

## The Frozen Pier

Holding a small pair of scissors in his left hand, Martin fingered a daphne blossom growing inside the weathered planter sitting on his back porch; then clipped it off, along with a few inches of stem.

Rolling the slender twig beneath his fingers, he brought the cluster of tiny white flowers to his nose, then walked slowly down the porch steps and through his backyard.

Snow had been falling for the past few days, and his house and property took on the unique persona of a cottage in New England in midwinter. The air was cold, yet dry and clear. If he squinted, his yard looked just as it had ten, twenty, thirty, forty winters ago – the frozen pond and the rickety pier; the drooping trees through a veil of fat snowflakes; the faint smell of wood smoke from somewhere in the distance. Martin smiled. Some things never changed, and often those were the ones most worth cherishing.

Like the daphne blossoms. Martin didn't care much for most flowers, but he found a certain beauty in a species that could thrive in the most trying times – circumstances that left most plants withered and inert. The flowers he held had bloomed only a few days ago and would wither and die in a few more after he had harvested them. But the plant from which they came would live on through the cold.

It was, Martin reflected, a bit like love.

He made his way out to the pier overlooking the pond and sat down cross-legged, resting his considerable weight on the creaky, dilapidated structure. Sitting in front of him was a small wreath of daphne blossoms. He wove the latest addition into the crude, handsome, ring. It was finished.

The pier groaned. Nearly every winter, Martin and Ruth told themselves they would finally take it down. It had been poorly constructed from the beginning, and every winter the freezing and subsequent thawing of the pond further weakened its thin wooden supports. For years they had painted the accessible parts of the supports with water-resistant coating, and for years they had watched as the pier succumbed, a few short months later, to its inevitable ongoing decay, the chemicals designed to prolong its life dissolving into the murky water.

He knew he should have dealt with it long ago - the pier had been dangerously weak for some time now. But he considered it an intrinsic part of the old house; an old friend with whom he couldn't part after the decades they'd spent together. And although he and Ruth had always made little jokes at its expense, he knew they had both held the same affection for the little wooden outcropping in their backyard.

Just tear it down already, she'd said once. Home Depot will sell us a stainless steel one for six hundred dollars.

I don't know, he'd replied. It's hard to let go of the old thing.

Stainless steel hadn't even been invented when you bought it, she countered. You'd be doing it a favor.

And even as she said that she pulled out the tin of chemical glop she'd picked up on her way home, and together they made their way out to the pond and set forth on their annual ritual of slathering the wooden posts.

Martin smiled at the memory, then stood slowly, taking care not to damage the delicate wreath. He stepped gingerly onto the solid ground around the pond, off of the pier. It groaned again, mournfully, as if it were sorry to see him leave.

He made his way out to the driveway and began to brush the snow off the roof of his car. Ruth had always loved the daphne blossoms, and he'd be damned if he got them to the hospital after they took her off life support.