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A History with Trees

by Marie Ostarello

The sun has yet to cast its yellow squares upon my bedroom floor, but my father no doubt has been up for hours. Even with plugs in my ears I can hear him, pacing and fidgeting, as if he's behind schedule and I'm the one keeping him from his appointment. I turn over in bed and find him hovering outside my door, garbed in his work clothes: a wash-dingy golf shirt and kelly-green polyester pants—items packed in his suitcase along with his other essentials. He leans in, lips moving, words muffled.

“Shane’s house is good lookin’?”

“Huh?” I pull out an earplug, rub a spark or two into my head.

“Ya say that chainsaw’s working?”

“Oh,” I mutter. “Should be.” And with that I have both given my blessing and surrendered my day to him.

He turns away, permission in his steps, and passes my mother who stops for a moment her spray of water at the sink, then he strides across the oak floors of the living room and down the steps to the first level of the house where all of his sounds become faint and speculative. I jump into some jeans and boots and head downstairs myself— knowing all too well the sorts of things that can happen when my father is left to his own devices— only to find him in the garage, already having oiled the saw.

By now we are both certain of the day's agenda, and so we walk wordlessly to my yard, a twenty-acre mountainous incline bristling with thousands of ponderosa pine and a small and straggling population of cedar trees, all of which cling to massive rock-outcroppings and grassy, gulchy slopes. He's been waiting for this day ever since I mentioned the tree a few months back, and, as he makes his way crookedly and unsteadily at times ahead of me, I remember in my just-kindled brain that, even without a tree to chop down, this is a momentous occasion for my father. Today is his eighty-first birthday.

My parents have made their way across the country to visit me here in Colorado. At their own home in Florida, Reno is known for planting trees, which in the heat and humidity grow to gigantic proportions until he must cut them down. "Had to cut down the mango," he'd say. "Got too big. And not much fruit." Or he'd say, "Ya know, grapefruit trees have a lifespan of 25 years, and this one is, oh, probably 26, 27." Then there was the recent occasion when his Norfolk Island pine towered a good hundred feet skyward, having grown over the years from a small plant that my father picked up at a nursery, eventually panicking the neighbors in their flimsy, prefab homes into concluding that even level-one hurricane winds could topple it and threaten a wide radius. He didn't chop down the Norfolk himself, but I understand it was quite the event and took a professional crew to dismantle that fast-

growing monolith. But these adventures I only heard about over two thousand miles of phone lines.

My father and I have our own history with trees, starting in 1994 when he and my mother came to visit at a house I owned on Cuyler Avenue in Chicago. It was a rambling Victorian with an over-productive mulberry tree out front, which, according to my own neighbors, deserved to be taken down what with all the mess it made and the fact that the birds pooped purple and regularly stained the yellow car owned by the guy next door. But I loved her nonetheless. The tree was by all means a “her” with her womanly round shape, her gracefulness, her fruity seeds that she spread all over my sidewalk and porch. I adored the way she filled my entire front yard with her branches, the way she reached down to rustle the hair of children who reached up to pick her tart berries in summer.

One of her limbs hung a bit too low, though, like a gate across the sidewalk, and I asked my visiting father if he could trim the branch. He had heard of this tree during one of our phone conversations and had brought for such occasion his own handsaw along with the many other tools he’d loaded into his Dodge Caravan, because, when visiting his children, he never knew what he might need and when he might need it. When I later looked out the window to check on his progress, I was sickened to see that a number of my mulberry’s branches had been cut, and that in my backyard, in order to create a safe and clear path for electrical wires, he’d severed another tree from torso to tip along one side, so that it looked like a mullethead.

I yelled. I raged. I said words my parents had never heard me say, until my father packed up his bags and his wife and headed to my brother’s house. He could not understand my anger; he had only done what needed to be done.

Nine years later, my father, without a hint of inner dispute, butchered another tree of mine, even though we had agreed that he'd have to receive permission to cut any tree on my property. At that time I lived in the Newlands neighborhood of Boulder, Colorado, in a brick ranch, which squatted at the entrance of an expansive park. On my lot there was one dead elm, amongst a thriving family of five or six, and I had asked my father if he could take down that tree and only that tree, but when I arrived home from work that day, I discovered not only had the dead elm been cut to pieces, but also one of my favorite and, might I add, very alive trees had been severely amputated.

I cried. I screamed. I slammed doors.

My father gritted his teeth and called me “an ungrateful daughter.” Two thousand miles away from home, far from family and friends, he was unable to just pack up and leave.

Three years have softened the glare of that event.

Now that I have this new house on twenty wooded acres, my mother and I joke that the place will keep Dad busy for weeks. She, on the other hand, doesn't venture much outdoors—she fears that foxes and lions and bears lurk in the property's dense evergreens—and instead she sits in the house safely scissoring coupons while we venture to the edge of the forest with a chainsaw.

I catch up to my father, who in his kelly-green golf pants and beige, K-Mart slip-ons is attempting to make his way up the steep and sandy incline behind my house. I rush ahead of him and meet him at the top.

“Happy birthday, Babbo!” I say, using the Italian word for “Dad.” I put out my hand to help.

“Oh, boy, yeah, thank you.” Chainsaw in one hand, he gives me the other.

I pull on him, giving him leverage as he steps up the slope, and then, before he can straighten much, I smooch his warm and whiskery face in the cool morning air. “Eighty-one, I can hardly believe it!”

“Yeahp,” he says. “I used to think it was so dumb when someone would ask an old person, ‘Come stetu?’ and they’d say, ‘Si mo qua.’” He translates his dialectal Italian: “How are you? Still here.” He stops for a moment to catch his breath. “Now I know what they mean. I just don’t have the stanima anymore.”

“Stamina,” I say.

“Yeahp,” he says as he views the expanse of the property.

The sun is just beginning to reach over the five-hundred-foot, rocky-cropped summit that looms in front of us. Across a short, shadowed meadow stands the front line of a mountainous grove of trees, thousands backing them up; but my father is only interested in one. He makes his way over a small gulch, stumbles up another incline using the saw as a cane, and approaches the almost dead cedar. He tilts his head back to scan his subject, which towers a good thirty-five feet in the air. Except for a few sprigs of green at the top, its branches are barren and boney and stretch upward as if it had for all its life tried to grab hold of some bright thing in the sky; its thick base and roots cling down into the meager red clay soil which has been eroded from the massive stone boulders surrounding it. It seems as if, like all trees, it has lived a dichotomous life, both earth-bound and heaven-bound at the same time.

As a child, my father seemed a giant to me. I remember how the whole house shook when he came home from work, and how enormous his shoes felt when I would slip my own feet into them and clomp around the living room. But he was a kind giant who would sometimes let me eat right out of his bowl or let me curl up next to him on the couch like a

little pet. Both allured and repelled by the size of him and all that went with it, I would lay my head against his big strong arm and carefully take in his even stronger smells of Asiago cheese, Genoa salami and a day's worth of sweat. Once tall and twelve-o'clock-straight, his now-shrinking frame perpetually leans towards one o'clock, except when he just rises from a chair, then his body tocks closer to two.

He bends down now to three, four, five, to tug on the cedar's lower branches. He pushes on the trunk, peels off some bark, snaps a few limbs. He wears no gloves. His hands have always been covered with the calluses of a workingman. He stands back and looks up at the height of the tree, then motions to me, finger pointing. "Go grab a chair."

"All right," I say and head off to fetch one from the deck that runs the length of the back of my house.

When I return, he is unwinding an orange cord from its group of even circles and throwing it across the yard. I know, without him having to tell me, that I am to plug it in and then return for my next assignment.

It's been like this ever since I can remember.

When I was a kid, he would sit at his spot at the head of the kitchen table and give hand signals throughout every meal, sometimes because his mouth was too full to speak, but sometimes not. He'd shake his glass, rattling the ice, which meant, more pop. He'd saw the air in front of his mouth, which meant, napkin. He'd circle his finger over his empty plate as if to say, I'm done. Of course, all the while, my mother and I would be jumping to grab him a napkin, clear his plate, pour him pop, ideally fulfilling his wishes before he ever had to resort to raising a single digit.

Back then, I don't remember my father talking much at all. In fact, for years every weekday morning he drove me to St. Anthony's School, a twenty-minute drive, and never

said a single word, except when I reached for the door handle as we pulled up at the black tar playground. Then he'd say what I considered at the time to be a silly little phrase, "Okay, goombye." And he'd lean over and give me a kiss before I jumped down and headed for class. Now I notice he gets in these garrulous moods, sometimes with me, and sometimes in public. We'll go into the Safeway and I'll find him telling off-color jokes to the young guys in the produce department. He's often laughing the loudest.

"What's your plan," I ask him as he adjusts the chain on the saw.

He finishes his adjusting and then he pushes the orange plug into the female connector on the side of the power tool. He kicks away some of the branches from the roots, steps back, and then examines the tree from tip to base again. "Well." He clears his throat. "I'm gonna start by trimming the bottom." He motions with the saw to the lower radiating branches. "Then I'll cut it down about here." He points to a spot on the cedar about two feet off the ground, soon to be a stump.

"Sounds good," I say, sliding on my work gloves. "But remember, it's just this one."

"I told you," he says with a half grin and a sweep of his arm, "put a ribbon around every tree you want to keep."

One raised eyebrow. That's all I give him.

And with that, Reno starts trimming the branches and tossing them my way. The saw whines and complains as it bites through, spitting dust and the sappy smell of cedar into the air. My father's arms are persistent, although now his skin hangs looser around his biceps than it did years before. I pick up the branches—some are twigs, some are large and heavy bodies—and carry them off to a nearby pile. Eventually, my father sits in the folding chair to take a break.

"You okay?" I ask him.

“Oh yeah. You know, in my mind I’m still forty,” he says, wiping his brow.

“Can I get you some water?”

“Okay.”

As I head into the house, I sort back through memories, and farther back through creased, black-and-white photos and retold stories that somehow my brain has claimed as my own. My father has always been a physical man. When I think of his life, I picture him swinging golf clubs, throwing bowling balls, diving into swimming pools, climbing onto roofs, carrying televisions, fidgeting under sinks with wrench and flashlight, and even earlier, lugging his heavy radio gear as he plants his feet on foreign shores.

Back then he escaped death, at least once he’s pretty sure of. And it was his pure Roman-nosed, curly-headed vanity that saved his life.

It was May 1944, and he was stationed at the time in Norfolk, Virginia, awaiting his next assignment with the rest of his naval unit. As a Radioman 3rd Class in a Joint Assault Company, it was his duty to go ashore with the third wave of infantrymen and send Morse code directions back to the ship. The job required him to carry a generator, which he had to wrap around a sturdy tree with a chain, so that he could crank up the electricity and send out the code. When he wasn’t on a mission, he’d hang out with the other Navy guys and smoke cigarettes. It was the thing back then to take a drag and let the smoke blow out of both nostrils, but my father discovered to his embarrassment that he was only able to blow smoke out of one. The guys used to kid him about it; and my father didn’t like to be kidded. So he lied to his lieutenant, saying he got short of breath, couldn’t breathe at times because something was wrong with his nose. His lieutenant could have sent him to the medics and then let him recover on board the ship, but since he and my father were both somewhat

hard-headed, the officer grouched, "I'll get a replacement." My father admits his lieutenant was probably glad to get rid of him.

A couple of days later, while my father was recovering in a Virginia hospital from deviated septum surgery, his ship was ordered to England. Shortly thereafter, his unit was sent to the beaches of Normandy, where they had eight-five percent casualties.

When I leave the house with his water, it's just after eleven o'clock and the late morning sun is dancing through much of the yard. Across the meadow, the area where my father is bent over, working, is now speckled with light. The cedar still towers next to him, but its lower levels have been cleared of branches so that it stands naked and awkward for the first time in its life. The saw begins again, revving and whining, my father's body one more mechanism in all of this willful machinery. It seems that he is on some sort of mission. Maybe it's to clear my land of haphazardly combustible material, chop it up, organize it into safe and useable stacks. But maybe there's something else, underneath it all, not yet illuminated.

As I approach and hand him the bottle of water, I realize that both of his arms have been gashed: on one, a jagged line runs the length of his forearm; on the other, deep nicks and cuts drip blood.

"Dad, you're bleeding!"

"Oh, that's nothing," he says. "I don't even feel it." And we are back at work.

I saw my father cry for the first time the morning his own father died. My grandfather was eighty-one; the same age my father is today. I had just turned thirteen. I remember waking up in the middle of a clear December night, the full moon so bright it lit up my room, casting shadows. A little while later I heard the phone ring. I recall thinking it must have been about my grandfather; we had been waiting for his death the past few days.

In the light of morning I went down to the kitchen where I knew I would find my father, sitting in his usual spot at the head of the table, a cup of coffee, bread and cheese in front of him, but I couldn't bear to look. Instead I drew near to my mother at the stove.

"Go hug your father and tell him you're sorry," she said, nudging me. "Your grampa died last night."

When I turned to look, a tense redness spread across my father's face like an overblown balloon and then burst. He hung his head. I hugged him and we cried together.

The second time I saw my father break into tears was just a few years later. He was in that same spot at the kitchen table just after the dentist had pulled out most of his teeth. He sat there, whimpering, dabbing at his mouth with a bloody paper towel. When he finally got his dentures, my mother kept calling him "Smiley" because he was flashing his new whites over every little thing.

The older my parents got—as if by some universal balancing act—the more my father cried and the more my mother hardened like stone. Any time I would call to wish him a Happy Father's Day or Happy Birthday or whatever the occasion, all I would hear on the other end were garbled words, nose blowing or silence, until my mom would get on the phone, laughing, saying, "There he goes again." My mother didn't know what to make of this turnabout in her macho man.

After lunch my father begins to tackle the cedar's trunk, and for the time being I am to stay out of the way. I sit in the stingy shade of the meadow on the north side of a pine and observe from an almost-safe, thirty-five-foot distance. To the east side of me, live cedar trees seem to have been daubed onto the scene—thick, heavy strokes in the foreground, thin, lighter strokes in back—on this vertical canvas of pine and rock and scrub and cactus.

What many in Colorado refer to as Rocky Mountain red cedar is actually a juniper, *juniperus scopulorum*, noted by its prickly, gray-green, scaly leaves and groupings of blue berries. It thrives in an environment that other plants would find challenging—semi-arid with occasional drought; stony, limey, shallow soils, heavy with clay—and is often found on exposed bluffs, rocky points or outcroppings of sandstone. Its wood, too, reflects its stubbornness; it is one of the hardest of all the so-called soft woods. Which is why this trunk-cutting process will require some creative determination on my father's part.

He begins by carefully cutting a series of slivers out of the tipping side of the trunk, a procedure that will eventually send the tree my way. His plan is to cut a triangular prism about four inches deep and three inches high, just enough to create a bit of instability after the real cutting occurs. His actions are almost surgical for this part: precise, geometric, calculated. I watch as he slices toward the heart of the tree, bringing its two hundred year history to an end.

My father's history doesn't go back that far, but it does have its glimmering eras. In the early 1950's, for instance, he opened a TV store when televisions were newfangled gizmos and he was considered somewhat of an entrepreneur. He took a chance and bought a building on the corner of 115th and Prairie in the Southside Chicago neighborhood of Roseland and partnered up with a couple of my uncles to run the business. They called it Illinois Television, because the name sounded big. My father was the one who went on the service calls, either delivering new TVs or fixing broken ones in people's homes. I can remember going along with him on occasion, riding from address to address in his turquoise Dodge van, which clanged and clinked with the sound of tools every time we went over a bump. He'd let me come with him into the houses which smelled curiously foreign, like mothballs or sauerkraut or disinfectant, and while he bent into the backs of the sets, his box

of tubes and gadgets flipped open next to him, I'd sit on plastic-covered couches, politely saying, no thank you, when offered cookies or pop or butterscotch candies.

A few years ago, I had a new TV delivered to my home when my parents were visiting me on one of their summer furloughs from Florida. My father watched while the two young men wrestled with the box, groaning as they leveraged their body weight to deliver the 27" Sony from its squeaky, Styrofoam womb. My father hovered behind them, having performed the very same act so many times in earlier decades, but his hand, not being needed at the moment, reached instead into his back pocket, pulled out a wallet and flashed an engraved, brass-plated card.

"See this," he said to the men. "RCA Victor, membership 1956."

"Wow," said the one with bushy brown hair.

"Careful, get your end," the other guy said, his biceps like oranges.

"Yeah, I was in the business myself," my father went on. "Of course, I started my store more than fifty years ago."

"Did they have color back then?" one of them asked.

"Oh, back then, we had black and white *and* color," my father replied, folding up his wallet, sliding it back into his pocket.

"Wow."

"Yeahp. Back then, TV was in its infancy. Today you've got those DVDs and LCDs. And the big stores, ya know, they took over. Like you. Circuit City, Best Buy."

"Careful."

"Yeahp, fifty years ago it was a big deal," my father continued.

"Easy does it. Easy, easy."

"It was the new big thing."

The guy with the bushy hair plugged the Sony into the wall and then pushed some buttons on the remote, the picture coming to life on the screen. “Okay, that should do it.”

“Hey, could I check out that card?” the one with the biceps said.

My father slid out his wallet once again, and this time he removed the card from its slot and handed it to the guy.

“Wow, 1956.” He turned it in his hands. “That’s an antique.”

“Yeahp.” Then my father pulled something else out of his wallet: a ten-dollar bill. “Good job.” He held it out, and the guy took the money, nodded and gave him back his card. “Thanks,” my father said as he led them to the door. “Thanks for everything.”

By about three o’clock, my father has cut so many slivers out of the cedar’s trunk that I keep a good forty-foot distance from the tree, knowing that at any moment it could let its exhausted torso fall to the ground. His arms pump and bulge as he shaves the sides of the triangle, deepening and widening the cut, and then, in an attempt to gain more leverage, he gets on the knees of his Kelly-green pants so that he appears to be growing right out of the ground.

Finally, he motions to me, and as I approach, I notice he stands amidst a scattering of sawdust—flying flecks of it have rested on his shirt, his pants, his face and hair. The chainsaw takes a break on the ground next to him. The gash in the tree’s trunk is a fresh new wound, reddish-orange compared to its gray exterior.

“Stand there,” he says, pointing to a nearby shaded area, deeper into the grove.

“Now I’m gonna cut the back of the tree, and when I’m done, together we’re gonna push.”

“Okay,” I say, taking position.

He joins me on the shaded side, and I stand behind and slightly above him on a jutting rock, watching over his shoulders as he slices the trunk. He edges the chainsaw back

and forth, sometimes pulling it out and then attacking the tree again with the rotating teeth. Chips strike at my shoes. The saw screeches as it makes its way through the tree's marrow, my father's unrelenting shoulders and back at the center of all the commotion below me, pumping, leaning, maneuvering, bulging.

Ten minutes later, when the noise from the saw has finally died down, my father turns and looks up at me. "Ya ready?" he asks.

"Yep." I step forward.

He directs me to a cleared spot on the trunk, and the two of us position ourselves beneath the skeletal canopy. We place our hands on the peeling bark and push, leaning with our weight, until we hear a creak. We push harder and harder, and then in unison, even harder, at the count of one two three, until the tree begins to bend forward, giving up its fight, creaks, cracks, moans, and then, the tall figure which had claimed this territory wheezes to the ground, blowing dust and debris into a cloud around it. It bounces once, twice, then quiets.

For a few moments we both just stare at it. Then we brush off our hands.

"Wow. And you're eighty-one years old."

"Yeahp," is all he says. But underneath his stolid face he is smiling, and his hazel eyes are sparkling. His skin shimmers with sweat and the gritty fragments of the forest around him.

In this one mission-accomplished moment, my father seems more alive than at any other point in his life—at least the parts of his life that I have witnessed. The cedar lies like a corpse across the meadow.

He wipes his brow and begins to walk the perimeter of the tree, planning his next strategy. I bend down to examine the severed stump, run my hands over the cut, the torn

and shredded end, and notice for the first time the thick red vein running through the center of its hard wood. In fact, every cedar branch around the yard shows the same venous mark.

The saw revs up again and my father starts trimming the branches off the fallen tree and cutting them into pieces that will fit into my fireplace.

“About two feet, you say?”

“Yeah, that’s about right.”

The sawing goes on with intermissions for stacking the logs into neat piles on my deck. I know everything will be arranged in order from small to large when he is done, and all that will be left are the scatterings of sawdust and chips of wood that the soil will absorb and break down like fertilizer.

A cousin of mine was visiting last weekend, and one night, after looking and laughing at old photographs, my father asked her, unrelated to any previous conversation, “So, do you have plans for when you go?”

“Um, no,” she responded, although, unlike the rest of us, she probably had no idea what he was asking.

“Yeah, mine’s already paid for,” my father said. “Mary, she’s not so sure.”

“I want to be buried next to my mother,” my mom said, touching her bottom lip.

“I don’t have any plans,” my cousin—who’s only fifty, after all—said.

“You know it used to be frowned upon in the Church,” my father carried on, “but, boy, cremation is really popular now, especially in Florida. Everybody’s doing it.”

“I want his ashes,” I chimed in.

“Yeah, Marie wants to keep my ashes,” my father said proudly.

My mother stood up. “And what are you going to do with them?”

“Put them on the mantle,” I said. “You know, I do have a mantle now.”

My mother looked across the room at my fireplace and the heavy, wooden beam situated on top of it. Then she went to the kitchen sink and did the dishes.

It's dinnertime, which according to my father's clock is before 5p.m., and so he leaves the tree trunk in the golden touch of evening and pulls up a chair at the kitchen table, waiting for someone to bring him food. I slice zucchini and marinate chicken for the grill while my mother tends to my father's wounds; most have closed up, a few are still wet with blood.

"Can you believe my Babbo cut down that tree himself?"

"Yeah, boy, you'd think he was *thirty-one*," my mother says with a smirk.

"You got any more trees you want cut?" my father asks. "I think I saw another dead one back there."

We all just smile. I shake my head.

After we eat and the cast of the room turns from gilded to gray, I grab a fat candle off my mantle and light it with a match. I begin to sing, and my mother joins in, "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you..." My father wipes his eyes.

"I wish we could've done more," I say to him, "had a party or something."

"Oh, it was a good day," he says, a few flecks of wood still in his hair. "A real good day." A moment passes, two; just enough time, I think, to make a wish. He blows out his candle. The smoke wisps toward the ceiling. "Tomorrow," he goes on, "I'll cut that stump to pieces and you'll have plenty of wood for the winter. Then, maybe we can go to that McClutchin's Hardware."

McGuckin's, I think, but don't say a word.

"You need more oil for the saw. And if I get the right size wrench, I can fix that grill."

“Door stops,” my mom adds.

“Oh yeah,” he says, “We can get some of those, too. Those are easy to put on.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I say. And I am a grateful daughter.

I strike another match, light the candle again and place it back on the mantle. It glows there until we go to bed. And tomorrow evening, after the wood is all cut, after the sun goes down and the air is cool, we can build a fire.
