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Pines

by

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The air around us was still, the very earth holding its breath. A buzz of an insect, then silence. The creak of a massive pine swaying in a breeze, the sound falling on us from forty feet up, then nothing. Mike's nervous hand brushed mine, nails dirty from helping his father, skin tan from hours spent working outdoors, and ended up back on his lap.

"We could take a walk," he said, his deep voice, new this summer, too loud for the hush surrounding us. I shrugged, stood, brushed off my shorts.

We'd cleared the meadow and found the silty dirt road before he took my hand, his callouses scratching my palm.

The bite of pine was sharp in the air, muted by the dust we kicked up. The sun reflected off the granite slopes around us, pyrite glittering like fairy dust.

Mike kissed me, my first, under the back deck of his parents' cabin, while the other kids poked the bonfire with sticks, drank smuggled beer, sang popular songs, and made big plans for futures that never materialized. Mike had no such plans. He was a rancher's son, his destiny already laid out before him. I had visions of nursing school, art degrees, maybe journalism. College was my destiny, that much I knew.

Our relationship was neatly contained within the Sierra camp where both of our families had cabins. At 6000 feet, at the end of the long dirt road that nobody maintained,

the cabins were only accessible during the snow-free days of summer, just a brief window to reconnect with old friends and make new ones. Kids from far-off cities and nearby small towns gathered around nightly games of kick the can and Jeep rides through the forest, before returning to our friends and lives at home. By fall we'd all lost touch again. My romance with Mike lasted just two weeks. Then he returned to his work on the ranch, and I headed off to cheerleading camp.

By the next summer, we were strangers. Mike had grown into a lanky, serious man-in-training. I'd quit cheerleading to focus on Amnesty International, volunteering at the local animal shelter, organizing community food drives. We sat across the bonfire from each other, our eyes never meeting, and listened to the other kids brag about driver's licenses, sexual encounters, forays into drug use. Mike drank too much and got into an argument with his best friend over their upcoming football season. I left early, disappeared into the darkness, unnoticed, found my way back to my family's cabin by feel and memory, blind along the moonless path.

The following summer I brought up my friend Kristi, a leggy flirty blonde, one of the popular girls from school who I'd wanted to impress, but who complained of boredom, dirt, bugs, hot days, and cold nights the entire week in the mountains. While I laid out on the hot granite slab that cupped the swimming hole, she hugged her knees, swatting at every insect in a three-foot radius.

"They're everywhere!" she squealed.

"They won't hurt you."

"Why aren't they bothering you?"

"Because I don't smell like coconut. I told you not to use that stuff."

Kristi laid out next to me, sighed. “This rock is hard.”

Her steady stream of whining was interrupted by the sound of male voices, a cannonball splash, obnoxious cheering. I shaded my eyes to see, but refused to sit up. Mike and two other boys from camp were wrestling in the sandy shallows, shirtless, their jean cut-offs sliding off slim hips, revealing boxer shorts beneath.

“Who are they?” Kristi asked.

“Local boys.”

She sat up, fluffed her hair, showed off her legs. Within moments they were on us, bumming snacks, inviting their wet bodies to sit on our towels. Mike’s two friends competed for Kristi’s attention, so he and I ended up together on my towel, the castoffs.

“How’ve you been?” he asked. His hands were huge, his limbs long, his shoulders wide but thin, his chest concave. He was gangly and awkward with his new height, over six feet, but he was still beautiful: cool blue eyes, a few freckles on his tanned face, a wide row of straight teeth.

“Good. You?”

He shrugged, gestured toward his buddies fawning over Kristi, rolled his eyes, and we both laughed.

“You still cheering?”

I shook my head, nodded toward Kristi. “She’s the captain, though.”

He took her in, his eyes lingering on her skimpy bikini top, her legs, before turning back to me. “Yeah, sounds about right.”

“And you? Still breaking your back for your father?” It sounded more harsh than I’d meant, judgmental. I thought he could be so much more, if only he’d wanted it, but he didn’t deserve criticism from me. He studied his hands, picked at a callous.

“We brought some of our horses up. If you want to ride.”

“I’m terrified of horses!” Kristi chimed in.

“I’d love to,” I said.

We met just after dinner, in the cooling dusk. Mike’s friends kept Kristi company while he helped me up, adjusted my stirrups.

“You remember how to do this?” he asked.

“Nope,” I said, kicking hard, my horse bolting down the road. I leaned into her, pressing down with my heels, angling my body into the wind. I’d made it halfway out of camp before he caught up, laughing, his perfect teeth shining in the fading light.

We rode a short time, darkness falling fast, the air around us cooling. When we came back to the miniature corral, Kristi and the boys were gone.

“Should we go rescue her?” Mike asked, leaning against the fence.

“She can handle herself.”

He pulled himself up to sitting on the top rail of the pen.

“Should we go rescue Jack and Paul?” he asked.

“She’ll devastate them both, no doubt.”

One of the horses came to me, nuzzling into my pocket, nibbling on the edge of my coat. I rubbed her nose, inhaled the warm animal scent of her. It was our last night in camp, the best night so far. I tried to memorize the moment: the comfort of Mike’s

presence, the gust of wind teasing the trees, the sound of the horses ripping mouthfuls of grass from the meadow.

Kristi's squeal broke the stillness, followed by the pounding of feet. With her boy toys in pursuit, she ran to the corral, leaned across the fence, grabbed my arm, yanked hard. I ducked out. She was spooking the horses.

"These country boys are damn crazy!" she said, laughing, tossing her hair, reeking of whiskey. She pulled me down the road, toward our cabin. I let her take me, Mike watching from his perch. Just before we passed out of sight, he raised his broad hand.

I didn't see Mike the following summer. I heard he'd been up just before us, that he'd be back at the end of summer. We returned for Labor Day, my new extended family of step-siblings and a new step-father. I took long walks alone, to get away from the crowded cabin, ended up near Mike's cabin on each stroll. It was empty each time.

The summer after my freshman year in college I caught a glimpse of Mike as I drove into camp, riding tall on one of his horses. He was all man by then, muscular and confident, sitting tall and proud, his head back, watching the pines pass overhead. My shy new boyfriend sat in the passenger seat, taking in the scenery with quiet appreciation. I couldn't think of a plausible reason to visit Mike's cabin together, and so the week passed without a reunion. On our final night, Mike's mother Elaine stopped by to say hello, a baby girl perched on her hip.

"Isn't she perfect?" she cooed. "Mike's girl. Arianna."

I stared at the beautiful child, who shared Mike's blue eyes, his sandy hair, and felt a loss akin to death.

“He’s working at the ranch then?” my mother asked.

“Oh, no, he’s in the army. He enlisted just after high school. His wife lives with us. She’s three months pregnant, with their second.”

My silly, selfish grief was stifling. I couldn’t sit still. I started dinner while Mom visited, recapping the mundane trivialities of our city life and marveling at the endless hard work of Elaine’s ranch. I’d just finished the salad when Mike stepped in.

“There you are, Mom. It’s late. She needs to go down.” He eased the sleepy child from his mother’s arms, laid her across one of his broad shoulders. The girl nuzzled into her father’s neck, her chubby fingertips trailing along his trim hairline. He nodded toward me, and I nodded back. I couldn’t breathe as I watched him turn and leave, his mother rushing her goodbyes to scurry after him.

I stared into the darkening skies outside, at the place Mike had been just moments before, until my mother eased the salad tongs from my hands.

“Married with a baby at nineteen, and another on the way,” she said, shaking her head. “They sure grow up fast in these parts.”

I sat beside my boyfriend, the straight-A physics major. He was already looking at grad schools, planning a life of teaching and research.

“Can you imagine?” Mom asked, setting the salad before us.

“No way,” I said, but for a brief moment, I could.

The next summer Mike’s wife and kids were in camp, but Mike was in Afghanistan. By the following summer, he was gone. Twenty-two years old, killed in a war I didn’t understand, two babies left behind, and a young widow.

I sometimes wonder if I'm partly responsible. Maybe if I'd been proud of his legacy, of him being a rancher's son, he wouldn't have felt the need to enlist, to find a different life for himself.

Mike's family sold their cabin, took all of my memories of him with them when they left. All but one. On days when the scent of the pines is strongest, I'll walk over to his cabin, and if the new owners aren't there, I'll touch the post under the deck, where I was leaning that first time he kissed me.