

The Spaces Between Trees

The summer my parents took us West was long and short all at once. Heading ultimately to Alaska, I didn't think it would be Canada that would make the lasting impression.

British Columbia was wide open. Glaciers glistened like seas of diamonds, while giant shards of blue ice held them together. The clouds never got in the sky's way, allowing the blue to reign. Another blue, one that hardly seemed real even as you walked in it, was the water. I knew the blue of the Caribbean sea well, but I never thought I would find it this far north. It's electric and smooth. It sits at the base of the mountains, creating an oasis that only seems appropriate for fairytales. The mountains above it stand tightly together and watch attentively as you drive by. Their heads hold caps of white snow that drizzle down the sides, seemingly close, even through the fogginess of a few hundred miles. At the time I'd never seen snow before, and I wanted nothing more than to touch it. I hoped we'd get closer. I wanted to be a part of the mountains, and the unbreakable force they had together.

You don't realize how deep your are in these mountains until you feel your ears pop, or look at the road and can't see a mile ahead because it's draped over a steep drop. They stand huddled together, as if for warmth and create a fence all around you that seems like nothing can break through. The day we spent the longest among the watchful mountains was the day we realized how dangerous their beautiful heights were.

The sun flickered through the tall pines as we drove on a ridge alongside a cliff of green and wild flowers. Wildlife was always just outside the car window. But a massive grizzly bear

was much more of a sight than the smaller black bears we'd seen since our trip began. With our shouts and giggling filling the car, my dad attempted a quick u-turn to get us another glimpse. But in that turn the edge of the road inched nearer, and the mountain tripped us up. No one screamed or gasped. Although, my mom was cursing my father's name. Our suitcases slid and slammed to the right side of the car. The next second we were halfway hanging on the edge of the asphalt road, and halfway peering down at a near vertical slope of the mountain that threatened to drag us down. Our car teetered.

We immediately got out and were relieved that the car was now stuck, not sliding down into the forest that seemed endless. I looked down into the chaotic maze of bark and leaves. The trees stood tall and close, like an army that's prepared for the worst. Their branches reached out to one another. We probably wouldn't have slid too far, had we gone down, I thought. The trees would have caught us. The spaces between them even seem undeterred. Like a invisible barrier where nothing could pass.

Out there amongst those trees and mountains and no phone reception, I was sure it would be hours if we saw someone, even more for someone who decided to stop. I was scared, and not optimistic. In a few minutes someone drove up, and they stopped immediately. The first man pulled over hastily. He was polite and concerned, and made sure we were okay. A few seconds later another vehicle stopped. Then another. Then another. No one, not a single car passed us without pulling over, or asking if we needed help. Within a few minutes, a semi was pulled over in front of us. A towering man of middle age, a beer belly and curled gray beard laughed at the pickle we non-locals had gotten ourselves into. "Hell, but I've seen it many times before," he smiled before pulling out a rope out of the truck.

My siblings and I stood by idly as we watched our parents, the truck driver and three other samaritans tow our big red suv back onto the road. Honestly, I was much more concerned about the grizzly we'd seen only a few dozen yards away. But when yet another local pulled over for us, her story distracted me from my bear-fear. Her voice was rough and her boots mud covered. "It happens all the time," she said with deep pitiful brown eyes. Sandy blonde hair cupped the sides of her face as she folded her arms before she spoke. "There was a family out here about a year ago who had the same thing happen. They just weren't so lucky." She looked down into the forest. "Car went down, and they got pretty banged up. The mother didn't make it." We all stared in silence for a moment, in disbelief as she ended the story. At twelve years old I think I was waiting for her to laugh and say "I'm just kidding!" But she shook her head slowly as if to confirm. "We gotta help each other out here," she sighed. "You don't know what could happen if you don't."

I've never been anywhere since where I've seen so much concern in people's eyes. Where compassion takes them over out of fear. Out of experience. Out of knowledge of what might happen if that compassion isn't there. British Columbia was a place where it's people knew that if they didn't look out for each other, they wouldn't get by. The land was unforgiving and they knew that. I don't know if that woman knew the truck driver who pulled our car up, but before she left she grabbed his hand and held it for a moment, as if to thank him. They smiled at each other. I watched their hands meet and thought back to the trees and how their branches reached out for each other. Like the forests that surrounded them, the spaces between them weren't really spaces at all. Just a barrier that you can't see from the outside. Here it's a barrier that keeps each other from falling through.