

*Approximation*

Northeast of town, Route 77 cuts through a deep ridge of Precambrian rock that once separated remote from isolated. When lumber barons needed to get at the trees on the other side, a road was dynamited through, leaving walls of greenstone embossed with old bore marks so that it appears stiff snakes had cleaved the rock. Beyond this corridor the road ribbons toward the border. After a few miles the vista grows nearly narcotic – dusty spruce and jackpine poke from scabs of sphagnum and stone erupts from the crust in a dozen stone shades. A patch of orange lichen might provide an occasional thrill, and in the few stands of old growth pine that escaped logging, holy-postcard sunlight stabs through as if blessing any cars traveling farther north.

Ten miles into the Boreal dim the road makes a drunken swale around glacial boulders, then levels where the forest thins and parts to reveal Lahti's Hobby like a startling pop-up page in a children's book.

The Hobby covers two rolling acres of green wort and fertilized clover bright as Astroturf. Forty or fifty trees of varying heights are grouped on this lawn, all meticulously clipped and coerced into tight, conical topiary, as symmetrical as if machined.

Vans loaded with campers slow at the Hobby casting canoe-shaped shadows as drivers do double takes. SUV's crawl with passengers wondering if it is a mini-golf course, if the trees are real. As odd a sight as it is, few stop to examine the Hobby or to photograph it – those headed into the wilderness are road-weary and itching to get on with their solitude, and those on their way out are hell-bent for soap showers and flush toilets.

To locals, Lahti's Hobby is merely a break in a monotonous drive, a mile-marker for the '98 washout and a trout stream kept secret from tourists. When directions are given to various trails and put-ins, one is sent either south of Lahti's Hobby, or north of it.

Alpo Lahti doesn't think much about the Hobby himself. It began as a pastime and over the years has become a daily routine of trimming and shearing that occupies him when he's not fishing. Spring is busiest, when he prunes and shapes and plants, and each autumn Alpo will introduce a few young trees, maybe a yew or an arborvitae to add texture. When one of his trees falls victim to diplodia or blister rust, he is watchful of the others, spraying with emulsions or washing them with botanical detergents. If a tree doesn't rebound in his care, he cuts and burns it, grubs the stump, ridding all traces of it.

The Hobby began after Rose passed, soon after Alpo's daughter Kelly convinced him to attend a grief support group at the community center. He went once, thinking he'd stick his head in so that he could say he'd gone without lying, but duty pressed him forward. He'd been the only male, the only widower, and the last and largest person in the door, too conspicuous to sidle away. Soon enough he was clutching a Styrofoam cup and a bear claw, surrounded by a dozen expectant faces.

The widows urged Alpo to tell Rose's story from the beginning, from diagnosis onward. As soon as he began, they began interrupting – asking how this felt or how that felt, how hearing the word *cancer* felt, how the next five months *felt*, and then, afterward, how *he* felt.

Alpo sighed. Things had to be done, Rose had to be taken care of. It was ovarian. At the plant he asked for all his vacation days and third shift. Rose's sister Sharon came from Wisconsin, parked her Winnebago near the pond and tended Rose while he worked. Toward the end they both learned how to inject, and a hospice nurse came three times a week. The kids came when they could, but Pete was in St. Paul at veterinary school, and Kelly was married with two babies.

Hoping honesty was what they wanted, Alpo admitted to the widows that he hadn't felt much of anything when she went. He wove his fingers into a hammock and told them it was only *after*, when the bed and oxygen trolley were cleared away, when it seemed something might collapse into the empty space where his wife had been. When there were no tasks to fill his hands.

As if grief was a problem to be solved, the widows faced Alpo much like a herd and offered the same solution twelve different ways. What he needed was a pastime, a hobby.

“Maybe so,” he pretended to agree, “But what?”

Anything! They offered *whittling, cabinet-making, model planes, bluebird houses, Adirondack chairs, Diamond Willow walking sticks. Marquetry.* Their suggestions were proffered in wistful or relieved tones, as if hearing echoes of their departed husbands putzing and hammering out of sight in so many basements or garages.

Caught in the small-eyed glare of Ruth Witt, an unchristian observation ticked though Alpo's thoughts – that even though Guy Witt's body or ice-house were never recovered, he maybe *was* in a better place.

He cleared his throat to lie, "Those are all fine ideas." After working indoors all day with tools in the machine shop, none of their suggestions appealed in the least.

Mrs. Huttala pointed her aluminum cane. "You should read!" she shouted, "The Bible!"

Alpo left in a lighter mood, knowing there was no need to return. If it was only a matter of a hobby, he'd find one. And though it was already there in his yard, months would pass before he realized.

In the front garden stood the blue spruce Sharon and the kids had planted in memory of Rose. When it set out its first new growth, Alpo thought it looked slightly shaggy, so he clipped away the new soft buds, careful to prune each just a quarter inch from its scaly source. The mindless repetition and rhythm of pruning was pleasant in a mindless sort of way. When he finished, the ground was covered with delicate buds, so tender he was moved to bite into one – if nothing else to see why the deer were so crazy about them. When the sun started to slide, Alpo looked at his watch to realize he'd been at it for hours. Squinting and chewing blue needles, Alpo raised a hand sticky with pitch to shield his eyes, and felt *better*, for the first time since.

The spruce looked a bit bereft centered in so much yard, so he planted a Mugho pine and a Prince of Wales juniper nearby. He ordered a few different types of fertilizers and pesticides, and recalling the taste of new spruce, surrounded his two acres with wire fence of an un-leapable height.

When his cousin Gil drove over from Blackduck to take him out for fishing opener, Alpo was busy with a fledgling cedar he was planting for Mother's Day and a little put out at being interrupted, and annoyed by the marks Gil's boat trailer was pressing into his clover.

"Lemme just finish this, Gil, then I'll put new test on my reel and we're good to go."

Gil leaned against the cab, "Only God can make a tree, Alpo, but only you would prune one with barber shears and calipers."

Alpo made no excuses for being precise – as lead machinist on his team, he had to be. If one cog on a piece of equipment his crew fabricated was a fraction of a centimeter off, it could mean an OSHA nightmare. Nobody wants dead miners on their conscience.

He customized a few garden tools, welding a pocket level to a small hedge trimmer, and since there would be no more turkeys, refitted the electric knife with a thirty-foot cord. He cut extra notches into the teeth of his handsaws to make smoother passes, less stress to the trees.

Shrubs and trees trickled in, some ordered from nurseries, others received as gifts, like the twin Scotch pines and the Frazier fir. The height of the trees was conditional – none grew beyond the sum of Alpo's height plus that of his favorite ladder – a sturdy eight-footer he saw no reason to replace.

A second mine closure meant more layoffs among Alpo's crew. Three years after that, the plant was acquired by a West Virginia outfit and moved out of state. Alpo took forced retirement with a pension cut and suddenly had nothing but time for the neat forest growing outside his window.

He jerry-rigged an old woodchipper with a pliable tube to make a mobile fertilizer spreader – the fish offal, bones and ash that went in emerged out the nozzle end as nutritious,

gross ooze the color of braunschweigert. When complimented on his green thumb, Alpo would point to his gore-crust machine, “Bullhead smoothies, nothing special.”

Alpo didn't realize what he did had a name until Section Three road just south of his driveway was surveyed and renamed. He walked down to the blacktop to watch as the sign was bolted to its post – green and white stamped letters, making it official. *Lahti's Hobby*.

He tended his trees in the early mornings before driving to town. Around ten-thirty he'd stop at the post office and then settle in at Pavola's to have his second round of coffee and read the mail and newspapers. He might stay for lunch with Chim or Ray, he might not. He'd idly listen to the shock-jocks on the boombox shaking the glass pie case, but left the fist-shaking and backtalk to the others.

When they weren't slamming plates or pouring refills, Sissy and Laurie kept those customers they liked up on local gossip and actual news. They were over forty, but didn't seem to mind being called girls, though Sissy took only a certain amount of shit from Chim before threatening to pour the next cup where it would matter, and Laurie refused to serve Big Juri Perla unless he passed her version of a breathalyzer, up on her toes.

In May, a full week went by without Alpo showing up at the café. Ray and Chim assumed he was either busy with spring pruning, or down with the flu that was plowing clear so many beds up at the nursing home. When Alpo didn't make it to Bibb Esko's retirement party, Chim tried calling, but only got a busy signal. The next morning he drove out to see if Alpo had fallen from a ladder or stroked out.

He was kneeling in the mulch under three Loblolly Pine and a black Japanese Globosa.

Chim joked to Alpo's backside, "We thought you might be shackled up out here – that maybe one of them bruisers up at The Klondyke jumped the fence for you. Laurie was all set to pool her tips to buy you a bottle of that Viagra."

Alpo answered through the twine in his teeth, "Yeah well. Shackled up I'm not." He backed out, holding a cluster of needles. "Godammit."

"What's the problem?"

"Problem is I don't know what the problem is." He moped perspiration from his eyes. "Think Sissy's cousin down at the library would show me how to use that Internet? I have to look up some blights. There's nothing in my books."

Alpo sat among children in the library and learned to push a mouse. A girl who didn't come up to his shirt pocket showed him how to navigate the web. In a few days he was surfing and emailing without much fumbling. He spent afternoons researching diseases and molds, picking up bits of Latin along the way.

Erv from County Extension came out and the two of them lay on their backs aiming flashlights along the trunks. Erv couldn't guess what might cause them to ooze a thin, odorless brown syrup.

"Hell, Alpo, most of these aren't native species. Probably one of 'em imported something viral."

Within a week, the needles closest to the trunk of every tree in the Hobby suddenly turned yellow. His trees were failing from the inside out.

Kenny Odegaard from the DNR was no help at all, only offered to spray for pine beetles, which there wasn't a one of. Les Klun the section ranger suggested a Dendrologist. When Alpo

finally found one, in Winnipeg, the man refused to speculate over the telephone, only demanded needle and trunk samples. Alpo felled his sickest tree and packed needles and thin rounds of trunk into a Fed Ex mailer. The results could be either a week, the Dendrologist told him, or six.

There wasn't that kind of time. Fearing the worst, Alpo borrowed Ray's camera and took pictures of the Hobby from several different angles. He wanted a record, at least. But none of the shots were frame-able. Juri Perla took some wobbly video that wasn't great either.

The three of them were on their elbows at Pavola's when Tom Maki came out of the mens, hitching his belt, "Damn, Alpo, you weren't this long-faced when Rose was sick."

After a taut second, Ray swiveled. "Shut your trap, Maki, or you'll be shitting your teeth tomorrow."

Alpo held Ray's sleeve, "You got a plastic hip and twenty years on him, Ray."

"He insulted you."

"Nah. He's just got a big mouth and is stupid enough to says what he thinks."

They watched Tom launch out the door to bumble around the woman coming in. Meg Machutova just managed to squeeze past and open the door, shaking her head.

Chim sniffed. "That painter lady. Watch now, two bits says she don't say boo."

She waved her dollar at Laurie, set it on the till and reached under the counter to get her *Chicago Tribune*. Joe Pavola special-ordered city newspapers for summer people and for Meg, who was almost a local, in hopes he'd sell them breakfast as long as they were in the café. A few stuck around for a meal, but most only bought a coffee to go. Those fetching the *New York Times* did neither.

Joe blamed his own regulars, sometimes coming out from behind the grille to shake his cleaver, "Jesus, can't you be a *little* friendly? Staring just scares folks."

Just as she was leaving, Meg nodded at Alpo, saying, “Hey.”

Alpo nodded back, watched the door shut, turned to grin at Chim and held out his palm, “You owe me.”

“For ‘Hey’?” Chim set his Zippo on the counter and swept most of the tip meant for Sissy toward Alpo, who pushed the coins back with a disgusted sigh.

“Hell,” Juri offered from his corner, “...she was a downright friendly today. You know her much, Al?”

“Not really. I knew the old man a little. Pete went out with her one of those summers he worked at Naledi. Never brought her out to the house though.”

Ray leaned, “How’s he doing?”

“Pete?” Alpo was watching out the window as Meg crossed the street. He hadn’t thought of his son in weeks. “Couldn’t say. Maybe drinking, maybe not.”

He was waiting near her vehicle when she came out of the bank. He pointed to the left rear tire. “Could use a few pounds in that.”

“Oh, I could. Thanks, Mr. Lahti.”

“Alpo.”

Meg nodded, “Okay.”

“I saw that article – the one with the pictures. And I read that you’re living out at the resort now.”

“Uh huh. What’s left of it.”

“Well, the lodge is solid enough...shame, though. You know my Rose passed not long after your granddad did.”

“Yes. I was very sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, well, it’s coming up on twenty years now, so...” Alpo saw she was anxious and only being polite, so he got to the point. “Listen. You’re a painter, and I need a picture.”

“You do?”

“A commission. You do those?”

“Ah, depends.” She sounded doubtful. “What is it you want painted?”

“My yard. The Hobby, I guess people call it.”

Meg nodded. “I’ve driven by.”

“And I’ve only seen a few of your paintings, but what I’m looking for is more like an actual picture.” He pulled out a battered field guide and opened it to *Common Juniper*. “This is what I need, something realistic that looks real.”

“Representative?”

“Sure. Thing is, I need it quick. I’ve got some sort of blight, so I don’t know how long...”

“You want me to paint your trees?”

He shrugged. “Yeah.”

Meg looked at Alpo’s vest like she was counting the quilted squares. She nodded across a dozen or so before answering.

“All right. I’ll drive up and take a look.”

Alpo watched from his kitchen window as Meg meandered figure eights around his trees, standing back, tapping her chin. She clipped across the road where her old Cruiser tipped into the ditch and he thought, *Fine then, go.* But she only climbed up the rock shelf and stood staring at the Hobby from there.

He poured a cup of coffee and walked it out to her, easing down the ditch and up the scabble, careful of his knee.

“Well?” He held the cup up to her.

She crouched to take it, “I’d say you’re rather an artist yourself, Alpo.”

“Puh.”

“I’m serious. Come take a look from here.”

She offered a hand, but Alpo hoisted himself. Standing on the ledge, he realized he’d never seen the place from this angle, how the Hobby was set just so, surrounded by the real forest.

“I’d paint it from here. Not just your perfect trees, but how they’re framed by the others.” She grinned at Alpo, “If this was out East, it’d be on the cover of *ArtForum*.”

Meg backed her vehicle across the ditch. Once they got her easel up and leveled, she clamped on a huge drawing pad, set up a golf umbrella and squinted at Alpo’s trees. “They *seem* healthy enough. I mean, they look fine from here.”

He shouldered the tailgate shut. “Rose looked fine too, damn near to the end.”

Meg went in once for the bathroom, but otherwise kept to the ledge with her dog. At five o’clock she knocked to say she was done sketching, and would come back Tuesday with a

canvas. She could finish the painting over the next few weeks or so, depending on weather and the light.

The Winnipeg man sent his inconclusive report, a half of which Alpo could not make out, along with a bill for three hundred dollars.

Alpo couldn't fathom how a painting could take more than a few days. His trees were in stasis, not getting any better, not getting worse. Tired of waiting, he packed his pickup with a cooler and fly rods and told Meg the house didn't have a lock. "So, anytime you need the john or fridge or whatever..."

He drove on back roads, heading for streams along the big lake.

After several days of getting skunked on the Temperance and Little Manitou, he wound further north. In a nameless stream near the border he caught a rainbow trout that nearly snapped his rod. By the time he'd reeled it in, his shoulder burned and his waders were half-filled. He was barely able to slosh back to the bank. He settled the fish into a tiny pool with a sand bottom and leaned back to catch his breath.

It was a specimen – plump and bright, not a nick on it. Alpo knelt to examine its iridescent scales, knowing the color would begin to fade soon enough – would go dull once he'd thwacked it. He watched it swim circles, pulling along its ribbons of color.

When he could no longer ignore the jabbing in his knees, Alpo hefted his trophy of a fish – eleven, maybe twelve pounds – not quite a record, but certainly taxidermy-worthy. It wriggled in his grip as he held it aloft, turning it this way then that. A beaut.

Then as if watching someone else's hands doing the next thing, he eased the trout just below the surface of the river and let it slip from his hands into the current.

After he'd cleared his campsite, he backed the pickup around and rattled over the washboard toward the two-lane, aiming west and home.

Back in the Hobby, he found his trees had declined no further, just the usual brown weeping. The only sign of Meg was a one-word note left on the table; *Finished. Drying now.*

A week passed and still nothing died. The brown weeping baffled him. That it kept coming.

When Meg called to say the painting was dry and varnished, he asked her to bring it to Pavola's after lunch on Monday, just before the café closed. He knew about art openings, that there was food and definitely drink involved, so he asked Ray to pick up the beer and a few gallons of wine. Joe offered to make his little pizzas and a tray of rye and herring.

When Alpo got to the café, he was a little embarrassed at the fuss made. Streamers hung from the fluorescents. Sissy had made tree-shaped cookies and deviled eggs. Folks from places up and down Main Street stood around drinking beer or sipping Dixie Cups of wine.

The painting was propped on two chairs. Alpo barely glanced, standing just offside, listening carefully to everyone's comments, hoping they might inspire his own when it came his turn. *Pretty*, the women repeated, predictably. *Just like a photograph. It does the Hobby justice, etc.*

In lieu of an apology, Tom Maki sheepishly told Alpo he thought it was a good painting. Bertie and Sam left their squad parked with its lights twirling and came in to joke that there must

be trouble, since the café door was still open past 1:59. Bertie said his aunt was a talented painter too, but couldn't paint like that.

"It's nice..." Laurie mused in a whisper, "...that she could paint some actual place for a change."

Hal from the bait shop made everyone laugh by giving it a two-thumbs up, holding his good thumb up twice.

The party was nearly over before he really looked for himself.

It was exactly what he had asked for. More, in fact. The artistic license Meg had employed – touches of bright colors and deeper shadows, made it look as if you could step right into the Hobby.

Alpo dug the checkbook from his coat and motioned Meg to an empty booth.

"I know this isn't gonna be cheap, so don't think you're gonna shock me." He had *Googled* Meg weeks back, when links to galleries in Chicago and London led him to lists with breathtaking prices. "So, what's the damage?"

Meg shook her head. "Nothing."

She was joking, so he joked back. "I might not be from the city, but I know nothing is no price."

Meg pressed the checkbook aside. He was reminded of her granddad – that look he'd had, she got. When Vac Machutova was roused to say something, it was usually worth listening to.

"It's only a painting." Meg said.

"C'mon here, Meg I don't-."

She stopped him cold by laying her hand over his. "Pete told me what you did for Vac."

“What?”

“After Doc Klun put him in the hospital for good.”

Alpo was blinking at her hand, “I didn’t do anything.”

“Yes, you did. You got him in your truck and drove him to Naledi for a last look. You took him *fishing*.”

A vague memory clicked. “Jays, *that*?”

It had been right after Rose first fell ill – when there was too many reasons to be around the hospital for too many hours at a stretch, hanging around the halls waiting for the results of this test or that scan. Taking the old man for a ride had been selfish lark, an excuse to escape the green tile. Pete had helped, anyway.

They’d only been making small talk in the hall, Vac pulling his wheelchair along with a slippers foot, Alpo asking him about how the pike had been since the winter kill the year before. And then he looked over the old man’s head at Pete and they seemed to have got the same idea at the same time.

At the resort, he’d carried Vac down the hill while Pete managed the chair. He hadn’t weighed much by then, bony as a zipper. They wheeled him to the end of the dock. Actually Alpo had a lot on his mind that day, it was hard to keep everything about those days straight, but yes, maybe Pete did put a fishing pole in the Vac’s hand, and maybe they did sit there awhile...

It had been a pretty afternoon, he remembers that much. One of those blue and gold September days. Vac seemed glad enough to be home, if only for a couple hours. Pete got some beers from the lady staying in the lodge. They wet their lines and caught a few crappies. But that was it. When Vac started nodding Alpo worried maybe they’d worn him out.

Back at the hospital they'd snuck him through the side entrance to avoid catching grief from the nurses...

"Hell, Meg, it wasn't anything. Anybody else woulda done the same."

"But nobody else *did*." Meg's gaze swept from the swag of streamers to the empty Gallo jugs and trays where triangles of cheese had begun to curl. "This was nice..." she stood.

He supposed it was.

After she'd gone, he stayed in the booth until the party was just himself and Juri, Chim, Ray and Joe. With the door locked, they sat and drank up the rest of the bottles so Juri could take the empties for the deposit.

It hung where he could see it, above the TV. But it did not make Alpo feel the way he thought it might. It was pretty and worth a lot of money, but like she'd said, it was only a painting. Only an approximation.

Outside, the real trees of the Hobby had begun to rally. Within a month, whatever was wrong with them stopped being wrong. After they'd been examined and reexamined, Alpo stood in the middle of the Hobby turning slow circles with his arms hanging, knowing he should feel relieved.

Over the autumn, Alpo began fly-tying classes at the bait shop. Under Hal's guidance, he hunched over his tying table with scraps of fur and feather and clamped tiny hooks into his vice. By spring he'd mastered the Damsel Nymph and Irresistible Adams. He could tie Woolly Worms in his sleep, and even made up a few flies of his own. He ordered a monocle made in Switzerland.

The yellow inner needles of the trees had shed over the winter, and in spring they were replaced by plump, green growth.

Not many noticed that new buds on the trees went unclipped that spring, few remarked on the Hobby's perfection growing less perfect – that the trees seemed a little fuzzy around the edges, in need of a shave.

Several more seasons passed with Lahti's Hobby growing unrestrained. By the time Alpo tore down the deer fencing, the yard was so shaggy not a head turned or a finger pointed from the vehicles barreling north. The trees shot up quickly – or maybe it just seemed quickly to Alpo when he compared the view out the east window to the painting hanging near it.

Soon his trees were brushing unruly branches against one another – reaching up and outward, inching toward the property line and over, where wild trees grow every which way.

[end]

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