

I've always found peace in the soft silence of the northern woods. My grandfather and I would walk through the woods for hours and hours, sometimes having conversations without uttering a single word. Other times, he would recite tales from his youth, having traveled the world with his family-by-choice.

He would take me from tree to tree, showing me how to identify the various species: teaching me that Hickory trees form ridges of bark in vertical patterns, sometimes overlapping, that the leaves of an Ash tree are toothed, and they alternate on its branches, that the needles of a Fir are long, soft, and flat, etc.

Sometimes, he would stop, close his eyes, and take a deep breath through his nose. He would tell me that he could smell each distinctive tree, and that the only thing more brilliant than a northern sunset is the scent of the collective individuality of this forest. Observing him, I would try the same thing. I could always smell the forest, but not the individual trees themselves. He told me that it took practice, and more importantly, patience. But I was only 10 years old back then - impatient as ever. Still, I cherished those walks.

Growing up, when autumn rolled around each year, he would look at me and ask if I was ready for our adventure. He told me that, someday, I would be an adventurer. He told me that he knew I had so much to offer the world, and that the world had so much to offer me. I would smile and nod emphatically. Whatever makes you happy, grandfather.

As the years went by, he became forgetful with age. I would ask him to explain to me yet again the difference between a Spruce and a Pine tree, even though I already knew. He struggled. I just liked hearing his voice.

One year, when I was 18 years old, he never showed up to take me camping. When I saw him at the winter's crest festival in town, I asked him why we were skipping a year. He didn't know what I was talking about.

The next year, he came by as the leaves were changing. I opened the door to see an earnest smile. "One last time," he said. I hugged him as a tear rolled down my cheek. I could feel the warmth of his heart against mine. We departed for our final adventure then and there. That night, he sat me down, looked me in the eyes, and said, "loving with your heart is knowing that even in a dark grey forest, a flower blooms in the rain, needing sun but finding joy regardless." I didn't quite understand what he meant at the time, but it felt good.

That was last year. I'm nearly 21 years old now, getting ready to pack my life away in a backpack and travel the world, just as he did decades ago.

One night, before leaving home for good, I ventured out to the woods to sleep under the stars for the night. Arriving at our usual campsite, I quickly started a fire to make some tea. I rolled a suitable stump to the fireside, took a seat, and looked up to the stars for a moment. I pulled out the wooden flute that he gifted to me last year. I felt the breeze against my skin, and I played a gentle melody of inspiration into the night sky, just as he would. I closed my eyes, and inhaled deeply through my nose, and suddenly, I understood everything. I smiled.

A campfire for one. But I didn't feel so alone.