Marshfield Dreams

Marshfield

THERE'S A TOWN called Marshfield in the state of Vermont. You can also find a Marshfield in Maine, one in Missouri,and one in Wisconsin. I grew up in Marshfield,Massachusetts. The curly part of Massachusetts that sticks out into the ocean is Cape Cod. Marshfield sits on the ocean,just above that curl.

I lived on Acorn Street in a regular house bordered by forest on two sides. Dad owned seven acres of woods in back. Across a dirt driveway we had Ale's Woods,a forest of pine trees. The pines dropped millions of needles,which gave the forest floor a nice,springy feel. Those trees were great for climbing. If I crawled out too far on a limb and fell,the soft needles cushioned my fall,so I never got hurt.

The woods held magical things. We found snake skins,real Indian arrowheads,box turtles, beehives,snake spit on tall grass. We dug up the buried trash from people who lived there many years before. We saw gravestones so old we could no longer read the names carved in them. We found all kinds of mushrooms. Some were edible, and others were poisonous toadstools. Mom said to think of them as strangers—some are good, some are bad,and since you couldn't tell the difference it was best to leave them alone. One morning in the woods I stepped into a fairy ring of mushrooms,a big circle ten feet across.

There was a tiny stream in our backyard small enough so you could step from one bank to theother. This stream flowed under the dirt driveway and formed a swamp at the edge of Ale's Woods. I loved the dank smell of that swamp and all the things that lived there: mossy logs and goggle-eyed frogs,bloodsuckers and eels and foul-smelling skunk cabbage. Half the swamp was underwater,and the other half contained thick, dense mud. It was impossible to walk through that muck without getting stuck. More than once I tried and left behind one of my sneakers,a lost sole sunk forever at the bottom of the swamp. I got in trouble for that. But today I'm glad to know that something of mine was left behind in Marsh-field.

Here is my story.

Junior

AS THE OLDEST of nine,I was named after my father and my grandfather. Some kids on Acorn Street teased me,calling: "Hey,Juuuu-nioooor!" not that I minded. I liked having the same name as my father,but it did cause confusion in the house.

Whenever Mom called out,"Ralph!" Dad and I would both answer,"Yeah?"

"No,Big Ralph!" or, "Little Ralph!" she yelled back,to clarify things. I guess that would have annoyed some people,but it didn't really bother me. Dad was tall and handsome. I bragged to my friends that my father was so cool he had three jobs: teacher,milkman,bartender. I was proud of him. I loved knowing that Ralph could fit us both in one snug syllable.

Statue

BY THE TIME I was three I already had a brother, Jimmy,who was a year younger than me. My sister Elaine was a year younger than Jim. Dad worked as a traveling book salesman,and Mom took care of us when Dad was away. Dad came home on Friday nights. On Saturdays,after breakfast,the whole family would play outside.

As soon as I saw Mom and Dad coming out the door,I'd get excited and run to the big boulder in the front yard. We were about to play my favorite game,Statue. I arranged my body in a certain pose and froze. Then I closed my eyes,waiting. My heart beat faster as they came closer.

"What's this?" Dad asked.

"It looks like a statue!" Mom said. She had Jimmy and Lainie in the stroller and pushed them closer.

"A statue of a little boy!" Dad exclaimed. "It's beautiful! It's absolutely perfect! Amazing!"

Mom knelt to touch my nose. I could feel the eyes of my whole family studying me closely. Jimmy laughed. The baby just stared.

"A little boy carved in stone!" Mom exclaimed. "You think we could buy it?"

"Hey look!" Dad said. "There's a price tag right here on the sleeve!"

I remained absolutely still,barely breathing, while Dad examined the invisible tag.

"How much?" Mom asked impatiently. "How much is it?"

"It's a lot—one hundred dollars!" Dad told her. "But who cares? It's worth every penny! I'd pay five hundred dollars for a statue like this! I'd pay a thousand!"

I tried hard not to smile.

"Excuse me,madam," Dad said to baby Lainie. "Is this your store? My wife and I would like to buy this statue here. A hundred dollars? Certainly. Here you go. Ten,twenty thirty forty fifty sixty seventy eighty ninety one hundred. What? Ship it? No,no thank you. We'll just put it in our car and drive it home."

He handed Lainie to Mom and picked me up. With me in his lap,stiff as a board,he sat on the boulder. Mom sat beside him. Dad pretended to turn on the car ignition.

"Drive carefully," Mom said. "We don't want the statue to get damaged."

"Don't worry," Dad replied, while turning the steering wheel. He pretended to park the car. "Here we are."

"Where should we put the statue?" Mom asked.

"I've got the perfect place for it," he said. "Right here in our front yard."

"How wonderful," Mom exclaimed. "We've got two boys,but I've always wanted another."

"Look at the detail on the face." Dad bent down to examine me closely. "It almost looks alive!"

That was my cue. Slowly,I lifted my chin and looked up,first at my father,then at my mother.

"My goodness!" they shouted. "He's alive!"

Hugs! Kisses!

"It's a real boy!" Dad exclaimed. "Would you like to live with us?"

Shyly,I nodded. With more hugs and kisses, they welcomed me into the family.

"It's a miracle," Dad kept saying. "An absolute miracle."

Excerpted from Marshfield dreams by Ralph Fletcher.
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