

Autumn of Dying Trees

My fifteenth summer, I mowed Mr. Alfred's lawn each time the grass grew long.

I weeded his garden.

In autumn, he sent more vegetables home with me. "There's more here than I can eat. I grow them as much for the beauty they are, for seeing the rewards of satisfying labor as for food to eat."

Leaves fell. He looked down the draw, filled with brush, that wound down the foot of the hill. "All the trees are dying," he said.

"They're dropping their leaves for winter," I said. "They do this every year." I was sure he knew. He'd seen many autumns.

The next afternoon, sunlight filtered through tree branches into his garden. He looked at bare trees and bushes. "All the trees are dying," he said, lost in thought. I didn't say anything. I thought he wouldn't hear me.

Near the end of the week, I sat at our kitchen table, figuring the length of hypotenuses of right triangles and writing down the figures.

Mom walked into the kitchen and said, "Mr. Alfred died today. Mrs. Mortenson just called and told me."

I couldn't absorb what she said. I repeated it silently several times. "Mr. Alfred died today. All the trees are dying. Mr. Alfred died today."

He taught me which plants were weeds, which plants to encourage to grow, about many vegetables I didn't even know existed before I worked for him in his garden. "All the trees are dying," he said.

I wrote down the answer for number eight. It had nothing to do with hypotenuses, but it was the right number for the day, for Mr. Alfred's garden, for tree shedding their leaves and presenting bare branches to winter.