Miles To Go

Mardelle Fortier

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I stop the old Ford, bare hands red and shivering with cold. The wind picks up speed from the frozen lake. Yet, I am grateful for these woods, so non-judgmental and so dark I can imagine anything. Their fir branches lace my weary body in a cocoon of dreams, outside time.

Snowflakes soothe my nerves, as I wander down a deserted path, winding toward the lake. How wondrous it is to be free of people, and their prodding. My parents have always insisted: You can never earn your living as a writer. Go milk the cows.

I’ve trampled through blizzards or gentle snow, falling around me in a bridal veil. Yes, I’ve stayed on the farm, fighting with scratchy hens for eggs, while staying married to storytelling.

Maybe I’d have done nothing but bake cookies and churn cream, but Grandma was a scribbler. Brushing prickly needles from watering eyes, I recall that Grandma penned her prose during long winters, when the crops had been gathered. She was the only one to nurture my writing: You can do it. Be braver than me—send stuff out.

Before she died, Grandma helped me set up a table in the attic, made of discarded crates. I could look out the window at trees...

...as I now gaze at graceful pines, laden with pure blankets, sheltering me from jeering humanity. I have always enjoyed little-trodden paths, like this. Whose path is it, whose woods? I’ve a vague recollection they belong to Mr. Lauster, from the village. At school, his daughter wore fancy duds. She sniffed at my homemade jumper, and at my poetry (“what, no cash?”). The Lausters wouldn’t be out here in the moonless dark, to know I’m trespassing, alone with the elves. Their faces twinkle in timeless dreaming shadows, shifting with the breeze.

I pull my wool coat tighter and sigh with exhaustion as my legs turn limp. Sometimes I’m tempted to trudge so far I turn numb, lose bodily aches, sink into a soft bank, and gently fall asleep. I’ve milked each day to find time
and ideas to write. I’ve had to battle for each precious egg, unique and frag-
ile. How hard it was to endure social disapproval without Grandma’s dark,
gleaming eyes. Now I stand watching the icy lake, a glassy mirror. My face is
pale, my dark eyes a smudge. I grow older. I will never be more than a minor
talent.

Slowly, I turn and gaze behind me at the vanishing path. Snow covers
my footprints—yet they remain, as do the few poems I’ve had accepted and
published. I’m so tired, my heavy boots drag. Yet this deep silence undis-
turbed by clocks refreshes me. Maybe by putting one foot in front of the
other, I can make it back to the car, make it home. I must keep going for
Grandma.

As my fingers stiffen, I recall Grandma when I last saw her; Sis and I
sat on her bed. I hugged her, asked my sister to mirror me. Grandma started
a plot about travellers, and looked to us—first one, then the other—to con-
tinue it. Sis did her best, though hadn’t invented a story since childhood. We
kept on, hearts pounding, till Grandma’s eyes closed.

Grandma didn’t insist, but deep down I know she wanted her story-
telling to continue. Sis is too busy with her brood of kids.

Stepping into the car, I rev the motor. It coughs, stops. I push, try
several times, groaning. Finally, I guide the ancient rattletrap down the long
country road. Barely seen in the ghostly snow, apparently eternal, it reminds
me of many old tales.

Miles to go And miles to go before I sleep

-Mardelle Fortier