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The Clearing

I refuse to go back. Call me crazy, call me sentimental, but I refuse to go back. At least this way I can remember the creek as it was, without the gray emptiness. Oh, I know it's not *really* empty. They left a few trees—those that were too stubborn to fall—and a lot of upturned earth. They left some of their equipment too, and it gathers rust in piles beneath the fallen trunk of the great oak. I guess the old oak refused to leave quietly, even though the bulldozers were more than a match for him. I like to think that, anyway. I like to believe that the woods protested the invaders and took hostage their machinery. There is some comfort in knowing that the rain tarnished the shiny metal and rendered it useless. But Technology is a cold warrior. It does not pause to mourn its dead. And the bulldozers and trucks and cranes came anyway, and removed the rest of nature's soldiers.

"They only want the pines, honey," my mother told me, and I tried to believe her, even when they started making roads for the bigger pieces of equipment to come through. I could hear them from my porch, plowing, digging, crushing. I heard the sharp breaking limbs of the maples and poplars as the blades sliced through them on their way to the desired

harvest. "They only want the pines, honey," she said, but I heard everything else fall.

It turns out that pines are valuable. They're used to make paper products. Some old lady must have known that, because she sold her property to the logging company for a good bit of money. She lives in the city somewhere, so I don't suppose she knew what the woods meant to the neighborhood kids. Especially the creek. The small, trickling creek that housed all our clubs and fantasies. My cousins and I built a whole hut there one Saturday, and it became the center of our weekend adventures. Handmade, the Hut was embedded deep into a bank, just beside a small rocky waterfall. We laced its floor with freshly cut ferns and bound the roof with the laurel that tangled and twined its way up the hill side. Heath carved our initials into the huge beech tree that stood proudly just a few yards from the creek's edge, and Fern Valley became ours.

We didn't know about the old lady who legally owned our portion of the woods. We didn't even know that a creek could be owned. No one had ever bothered to trim the mountain laurel or plant the ferns in nice, neat rows. No one picked the dandelions that grew, untended, along the banks. We knew the creek didn't need us, but we cared for it anyway. Justin monitored the crawfish and gave population reports. We'd spend hours trying to catch the tricky devils, as they backed easily away from our grasping hands, pinching our fingers with their tiny claws. Heath and I made

small paths through the thick, winding mountain laurel, and Katie gingerly freed leaves and twigs from the waterfalls, making sure that the water stayed quick and clear. When we were thirsty, we drank from the creek. When we were hot, we swam. And when we were tired, we slept beneath the shade of the great oak.

When the men started loading the pines onto their trucks and driving them out of the woods and onto the highway, I couldn't stand it. I hung around. I pestered. Careful to avoid Mom's eagle eye, I'd slip out of the house and towards the roaring machinery. "Look, kid," the men would say, as I stood, hands on hips, watching them tear out the only remaining holly. "We're just doin' our job. That's all." But I wondered if they knew just what their job was doing.

Mom said they came for the pines, but they took everything. The clear-cutting went on for weeks, and then the wood that had once surrounded our house was left to rot. When the rubbled remains of the hardwoods became too crowded, the fires began. The smoke covered the sky for days, and then the ash filtered its way back to the earth. Everything was black.

When the smoke cleared and the trucks left, I went to inspect the damage. I went only once and I refused to go back. Black mounds of charred wood are all that is left of my forest. The only thing that retained its

natural color was that great oak, which spread its huge limbs over the one thing it had managed to take from the men. Their metal.

Since they couldn't take the creek they left it to erode. The felled trees resulted in a failed root system, and when the rains came there was nothing to stop the sediment and soil from slipping down the bank and into the water. The creek turned brown, its quick, lively path slowing and dying between the muddy, crumbling banks. The dandelions were gone. The ferns, crumbled. My cousins and I paid a solemn visit to the remains of our hut, but we didn't have to scramble through the paths in the mountain laurel. A road now led the way back home.

Now the morning brings a sunrise that begins at my window. Dad will wait on the porch to see this. He stares past the briars and brush and into the pinks and purples and reds of the early sky. Once in a while we hear a few calls of a whippoorwill. But I'm not used to all the brightness. I'm used to the woods that towered, sheltering, above the rising sun. Dad thinks it's a good trade-off—the woods for a sunrise. But I think the sky is bleeding, its crimson hue an open wound of war. We've finally managed to cut deep enough to see it.