said with a forced smile, the way he pretended everything was fine. Then he left me alone in the car. I’d stayed behind in the car last year, too, but with my mom in the front seat. Even though she slept the whole time. Even though she couldn’t sip the milkshake Dad brought back for her.

We reached Big Trees in the gathering twilight. With no streetlights, the neighborhood swallowed us in darkness. My dad pulled into our cabin’s driveway, his headlights flashing

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across the shadowed split-level home surrounded by large redwoods that gave this Calaveras pocket its name. I nudged the uneaten burger on the dash with my foot as his finger punched the garage remote.

“Damn, the power is out.” He unbuckled his seatbelt and opened the door. “Wait here, Katie Bug,” he said, then jogged up the front steps as I glared after him. I hated when he called me that. The smell of pine wafted through the open car door, the crisp mountain air conjuring early memories of my mom turning around in the front seat to give me an excited grin. Just over a year ago, I’d had to help her up the steps.

One by one, the cabin’s dark windows lit up. I took the moment to peer up at the house, seeing the parts that were visible from the driveway. The side deck where we’d roasted S’mores at night. The potbellied stove my mother had named Lucy. The stairs that led to their bedroom. His bedroom.

“Just a tripped circuit,” Dad said as he slid back in the driver’s seat. He pulled the car into the garage, stopping when the tennis ball hanging from a rope bounced against our front windshield. He shut the engine off and immediately began unpacking. I grabbed my knapsack and pillow and headed for my room on the ground floor. A faint sour scent hit me as soon as I shut the door, growing unbearable as I searched for its source. I finally found it, a decaying rat in the corner of my closet.

“Dad!” Forgetting my silence, I flung the door open and raced up the stairs. He was loading the fridge with food from the cooler but paused when I stomped into the kitchen.

“There’s a dead rat in my room.” I glared at him like it was his fault. The dead rodent. This stupid trip. The late-night phone calls. My mom.

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“Where?” He got up, groaning and touching his back as he did. “That is not a drive I want to do every day,” he said with a laugh. As if I’d asked him to drive all this way.

“In my closet. I’m not going back in there.”

“Should we bury it?”

“Dad!”

He laughed, heading down the stairs as I flopped on the couch. The red blanket across the top landed in my lap, and my breath caught as I realized what it was. I leaned close and inhaled. My mother’s sweet scent filled my nose; tears brimmed my eyes. When I heard Dad’s footsteps on the stairs, I wiped my tears and shoved the blanket to the ground. He emerged from the stairwell holding my bag and pillow, his eyes sweeping across the blanket. I noticed the shift in his features, the way his jaw pulsed as he took a sharp breath. He chucked my bag next to me, followed by the pillow, and I thought he was finally going to yell.

“Check for rats,” was all he said. He winked before picking the blanket off the ground, placing it on a chair out of my reach. “If you’d like, you can sleep on the foldout couch.”

I got up without answering and headed outside to the deck, his sigh following me as I closed the door.

Heavy tarps protected the three Adirondack chairs, with a year’s worth of pine needles on top. I pulled the covering off one and looked for any surprises before settling into the sloped chair. A few early stars flickered against the rose purple canvas, and I watched as dusk enveloped any last remnants of light.

“I brought you dinner,” my dad said, balancing two plates as he closed the door behind him. He set one in front of me. “It’s just a TV Dinner, but we can pretend it’s homemade, right?”

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I picked at the mashed potatoes, though my empty stomach grumbled at the promise of food. I glanced at him, but he wasn't even looking at me. His mouth moved in a slow chew as he stared at the darkened sky, the stars now like gleaming grains of sand surrounding the twisting vein of the Milky Way. Sighing, I nibbled the smallest bit of potatoes, savoring the flavor of rehydrated buttery flakes as if they were the real thing.

“It will be a year tomorrow,” he said, still looking at the stars. As if I needed a reminder. As if this whole place wasn't a goddamn reminder. Huffing, I rose from my chair, carrying my plate back in the house. For a moment I thought about throwing it in the sink, wasting the food he gave me. Instead, I shoveled the food in my mouth, trying to stuff a void that couldn't be filled. Then, abandoning the plate in the sink, I retreated to the foldout couch in the upstairs family room, already made into a bed. I plugged headphones into my Discman and curled under the blankets.

A few songs in, I jumped when my dad touched my shoulder.

“What?” I glared as I pulled the headphones down.

“I said, I'd like you to clean your dishes when you're done with them. Your plate is still in the sink.” The dim lights from downstairs made his sunken cheeks more pronounced. His sweatpants were baggier than I remembered.

“I'll get it tomorrow,” I said, closing my eyes as I put my headphones back on.

“Katie, now. Do you want more rats?”

I threw the headphones on top of the Discman, flinging the blankets aside. Then I stomped to the kitchen, swiped the sponge over it, and threw it in the rack.

“All right, let's talk,” he said behind me, his voice tight. I whirled around, narrowed eyes, the front of my shirt sopping with dishwater.

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“Don’t you have a phone call to make?” I tried to move past, but he gripped my arm. He let go as I yanked away, his face as shocked as I felt over the action.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Leslie?” I prompted. “Isn’t she waiting for you to be done with your fatherly duties so you can have phone sex or something?”

“Katie, watch your mouth.” His cheeks were red, anger flashing in his eyes. He ran his hand through his hair. “How do you know about—”

“Leslie? I heard you. I picked up the phone and you said you’d like to see her again. It’s like you never even loved Mom. Were you just waiting for her to die so you could date?”

“No, it’s not like that!” He looked at the ceiling, clenching his hands into tight fists by his sides before returning his tired eyes to me. “It’s . . . complicated.”

“I don’t know what’s so complicated. It’s been a year and you’re in love with some other woman.”

“I’m not in love.”

“So, you’re using her.”

He shook his head, breathing hard through his nose as he matched my stare. We stood like that for a few moments, silently daring the other to spew something worse.

“I’m going to bed.” He turned, leaving me there with more barbs on the tip of my tongue. However, my prickled words slipped away when I saw the way his shoulders sunk low as he took the stairs to his room.

We ate breakfast the next morning in silence. He washed his dish in the sink, and when I approached to wash mine, he took it and cleaned it himself. I felt a seed of remorse. All these

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months he’d met my hostility with kindness. It made it easy to fight him. Now, his tired face and heavy walk let me know I’d won. But what had it accomplished? What did I want?

My mom. But she wasn’t coming back.

“I’m going for a walk,” he said, grabbing his hat before he left. I went to the porch and slumped in the chair. I stared into the columns of trees that took up the back acre of our property, inhaling the mossy aroma. With it, I saw the ghosts of childhood forts and heard the sound of innocent giggles laced with the wind.

I loved being here. It hurt being here. All I saw was her.

I faked a nap on the couch when my dad returned. He stayed on the deck later that afternoon while I read in the window nook. In the evening, he made dinner but only dished up his own plate. I swallowed hard, spooning spaghetti and meatballs in a bowl. Her favorite meal. I snuck glances at him in between slurps of noodles.

“We’ll leave tomorrow,” he said when he’d finished and stood, dish in hand. “First thing.”

I stared at my plate, nodding, only looking up when he went for the door to the deck. He paused as he touched the doorknob.

“I miss her,” he said, his back still to me. I held my breath, afraid to speak. “I think of her every day. More than anything, I want things to go back to how they used to be. But I’m lonely, Katie, and things aren’t going back. I don’t know what I’m doing, and I’m just as confused as you. But I will always love your mother.”

He left before my tears fell to the table, shutting the door quietly behind him. I pushed the bowl of spaghetti aside. Across the room, the red blanket rested on the chair, calling to me. I

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remembered how it felt to curl up in my mother’s lap, her protective arms around me while she draped it over both of us, the snow falling silently outside while Lucy glowed in the corner.

Wiping my eyes, I retrieved the blanket, taking a deep breath before opening the door. My dad sat in the chair closest to me, his face turned to the starlit sky, the inside lights reflecting off the moisture on his cheeks. I shut the lights off, then shuffled to the chairs by feel. Once seated, I unfolded the blanket, spreading it over my lap before handing him the other end. I felt his hand brush mine as he tucked himself in. Silently, we studied the stars, the millions of stars, the same ones we’d looked at for years when there were three of us.

“Let’s stay.” I whispered the words so softly, I wasn’t sure he heard. He squeezed my hand gently, reminding me how big he’d once been to me. How big he still was.

“I’d like that,” he said. Eventually he let go, my hand dropping back in my lap while he held his over his chest. And both of us stayed silent as we watched the stars, inhaled the pine, and exhaled into a world that felt darker without my mother, but a little less incomplete.

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