

My Father in All Seasons

FALL

Every Sunday he roamed the forested hillsides, lifting logs and kicking the useless mushrooms to a powdery sheen all over his shoe tips. His coal-split hands would gather a great ramshead—the so-called chicken mushroom that resembled a strange head of orange cauliflower more than it did a chicken. It would join its mates on the back porch, where they'd sit for weeks because my mother refused to cook mushrooms, all of which she deemed "poisonous." No matter. The next week he'd turn over another damp log and trip down the hillside with his glorious orange prize and muddy heels, with pieces of fern and the damp earth smell he loved clinging to him.

WINTER

When a snowstorm hit, my father would disappear for days to salt and plow the county's roads. He'd reappear at odd hours, red, exhausted, and utterly wired, to slug down a few shots of Wild Turkey and head back into the storm. He wore—could only wear in that household of small females—his large clothes, but when it came to winter hats, he sometimes grabbed whatever was handy. One year it was my sister Virginia's bright purple knit cap laced through with shiny silver thread. Somehow he stretched it over his head. It fit snugly, riding above his ears like a burglar's knit hat in an old movie that had been given a burst of Technicolor. On one of his refueling stops, as he sprawled in his favorite chair, my sisters and I spied the cap in his hands and collapsed in laughter. He looked at us, the joke lost on him.

"It's Virginia's!" I shrieked.

He shrugged, pulled the cap back on, and struggled out of his chair and into his flannel shirt—one sleeve, then the other—followed by the heavy coat and boots, marked with ice and ash. He walked out glittering into the night.

SPRING

My father kept track of the nests of birds in the six fir trees scattered across the side and front yards. “Don’t touch the nests,” he’d warn us, “or else the mother won’t return.”

He’d give us periodic updates. “The eggs hatched,” he’d say, pointing to broken blue shells in the grass. Sometime later we’d hear, “They’ll be learning how to fly soon.”

Within days he’d lead us quietly to a tree, and we’d watch a bird toddle out onto a branch and flap some feathers before falling to the earth. Again and again the fledglings plunged to the ground and their mama would scoop them up until one or two started a flurry of flapping halfway down and you could see a head lift in amazement, eyes wide, the beak no longer pointed down like an arrow but open as if to say, “Aha!”

SUMMER

During the hottest July on record, my father drove an eighteen-wheeler without air conditioning. In the late afternoon, he would return home and fall asleep on the walk, against the side of the house, his head lolling over. His face and once-white T-shirt were dark. And the look on his face—that was dark too. Sometimes he slipped down onto the concrete, prone, an empty beer bottle standing like a sentinel beside him. His toes, shed of socks and boots, pointed skyward like those of the dead witch whose feet stuck out from under a storm-tossed house and left footprints in air. Like her ominous red-and-white striped stockings, the papery white skin of his utterly flat-footed soles wasn’t innocent, but tough, a kind of power looming in the body—his body—suggestive of giants. When I slipped my feet into his boots, I swear they were still steaming.