

Mountain

By Laura L Wozniak, LCSW

Everyone who sits on my couch sees a black and white print of the valley I lived in as a teenager viewed from our mountain. It hangs out of my line of sight, behind me and over my head. I forget it is there most of the time, but it was a gift to my Dad toward the end of his life from one of his art students. They were as eager for his praise as I was—and less frustrated. Above the print hung a ceremonial eagle feather given to me by a Native American elder. I thought it looked great flying above the aerial view. More importantly, it reminded me of hope and higher powers.

Frank sat there today, looking past me as he dredged up words from his own valley of physical pain and depression. There was a mountain of trouble for this man. He was a tribal policeman laid low; a revered youth hockey coach stopped cold; a mountain of strength to his family, now dependent. Maybe he was a cooling volcano looking for just one reason to glow again.

I remember the mountain I saw rising from the shore of the Connecticut River across the road from my house as a teenager. Mount Sugarloaf looked huge because it was so steep and loomed in striped sunset colors above the flatness of shade tobacco fields and wide water. Pocumtuck tribal history said it was the body of a menacing giant beaver killed by a god, but when I was a teenager you could drive up and park on top with your boyfriend. From my window I could see the lookout tower and all the places where

the fence leaned out dangerously.

Looks deceived. The mountain was made of arkose—coarse sandstone. A handhold turned into handful of miniature rocks of pink, red and gray and ochre yellow. Each bit beautiful and nothing that you wanted to keep in the end. Mount Sugarloaf got smaller every year. It was earth science in fast forward, but it still so dominated human scale that I knew my grandchildren would gasp to see it just as I had when we moved there.

I saw Mount Sugarloaf every morning and every day. It stands over my mother's old garden bordered with chives and marigolds to repel pests. It stands over the tiny Christmas tree farm my Dad planted in front of our house—now tall and shadowing the long driveway. It was my point of reference—always there when I needed to take the long view.

I looked up after my Dad died at home and Mount Sugarloaf was still there when his ashes came back in a cardboard box. The ashes looked like tiny pale rocks—nothing that could hold together in the shape of a tall, tall man with a giant presence.

I got up at the end of the hour with Frank. He moved slowly, so I had time to look around. I was searching for one more thing to say or do to ease his life. My hand flew up and I spoke without hesitation. "Please take this eagle feather. It is meant for an elder." I think of him now every time I see the pinhole in the wall above my Sugarloaf view. ❖

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