

## Lessons From the Shore

My friends and I were bouncing out of the boat before it even bumped its nose against the shore. The map said the treasure would be buried at Kettle Creek Beach. This had to be the right place: halfway between Kettle Creek and the Barnegat Bay, on the same side of the creek as the lagoon I lived on, no bigger than a backyard, and marked by a regal red, yellow, and blue jungle-gym.

We hurled ourselves into the water and soldiered through the squishy, detrital sediment that swallowed up our water shoes. There! Where the sandy, untamed shoreline met the piling bolstered dirt parking lot, X marked the spot. We clawed at the sand with the kind of enthusiasm and dedication only children possess. Gasps rang out as we reached into our trench and lugged out a salt soaked, wooden treasure chest.

“We’re gunna be on the news!”

“We’re gunna be rich!”

The chest opened with a moan and revealed heaps of gold nuggets, shimmering in the bright sun of June. My friends yelped with delight. Some sifted the shiny chunks of gold through their fingers as if they had won the jackpot in Atlantic City. Others began shoving nuggets down their sandy bathing suits.

Days before, my dad had spray-painted rocks from my backyard metallic gold. He had made the treasure map of our riverine Jersey Shore neighborhood by tinting paper and burning the edges. And, mere hours before its dramatic discovery, he buried the treasure chest at the bay-front park in my neighborhood. It was the best birthday party a nine year old ever had.

*Pinus rigida*, the rigid pine, the Pitch Pine, is the gatekeeper of Coastal New Jersey. With each tree boldly outstretched to absorb the scorching sun, a battalion of Pitch Pines lines every mile of the Garden State Parkway. When I return from my travels, the Pines direct me to this familiar

runway of pavement and open their spindly arms as I coast home. The Pines and I share a smirk at squawking Bennys (infamous tourists from Bayonne, Elizabeth, Newark, or New York). The trees' prickly salutes remind visitors that, despite some imposter palm trees and tropical bars, these tourists tread on the Jersey Shore, a place like none other.

The Pitch Pine is the heartiest and most underappreciated faunal denizen of the Jersey Shore. Call it ugly, call it scrubby. Hack it back and plant prissy flowers and tamed shrubs and the Pitch Pine will smirk at you, too. No insult or injury can wrench away the seed that makes the tree so important. In its humble cones and homely bark, the tree holds the irrepressible and ever blooming spirit of the Jersey Shore and its true admirers.

A bystander would pity the Pitch Pine, as I once did, thinking that it drew the ugly straw in the evolution of the Earth's species. It's an awkward tree, irreverently thrusting its trunk and branches in every which angle as it grows. Too impatient to wait for new branches to form, green gangly sprouts shoot out directly from the deep gashes in the tree's armored, ashen bark. Golden-green needles, in bundles of three, and spear-tipped cones crowd together wherever there is opportunity to grow.

Its less than graceful design however, is in fact, all by design. Millions of years ago, on the cusp of being one species or another, the tree did something really brash; it evolved to *embrace* the New Jersey wildfires that scorched other, more sissy species. The callous, plated bark protects its gut from scorching. The anxious sprouts that manifest themselves all over the trunk (and make the tree look so peculiar) do so to quicken healing after fire. Its porcupine cones are triggered by the heat of wild fires and explode like grenades to release seeds (which ensure offspring survival even if Mama Pine really is toast). Pitch Pines will even sacrifice tall stature above ground to concentrate their survival efforts below ground. When I visit Warren Grove's Pygmy Pines, though

I am in the middle of the forest, I can see for miles. All of pines there have dwarfed to only three or four feet above ground so that they can create a vast stronghold underground.

Wildfires only solidify the Pitch Pine's dominance; each time the tree is scorched, it answers by bursting into even greater bloom. I swear it should be the state tree.

I was raised by a Pitch Pine. My dad, George Nicholas Campbell, is in his early fifties now, but he still has the same crooked grin that he wears in the faded pictures of him at thirteen, manning his first 16-foot mahogany Lynman boat and at sixteen, winning his regional wrestling tournament. His smile and his laughing aqua blue eyes are set in an amiable round face. He still has a full head of ruffled brown hair; though, it hardly compares to the Greg Brady doo he sported in the seventies. He's as stocky as his Scottish last name (which made him the perfect Santa Claus at my grade school Christmas parties) though he's held on to the muscular limbs of his youth. Like the Pitch Pines open their arms to me as I drive home, my dad always catches me in a bear hug and says, "Oh, my Caiti girl."

He is unendingly patient, cheerful, and selfless. It looks like I've lucked out, that the universe randomly granted my father such cool disposition. But, like the Pitch Pine, my dad's nature is no accident; it is the fruition of a lifetime of burning and blooming.

George was born the third of four brothers. His father and mother, who married young and had little money, divorced when my dad was still in grade school. Though this grandfather I never knew made an initial effort, visiting, from time to time, in a Cherry Red Corvette from Surf Chevrolet where he worked, child support demanded enough money to drive him to the West Coast where he'd hide the rest of his life. My dad and his brothers were left to make ends meet: exploring for glass bottles to cash in and accepting shoes from teachers as my grandmother tried to stretch her bookkeeper salary. When my dad recalls these times, however, he always highlights

the positive: how he and his brothers had fantastic adventures dumpster diving and how sympathetic teachers, charmed by his optimistic smile, let him get away with almost anything.

My grandmother remarried and had one more son, and finally, a baby girl sixteen years my dad's junior. George's stepfather, a former boxer with a penchant for liquor and violent displays of authority, turned out to be just another scalding entity in my dad's life. A junior in high school, my dad came home one night, after winning his State Wrestling Championship, to a world ablaze. Drunk again, his stepfather had locked his mom in the bathroom and was speaking his mind with his fist. When George tried to intervene, his stepfather swung a punch at him too. He dodged it, and, pinning to the fuming creep to the floor said, "you won't ever touch my mom again! Get out of this house and don't ever think about coming back!".

Though I never saw it happen, the scene is engrained in my mind—maybe because of the way my father shakes when he recalls it, perhaps because I've never seen my dad hurt, or even yell at anyone. Really, this scene stands out because I am amazed that my dad went through a life like that and grew to be the warm and coolheaded father I know—a dad who threw fantastic birthday parties, who takes my family and friends out for days on the ocean, and who only gets upset when my sister and I hurt my mom's feelings or his boat.

Most would let a tough adolescence like my father's burn their hearts to a bitter crisp, but my dad is a Pitch Pine. He decided, during those tender years when he was on the cusp of being one kind of person or another, that being impervious to the trials of life that char everyone else would be exactly where he would triumph.

Once, picked out as another white, middle-aged male, my dad was let go for corporate restructuring. "We know George," they told him, "that you are a marketable employee—that you will find success in another job." My dad tells me that he nodded and smiled. "Don't worry about me," he said with what I imagine was a shrug and friendly gesture. "I feel sorry for you all! You're

in this mess". He, of course, found another job, a better job. He smirks at what life throws at him and each time it burns his bark, he only grows again with his roots even deeper established.

I think of my father and the seed of wisdom he has nurtured as I drive through my familiar haunts of the Jersey Shore. My right hand taps on the steering wheel while my left arm hangs out of the window to soak in the sun and hug the breeze. I drive over the Manasquan Bridge and watch as the sea glass green bay stretch out before me and feel the seams of the concrete road create a familiar rhythm beneath me. As I maneuver the winding marsh roads near Atlantic City, I watch the swaths of salt grass as they shiver in the wind and pause to see how the setting sun frames the soft glow of the casinos and hotels in the distance. I cock my head at the abandoned boats and shacks dotting the way to Long Beach Island; I know each has a story. I wish I could know them all.

The sun dipped closer to the horizon so we returned to my house for birthday cake and goodie bags. As my friends compared their booty and shrieked with delight, I looked up at my dad, the real treasure of my life, with a triumphant, gaping smile. Of all that my father has given to me, it is the lesson he never spoke aloud that impacted me the most. He taught me to appreciate and seek to understand everything around me. You see, the Pitch Pine is just one of the hidden gems in my life. If I look close enough, wherever I go and whatever I encounter, a piece of golden wisdom will await me.