

My Beloved Lumberjack

Christie Wilkins

University of Michigan Biological Station
English 317. Environmental Writing and Great Lakes Literature
August 14, 2009
Prof. Keith Taylor

I grant the Regents of the University of Michigan the non-exclusive right to retain, reproduce, and distribute my paper, titled in electronic formats and at no cost throughout the world.

The University of Michigan may make and keep more than one copy of the Paper for purposes of security, backup, preservation and access, and may migrate the Paper to any medium or format for the purpose of preservation and access in the future.

Sign~

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'CW', written in a cursive style.

Christie Wilkins
ENG 317
August 13,2009

My Beloved Lumberjack

The nodules on my dad's thyroid weren't just nodules. They were cancer. It's been a year since the diagnosis shook our family with the reminder of how those diagnoses can end.

My dad is a simple man. His everyday outfits are t-shirts, random (usually free) baseball caps, jeans that are at least as old as the cabin and flannels missing either buttons or their bottom halves. When we are gathered in the living room together, he jokes that we are in Tibet because of all the yaks in the place. My dad is responsible for my love of flannel and beards. He's also responsible for making me believe I am indestructible. He finds happiness in living day by day surrounded by his family.

It was almost a year later when I visited my parents for the weekend this summer. My mom e-mailed me and said that she and my dad were going to be up north, so I decided to drive south on old 27 to the sandy two tracks known as "Bear Road" to meet them. We bought our land in Frederic ten years ago when it was completely wooded and, as my dad would say, you couldn't walk more than two feet without running into a tree. Now it's a little blue shack in the woods with our attempts at a yard left to turn into wild daisy patches. At our house downstate, pines on the east and a field to the north border us, but there is still the busy Clark Road out the front window. At our cabin in Frederic, we trade the busy main road of our home in Bath for the narrow two tracks where the only traffic is our neighbor down the road or the infrequent passing of an ATV.

Christie Wilkins
ENG 317
August 13,2009

Last summer we wouldn't have been at the cabin much. My mom was healing. My older sister was working 80-hour weeks. I just graduated high school. Last summer is when we first found out something wasn't right at my dad's checkup with our family doctor. When Dr. Messenger felt my dad's throat he knew things were out of the ordinary. What he felt were the malignant nodules. My dad was scheduled to see a specialist immediately. The thyroid may be a small organ but it produces the hormones responsible for regulating all aspects of your metabolism. Thanks to Dr. Messenger's sense of the abnormalities in my dad's neck, my dad was referred to a specialist. At the appointment with the new doctor they did a needle biopsy on my father and after his first appointment with the new specialist, it was clear that they needed to perform surgery. This surgery would give them a chance ,to distinguish whether or not it was cancer that they could feel on his throat.

My parents signed for our land in Frederic ten years ago during the winter. When they first saw where our cabin would be the snow banks were a foot above their thick snowmobiling boots. Before illness jaunted our seasonal routine, most of our time spent in our humble cabin was in the winter. We spend the summers preparing for waist deep snow and cold cabin floors.

Last summer it wouldn't have mattered if we prepared for the winter. My dad was too weak to do much, other than bum around the house. When the first snow fell he was still healing from the incisions of the surgeries that removed the nodules. His first surgery, on the Tuesday I started my first college classes, was only a biopsy.-At that time the doctors told my mom that it didn't-look like cancer. They were unable to do the

Christie Wilkins
ENG 317
August 13, 2009

biopsy of the tissue during surgery, so we waited to hear the results about what was growing on his throat. It was after this surgery that the doctors knew it was cancer and scheduled to take out the rest of his thyroid for the following Friday.

Less than 24 hours after my dad had been sent home from the hospital they called and told my family that it was cancer. I was called shortly after. My dad's voice, hardly audible from the surgery that had stretched his vocal cords, was pleading with me to stay strong, not to cry. He needed us to be strong for him. Hearing that sentiment from his end is rare. I told him that I loved him and then my mom's voice returned to the receiver. She told me that another surgery had been scheduled for Friday morning to remove the rest of the thyroid and to see where else the cancer spread. My mom arranged for one of my childhood friends to pick me up after my last class on Thursday so that I could be home for the surgery scheduled for Friday morning.

The second surgery removed what was left of the thyroid and the surrounding lymph nodes. This second surgery performed on my dad is known as a total thyroidectomy. They scraped some tissue from his vocal cords, which meant his voice would be a low whisper at best, until his nerves had settled back into place. It was easy to tell that it hurt him to talk, so my mom, my brother and I tried to dominate conversation post-surgery. My mom was able to bring my dad home the following Saturday afternoon. This would be his last surgery, with a plethora of tests to follow. The loss of this tissue also meant a loss of natural thyroid hormones for my dad's body. He will take a hormone supplement for the rest of his life that controls secondary growths and fills the natural void of thyroid-produced hormones.

Christie Wilkins
ENG 317
August 13,2009

My dad's situation began to turn around shortly after the first PET scan last October. It was after this scan that he was allowed to begin taking his medication again because whatever thyroid tissue was left, was destroyed during the radioactive iodine procedure. His body, unable to regulate itself, wasn't functioning properly and he gained weight throughout the configuration of his medications. Even the smell of his feet, which usually drove anyone in the family to bury their head in a pillow, was absent. Each time my dad has a PET scan he has to go without his medications which causes a wave of difficulties for him. The worst for him was staying out of his barn and being told he was essentially on bed rest. Even if they had allowed him to busy himself, I doubt he could have made the trip to his barn. My brother even joked with my dad once not to pick up a part while they were working on my brother's car because he thought his head would fall off. His incision, about 5 inches across at the base of his throat was swollen and red from being opened up twice in the same week. I saw that scar each time I looked at him during his recovery. Our family wanted the scar to fade so that the cancer could do the same in our minds.

Just when it seems he's adjusted to his dosage to help regulate what his thyroid once controlled, there's always a PET scan to check on whether or not the cancer has progressed. Towards the end of last October, he was able to sweat for the first time since his surgeries. It seemed strange that he would be happy to rake the leaves of our twin maples by himself, but being able to keep busy is what really made him happy. My dad's sweat was the sweet scent of recovery, I suppose. All of my dad's PET scans since just after the surgeries until mid-June were clear. Then in June he had to be off his

Christie Wilkins
ENG 317
August 13,2009

medications again, at the mercy of the radiation pill. With the go ahead from the doctor, my dad is back on his medications and back to some sense of nonnalcy. Healthy enough to busy around the house and barn, his ability to do the same at the cabin is a sigh of relief for our family.

My parents made one trip to the cabin last winter, but without the usual haul of snowmobiles or snow gear. My mom was concerned about the cabin; no one had been there in months and she convinced my dad to get away for a night or two.

On this weekend my dad's goal was to build up the woodpile. I remember when the piles used to stretch 30 feet long, three cords deep. My mom would rather we didn't cut the trees that were still living. My dad always asks her, "You want to stay warm this winter?"

He started cutting on two dead trees on the south side of our cabin at my mother's request. She hoped that her beloved birch would grow better without being impeded upon by the two immature poplar trees. Perhaps she'd, rather see the peeling paper white bark of the birch than the tiresome gray of the poplars. My mom, who my dad called his primary care giver, was the Qne-who saved him. Saving the birch for her is probably a sort of repayment in his mind.

My dad using his Jeep-like 1976 International Scout that was first a snow pusher that became a wood hauler and a chain, pulled the ironwood around the birch my mom wanted to conserve. Later, I held a wedge of the ironwood while I talked to my dad under the lean-to that came from the back of my mom's parent's garage. He proposed that the

Christie Wilkins
ENG 317
August 13,2009

tight rings of this tree are what make it so difficult to drop. He'll commemorate the tree's opposition by turning the saved wedge into a knife handle.

My dad, feeling the best he had in a year, was relishing in the fact that he could sweat and taste again. Both things the treatment for his cancer had taken away from him. Things that I had never thought about losing until it happened to him. The night before at dinner my dad had even said he would rather lose his vision than his taste. His favorite meal is a hamburger and fixings, and he was elated that he could taste something other than sour candy (which at one point was even a diluted taste at best).

The ironwood lay on the ground cut up into logs of nearly equal length, and my dad started the Scout so that we could move the logs to dry before wintertime. I heard the engine and immediately jumped in the back, my feet on top the left side bench that lined the modest truck bed and held onto the rusty rooftop bar that held the extra plowing and trail lights. My brother and I always rode like this, one of us standing on each bench; only now I can reach farther on the bar than my tiptoes ever could push me in the past ten years. My dad, a former tow truck driver among many other unusual jobs, likes driving in reverse and sometimes I think he might be just as good in both forward and reserve gears. When the gear shifted from park and we lurched forward, I was confused. The snowplowing blade came unnecessarily close to the outhouse, and not seeing my mom anywhere, I began to laugh. I can only imagine the smile my dad had on his face as he chuckled to himself; even after 23 years of marriage he still finds it hilarious to push my mom's buttons. Unable to open the door of the outhouse much further than to stick an arm out, my mom promptly gave my dad "the bird." I laughed so hard my stomach

Christie Wilkins
ENG 317
August 13,2009

popped the top of the cab of the Scout in and out as we shifted gears and headed to the fallen tree.

It's great to see these two joking with one another, no longer preoccupied by the disease. They've taken care of each other all through their marriage, but this time was more serious than a cold. My dad is great at making a cold seem like the end of the world, though. If his nose runs, she makes homemade chicken noodle soup. If she cries, he holds her until she forgets why her eyes are wet. There's always been something deeply admirable about their marriage - they are truly in love with each other and have been since my mom was 16. I hope they always will be.

Once to the tree, my dad and I hurled the logs into the back of the Scout. My dad picked up one that had bounced off the truck bed and he saw his rusty, chipped yellow-blue toy had a new dent in it. He's driven that little truck all over our few acres of land and moved piles of snow taller than our cabin, sometimes on one cylinder alone. Seeing that his maneuver to not damage the birches earlier in the day had actually caused his truck the harm, he was bummed. Using an ironwood log, we couldn't pop the dent out and decided to work on it later.

After unloading the ironwood, we sat on the picnic table that my brother and I helped our dad build shortly after the cabin was erected. He was trying to tell me about a dead tree he had found. I couldn't quite figure it out where on the property he was talking about, so I followed my dad to the tree. He moves quickly in the woods, and I had to run to keep up with him. We stopped and looked at the tree. Seemingly held up by the branches of the living tree, a dead elm stood next to a double trunked maple. Fearing the

Christie Wilkins
ENG 317
August 13,2009

elm would come crashing down on my brother's log cabin built years ago, he tapped it with his hand and walked away. "Better leave it to nature." It's too bad though, he's the one who taught me that elm burns long and hot - perfect for fires in the middle of winter.

Our family may never know why my dad had thyroid cancer. The common belief in medicine is that thyroid cancer forms because of radiation exposure or genetic reasons. Neither factor explains my dad's diagnosis, but our family is forever grateful that his cancer was discovered before it was given the chance to grow. Our family is lucky that Dr. Messenger felt the nodule on my dad's thyroid early.

With everything that has passed over our family in the past year, it is no surprise that changes have come about. From what I've seen, he values his family and the time that he spends with us more. While the cancer didn't change his life completely, it was enough to steer it in a new direction. His feet are back to their indescribable scent, but I've never been happier to have that smell invade my nostrils. As long as it's because of his feet, it's okay by me.

The logs are stacked in neat rows, drying until they'll be split this fall. It's likely that the young guns will have to come up to the cabin and do some chopping for him. After our day of father and daughter lumberjacking he told me his body hurt. He's still learning how to do all the things he once did without his thyroid. Us young guns will keep helping though, with the hopes that we will get to come play in the snow with the man who we've jokingly called a polar bear. I'll continue to help so that this winter I can hang my toes over the edge of the couch and nap lulled by my dad's snores while the woodstove warms me from the bottom up.

Christie Wilkins
ENG 317
August 13,2009

The logs of the last tree were stacked and my dad told me it was break time. The cancer changed his body physically and mentally. His new "outlook" is something he will even talk to you about if he's in the mood. After we unloaded the wood, he was in that kind of mood.

We sat in two plastic white lawn chairs under the big maple in the center of our "yard." He told me how the past year had changed him, other than his fluctuation in weight and appearance. He eXplained to me that material things are frivolous, and that he never saw himself as a material person (the family didn't either). They were meaningless, these "things." He told me they were only two things that mattered to him now. Counting on his hand, holding out his thumb, he said, "One. My family" We are his first priority, the only thing that matters to him the most. And then,"Two. Getting myself out of bed the next day." As weak as he was, getting out of bed'really was a feat for him. I can understand why this is important. It's all about getting another day, being able to wake up and have another day with the people of his number one. He then told me, "Christie, if it weren't for you kids, I wouldn't be alive. If I wouldn't have started a family I would have died."

I haven't stopped thinking about that since he said it. I hope he knows that he is just as important to us. Hanging from the branch behind our heads was the gift my brother made for my dad years ago redneck wind chimes, complete with Budweiser cans as the part that create the noise when blown in the wind. Another branch holds the hummingbird feeder. I don't know what it is about hummingbirds, but everyone in my family loves to watch them. Maybe catching a glimpse of them, despite their speed, is an

Christie Wilkins
ENG 317
August 13,2009

accomplishment. Maybe it the buzz of their wings as they zoom past your ears. While my dad and I talked, we listened to the buzz as the tiny birds made their way from the feeder and back up to the pine tree again and again.