

The Cottage

It didn't seem fair that I had to spend my tenth birthday at the cottage. Every summer weekend, rain or shine, we packed the car and headed north like an urban salmon run upstream¹. Turning ten felt like a big deal, and I felt like I should get to choose where, and how, to spend my birthday. I didn't want to celebrate with old people like my grandma, aunt, and uncle. I wanted to stay in the city and have a birthday party with my friends. [...]

The cottage was one of three humble cabins perched on a rocky edge of Lake Superior². The blue one on the west side belonged to Aunt Jane, my father's sister, and her husband, Uncle Harold. The larger cottage, with the drooping awning³ and the empty bird feeders, belonged to Grandma Archer. Our cottage stood in the shadow between these two, tucked behind a tangle of chokecherry⁴ trees. It was a simple bunkie⁵ with faded green trim⁶ that bled down the whitewashed walls, as if it cried when no one was looking. The bunkie held its breath, all week, until Saturday morning when we cracked open the front door and it exhaled a cloud of dust, pungent⁷ with the smell of mold.

My father required weekends at the cottage to get his office job "out of his system." On weekday mornings, he gulped two black coffees from his #1 Dad mug, something I'd made for him in preschool, even though I had only ever called him "Father." "Dad" never suited the hard, stoic man who hauled his briefcase to the front door as though it were filled with some great, invisible burden. My mom always stood in the doorway watching him leave, her hand raised in goodbye. I never saw my father wave back.

My mother, on the other hand, had only ever been "Mama," though lately I had started calling her "Mom." She had raised her eyebrows at that, so I explained that it was more appropriate because I was turning a double digit. Mom didn't have a job, but she used to run a bakery before I was born. She only ever talked about the bakery with fondness.

When I asked why she didn't work there anymore, my father said the bakery took more than it provided so "something had to give." I couldn't figure out what my father wasn't getting, and why Mom had to be the one to give it, but she let the business go. Knowing how much she loved to bake, I felt bad for her.

"It's fine," she said brightly. "Now I bake for you."

I suppose this is how we became tethered⁸. Mom's career became taking care of me. She continued to bake but I was her sole customer. My father refused to do any taste-testing, insisting he was a meat-and-potatoes kind of guy. I'd come home from school to find cinnamon rolls fresh from the oven, fruit-filled pies bursting from their pans, chewy macarons drizzled in caramel – treats most kids only dreamt about. [...]

¹ *like an urban salmon run upstream*: byboere, der ligesom laks vandrer mod strømmen

² *Lake Superior*: sø i det nordøstlige USA

³ markise

⁴ fuglekirsebær

⁵ træhytte

⁶ tagudhæng

⁷ tung

⁸ knyttet til hinanden

My father's family were all loud, active, outdoorsy people, while my mom was the kind of person who liked to retreat into a nest of blankets on the couch and settle in for a long read. She always encouraged me to do the same. [...]

When Mom wasn't inside, she would hide out beneath the chokecherry trees. She loved the sparrows who filled their branches, how they made the trees seem alive, singing and dancing. She spent a good deal of time in those trees like a bird herself. Perched⁹ on a stepladder, she'd pluck berries for jam until her fingers were stained a dark red. I always stood beneath the branches, holding out the bowl to catch them. [...]

At first, my birthday felt no different from any other Saturday at the cottage. My father disappeared into his shed, which was always off-limits to me, where he fiddled¹⁰ with various tools and equipment. Mom and I were picking berries when Grandma Archer invited me on a short canoe ride to see the rapids¹¹. [...] I felt caught between the two of them, sawing back and forth like the rope in their tug of war¹².

Returning to the bunkie to clean up for dinner, my father stopped in front of the chokecherries. He usually passed them by without interest, but this time he noticed the trees had sprouted¹³ bulging lumps of fungus¹⁴ on their branches. He assessed¹⁵ them with delight.

"Take a look at this," he said, sliding a hand over the blackened bark. "These should really come down."

"I think they're fine," Mom said, attempting to position herself between him and her trees.

My father strolled under the canopy¹⁶ of branches, his narrowed eyes locked on each trunk. Mom fluttered beside him, squeezing the hem of her shirt into a knot.

"They still produce berries," she said. "Surely they're good for a little while longer. There's no rush."

"They're rotten. If we don't take them down now, they could fall on top of us." My father went back to his shed and returned with the chainsaw. I looked between the determined face of my father and the worried face of my mom.

Mom gathered her bowl of berries from off the ground and pulled it close to her chest. "But my jam," she said. "And the birds..."

With a wave of his hand, my father batted away¹⁷ her concerns. Grandma sidled¹⁸ up next to him. "You know, I feel like we could use a little helper for this project, don't you?" She winked at me.

Mom moved closer to me, her face pale. "But I want these trees. I rely on them. I don't think –"

Her words were muffled by my father yanking the starter cord handle¹⁹ and squeezing the throttle²⁰. He held it for a moment, then extended the handle of the chainsaw toward me.

⁹ balancerende

¹⁰ rodede

¹¹ små vandfald

¹² tug of war: tovtrækkeri

¹³ udviklet

¹⁴ svamp

¹⁵ vurderede

¹⁶ (her) taget

¹⁷ batted away: (her) afviste

¹⁸ luskede

¹⁹ starter cord handle: startsnorens håndtag

²⁰ gashåndtag

I stared at it with wide-eyed reverence²¹. I felt drawn forward, craving the power the chainsaw promised.

"This isn't a project for a boy," Grandma challenged, her eyes focused on me. "It's a job for a young man. Think you can do it?"

70 "Wait. He's too young for this." Mom's voice sounded far away.

I held out my hands cautiously, and my father passed me the chainsaw. It was so heavy that I nearly dropped it. The handle was still warm where his hands had been.

Growling vibrations traveled up my arms and rattled my skull, making me light-headed. I was distantly aware that I could hurt myself, that chainsaws were dangerous, and that Mom would be
75 worried about me. I also knew she loved those trees. But I couldn't hold myself back, and I didn't want to. I wanted to know what it felt like to cut something down, just like I'd seen my father do. I wanted to watch a thing fall because of something I did.

I planted my feet and held it tighter than anything I had ever held before. I looked at my father. "What do I do now?"

80 He smiled at me and ruffled my hair. Startled²², I nearly dropped the chainsaw again. His face was never that soft, not while looking at me. He pointed toward the tree. [...]

Trees were always something I thought of as strong, stable, reliable. But when I pivoted²³ toward the tree, the chainsaw's teeth turned it to mush. My father looked impressed – with me! – and I directed that energy toward the tree, pressing forward as the chainsaw chewed through the bark.

85 It was frightening and exhilarating at the same time. My hands were sweating and the chainsaw was so heavy my arms wobbled, but nothing had ever seemed so urgent or important. [...]

The branches collapsed into a heap, crackling and snapping against one another as if electrified. My skin tingled.

I stepped back, rocking from the chainsaw's momentum. My father lifted it from my hands. "Well done, son." He slapped my back. He'd never called me "son" before. My body was still vibrating, but it wasn't from the chainsaw anymore.

My father moved on to the other trees while Grandma gathered branches, and it was only then that I realized Mom wasn't there. I found her inside the bunkie, rigidly winding a wooden spoon through the pot of berries we'd collected.

95 "Did you see me with the chainsaw?" I said. "Did you see what I did?"

"No," she said. "But I felt the tree fall."

I thought about leading her outside so I could point out the tree that I had brought down, so I could tell her what it had been like, but she kept her body turned away from me. Her gaze remained on the steam rolling out of the pot. [...]

100 A birthday party at the cottage meant a family dinner at Aunt Jane's cabin. Although I always sat next to my mom, Grandma Archer said I should take her seat at the head of the table, between my father and Uncle Harold. "All the men together," she said. Then she chuckled when I raised my glass for a toast to the chef, because that's what my father always did.

Grandma Archer told Aunt Jane and Uncle Harold how I had cut down a tree, on my own. My
105 father ruffled my hair again. Aunt Jane clapped her hands and Uncle Harold punched my shoulder.

²¹ ærbødighed

²² Forskrækket

²³ drejede

Mom listened to the story, quietly pecking at²⁴ her food. Her position around the table had shifted along with mine, and she now sat at the far end. I wondered if she was proud of me, or if she thought I'd been brave. I waited for her response, hoping, but those words never came.

110 There was something about hearing the story in Mom's presence that blunted²⁵ some of the thrill and pride I had felt earlier. Although I added little details, like how I wasn't even scared, and how it was a lot easier than I thought it'd be, I couldn't get that exciting sense of achievement to come back again. Mom always baked me a special cake for my birthday. Last year it was a triple-layer²⁶, jam-filled, chocolate money cake with rainbow sprinkles. But there were no coins inside my cake this time. There was no jam, and no sprinkles, just ten candles wedged into the glazed surface.

115 "It's a little bit plain," she acknowledged when she noticed me digging through my slice, hoping a coin or two would appear. "But I thought you might like this better now." [...]

It was my birthday, but somehow she was the one who looked older. I wanted to take hold of her hand but I wasn't sure why, and I couldn't come up with a good reason to do it.

120 After dinner, Grandma suggested my father take me on an evening boat ride. I liked the idea of navigating the lake in darkness. My father held open the door and waited for me while I grabbed my windbreaker²⁷. As we walked toward the lake in the dusty evening light, I looked back to where the trees had been. The space seemed so unprotected now, so much more exposed to the elements. And now, whenever we came to the cottage, that space would be there.

125 Suddenly, I had an urge to run back into the cottage and tell Mom that cutting down the tree had been a mistake. That I had been caught up in the moment and I shouldn't have done it. That I was sorry.

"I don't know about you," my father said, following my line of sight, "but I can't say I liked that jam much anyway. It was too sweet."

The jam had always seemed just right to me – perfect, actually – but I didn't disagree with him.

130 As I climbed into the boat, I saw Mom standing in the doorway of the cottage, waving at us. Above her, a flock of sparrows circled overhead, searching for a place to land.

As we drove out into the bay in the fading glow of dusk, I waved, hoping she could see me.

(2023)

²⁴ *pecking at*: stak til

²⁵ *dæmpede*

²⁶ *triple-layer*: lagkage i tre lag

²⁷ *vindjakke*