

Place in Mind
Spring 2014
By Sarah Kilch Gaffney

Toward the end of a long Maine winter, my husband Steve and I bought our first house. We were young and short of cash, so we were unable to realize our dream of an idyllic homestead complete with an extensive woodlot, fields, and burbling stream. What we did find, however, was a snug little house with a sizable yard and a few acres of woods. An expansive marsh abutted the property, which was a two-fold blessing: it made our property affordable and gave us a fascinating environment to start exploring. As the world hovered on the edge of spring, we signed the papers and moved in.

When the snow receded, we found piles of asphalt shingles, countless motor oil containers, beer bottles, and other relics of the previous owner interspersed among the trees. But we also discovered peepers, which produce a symphonic wall of sound around the house each spring, and both painted and snapping turtles, which came to the yard to lay eggs. The marsh simply teemed with life: birds, insects, frogs, and sometimes the yips of coyote pups from the woods beyond.

We cleaned up the trash and planted apple trees, rhubarb, and asparagus. Each year the vegetable garden expanded a little more. We brushed out a path through the woods and our border collie burned her own track through the trees, connecting with the main path here and there. In the winter, the dogs bounded across the frozen marsh, delirious with the freedom of an unhindered run. We found pitcher plants, their intricately veined flesh frozen in the ice, wild cranberries, and beaver lodges taller than our heads. The woods were full of hemlock and cedar, with birch lining the yard, alder edging the marsh, and here and there maple, fir, and oak.

Then, at the age of 27, Steve was diagnosed with a brain tumor. It was large, challengingly located, and incurable. His doctors gave him five to ten years, if lucky, and our world spun to a halt. Treatment after treatment left him exhausted and, eventually, permanently disabled. Soon, favorite activities like backpacking, long hikes, and maintaining our section of the Appalachian Trail were things of the past.

As we adjusted to our new reality, I'd remind myself that we still had our land. On good days, Steve and I could walk down the path hand in hand; on bad days, I knew the perfect rock on which to sit and get away from the world.

When our daughter Zoe was born, our perception of what is truly important changed. Our focus became accepting and tackling the difficulties of Steve's illness while embracing the time we had left as best we could. We also discovered that there are few things in this life more hopeful than a child: she embodies more hope and strength of spirit than we ever could have summoned on our own.

When Zoe was two weeks old, we bundled her close to my chest and took her snowshoeing through the woods to the edge of the marsh. By 16 months, she insisted on

tackling our beloved path on her own two slightly trippy feet. Soon, she was on her own set of snowshoes meandering down to the marsh. One winter, following an impressive January thaw, we all traipsed out to the marsh together. It was a good day. Sprawled on our bellies, we looked down through the clearest ice I'd ever seen. There were air bubbles suspended mid-ascent, lily pads, and little fish frozen just beneath the surface. Zoe was enthralled, her eyes filled with wonder, and she threw a mighty temper tantrum when it was finally time to head back home.

Though we had only an inkling of its importance that first winter, our little piece of land has now become the backbone of our life. It keeps us grounded and happy. It feeds us, challenges us, and provides adventures and life lessons. It is a playground for Zoe (not to mention for the dogs, cats, and chickens), a work in progress, and home for all of us. Most importantly, perhaps, it is a constant in our decidedly tumultuous life. In times of crisis, there is little more comforting than the mundane, the normal: splitting wood, weeding the garden, walking to the marsh. Zoe is at the age where she asks about everything she sees, and we tell her as best we can as she wanders down the path and weaves herself between the trees: birch, hemlock, alder. Peace.