Growing up

IRL
2024/2025

Illustration by Isabelle Arsenault (The New Yorker 2022)

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John Cheever – *Reunion* (1962)

The last time I saw my father was in Grand Central Station. I was going from my grandmother's In the Adirondacks to a cottage on the Cape that my mother had rented, and I wrote my father that I would be in New York between trains for an hour and a half, and asked if we could have lunch together. His secretary wrote to say that he would meet me at the information booth at noon, and at twelve o'clock sharp I saw him coming through the crowd He was a stranger to me— my mother divorced him three years ago and I hadn't been with him since—but as soon as I saw him I felt that he was my father, my flesh and blood, my future and my doom. I knew that when I was grown, I would be something like him; I would have to plan my campaigns within his limitations. He was a big, good-looking man, and I was terribly happy to see him again. He struck me on the back and shook my hand. "Hi, Charlie," he said. "Hi, boy. I'd like to take you up to my club, but it's in the Sixties, and if you have to catch an early train, I guess we'd better get something to eat around here." He put his arm around me, and I smelled my father the way my mother sniffs a rose. It was a rich compound of whiskey, after-shave lotion, shoe polish, woolens, and the rankness of a mature male. I hoped that someone would see us together. I wished that we could be photographed. I wanted some record of our having been together.

We went out of the station and up a side street to a restaurant. It was still early, and the place was empty. The bartender was quarreling with a delivery boy, and there was one very old waiter in a red coat down by the kitchen door. We sat down, and my father hailed the waiter in a loud voice. "*Kellner!*" he shouted. "*Garçon! Cameriere! You!*" His boisterousness in the empty restaurant seemed out of place. "Could we have a little service here!" he shouted. "Chop-chop." Then he clapped his hands. This caught the waiter's attention, and he shuffled over to our table.

"Were you clapping your hands at me?" he asked.

"Calm down, calm down, *sommelier*," my father said. "If it isn't too much to ask of you—if it wouldn't be too much above and beyond the call of duty, we would like a couple of Beefeater Gibsons."

"I don't like to be clapped at," the waiter said.

"I should have brought my whistle," my father said. "I have a whistle that is audible only to the ears of old waiters. Now, take out your little pad and your little pencil and see if you can get this straight: two Beefeater Gibsons. Repeat after me: two Beefeater Gibsons."

"I think you'd better go somewhere else," the waiter said quietly.

"That," said my father, "is one of the most brilliant suggestions I have ever heard. Come on, Charlie, let's get the hell out of here."

I followed my father out of that restaurant into another. He was not so boisterous this time. Our drinks came, and he cross-questioned me about the baseball season. He then struck the edge of his empty glass with his knife and began shouting again. "Garçon! Kellner! Cameriere! You!! Could we trouble you to bring us two more of the same."

"How old is the boy?" the waiter asked.

"That," my father said, "is none of your Goddamned business."

"I'm sorry, sir," the waiter said, "but I won't serve the boy another drink."

"Well, I have some news for you," my father said. "I have some very interesting news for you. This doesn't happen to be the only restaurant in New York. They've opened another on the corner. Come on, Charlie."

He paid the bill, and I followed him out of that restaurant into another. Here the waiters wore pink jackets like hunting coats, and there was a lot of horse tack on the walls. We sat down, and my father began to shout again. "Master of the hounds! Tallyhoo and all that sort of thing. We'd like a little something in the way of a stirrup cup. Namely, two Bibson Geefeaters."

"Two Bibson Geefeaters?" the waiter asked, smiling.

"You know damned well what I want," my father said angrily. "I want two Beefeater Gibsons, and make it snappy. Things have changed in jolly old England. So my friend the duke tells me. Let's see what England can produce in the way of a cocktail."

"This isn't England," the waiter said.

"Don't argue with me," my father said. "Just do as you're told."

"I just thought you might like to know where you are," the waiter said.

"If there is one thing I cannot tolerate," my father said, "it is an impudent domestic. Come on, Charlie."

The fourth place we went to was Italian. "Buon giorno," my father said. "Per favore, possiamo avere due cocktail americani, forti, forti. Molto gin, poco vermut."

"I don't understand Italian," the waiter said.

"Oh, come off it," my father said. "You understand Italian, and you know damned well you do. *Vogliamo due cocktail americani. Subito.*"

The waiter left us and spoke with the captain, who came over to our table and said, "I'm sorry, sir, but this table is reserved."

"All right," my father said. "Get us another table."

"All the tables are reserved," the captain said.

"I get it," my father said. "You don't desire our patronage. Is that it? Well, the hell with you. *Vada all'inferno.* Let's go, Charlie."

"I have to get my train," I said.

"I'm sorry, sonny," my father said. "I'm terribly sorry." He put his arm around me and pressed me against him. "I'll walk you back to the station. If there had only been time to go up to my club."

"That's all right, Daddy," I said.

"I'll get you a paper," he said. "I'll get you a paper to read on the train."

Then he went up to a newsstand and said, "Kind sir, will you be good enough to favor me with one of your God-damned, no-good, ten-cent afternoon papers?" The clerk turned away from him and stared at a magazine cover. "Is it asking too much for you to sell me one of your disgusting specimens of yellow journalism?"

"I have to go, Daddy," I said. "It's late."

"Now, just wait a second, sonny," he said. "Just wait a second. I want to get a rise out of this chap."

"Goodbye, Daddy," I said, and I went down the stairs and got my train, and that was the last time I saw my father.

Philip Larkin – *This be The Verse* (1974)

This Be The Verse

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were soppy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

Glossary:

- Philip Larkin 1922-85 is one of the prominent British poets of the post war period.
- Fuck up: ødelægge
- Mean: have til hensigt
- Fault: fejl, mangel
- Soppy: sentimental
- Stern: streng
- At one another's throats: var i totterne på hinanden
- Hand on: række videre
- Misery: elendighed
- Coastal: kyst-
- Shelf: revle

Adrian Mitchell – This Be The Worst

They tuck you up, your mum and dad,
They read you Peter Rabbit, too.
They give you all the treats they had
And add some extra, just for you.

They were tucked up when they were small,
(Pink perfume, blue tobacco-smoke),
By those whose kiss healed any fall,
Whose laughter doubled any joke.

Man hands on happiness to man,
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
So love your parents all you can
And have some cheerful kids yourself.

Just Like That

Michael Richards

"Dead," said the man, "just like that". He stopped the engine. The boy stared out the window. "Well?" demanded the man. "Do you think you can do it?" The boy said nothing. The man said, "If you can't do it now you never will."

"Yes," said the boy, "I can do it."

"If you can't do it now you never will." They left the car sprawled across the crest of the road. They walked into the paddock. The boy lagged.

"Don't walk behind me," said the man.

The grass glistened in the early morning sun. The boy stretched hard to keep up. The wet grass was cold on his legs. Grass seeds stabbed through his socks and prickled his ankles. Flat seed stuck to his skin. The soft hair on his legs were soon matted and tangled with the sticky dew and the seeds from the grass.

The man stopped. He said, "Watch."

He raised his rifle. It cracked and the first kangaroo flipped into the air and fell down. The second kangaroo froze, staring directly at the man. He fired. The second kangaroo flipped and fell in the grass.

They walked to the bodies. The boy was slightly behind and on the man's left. As he walked his rifle wavered.

"Watch where you point that," said the man.

The first kangaroo lay on its side with its head in a puddle of blood. Its forepaws were curled like small hands. It lifted its head to caress the boy with its large limpid eyes. He was surprised how peaceful it looked. The man squatted beside it. He poked its belly. He lifted its tail then dropped it so it fell like raw meat.

"Dead," said the man. "Dead below the neck. It doesn't feel a thing."

The boy edged closer. He knelt to look for the hole where the bullet went in. The kangaroo swivelled its eyes, trying to watch both the man and the boy. Its throat was spongy with blood.

The man put the muzzle of his gun against the back of the kangaroo's head. The kangaroo jerked. Its lips drew back like a dog's. Then it was limp. Blood poured from its nostrils. The boy was fascinated. He had never seen anything like this before. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the bleeding head. The blood thickened quickly. The flow stopped. The man moved away but still the boy watched over the dead kangaroo.

It had happened so quickly and so easily that the boy couldn't believe it was real. He reached a hand to the kangaroo's breast. It

sprawled henslængt
crest top
'paddock indhegnet stykke land
lag sakke agterud
stretched hard *her:* tog lange skridt
seed frø, frøkorn
stab stikke
prickle prikke
mat sammenfiltre
tangle vikle ind i hinanden
dew dug
crack smælde
flip ryge op
waver svinge frem og tilbage
ca'ress kærtegne
limpid *her:* klar
squat sætte sig på hug
poke puffe, pirke
swivel dreje
spongy svampet
muzzle munding
jerk give et sæt
limp *her:* slap
nostril næsebor

was warm and very soft. The black eyes remained open. He couldn't believe it was dead.

He stretched a finger towards the coagulating blood but drew back without touching. The man finished the second kangaroo.

The boy asked, "What do we do with them now?"

"Nothing," said the man, "let them rot."

They walked further from the road, skirting thick patches of scrub. The boy felt very strong in the crisp morning air. He carried the rifle with ease. He enjoyed the strength of his legs as he strode through the grass. He felt that he could walk over anything that got in his way. The sun was warm on his face. They continued until they came close to the river, then turned and patrolled alongside the bank. Their wet legs glistened in the sun.

"Don't walk behind me," said the man.

They entered a cathedral of great river gums. The sun filtered through green stained-glass leaves. The man stopped at the far side. He pointed. He said, "If you can't do it now you never will."

The boy swallowed. He cleared his throat. He swallowed again. He braced his legs wide and snuggled the rifle to his eye. He aimed over the head of the grey kangaroo. He held his breath. He lowered the sights onto the white patch of the kangaroo's throat. The kangaroo jumped in the air, flipped backwards, and fell. "Great shot!" cried the man.

The boy was surprised how easy it had been. He couldn't remember pulling the trigger. The gun smell was sharp in his nose.

They found the crippled roo almost hidden in the grass. It was smaller than the boy had expected. It lay on its side, mouth open, breath gurgling deep in its throat. There was no blood. The boy stood over it, looked down, and felt nothing. He was empty as if his heart and his guts had been sucked out of the barrel of his gun. The kangaroo twisted its head to look up. Its black eyes met his. He had never seen eyes so soft and so black. "Kill it," said the man.

The boy touched the rifle to the back of its skull. The roo stiffened. The boy thought it rattled but afterwards he couldn't be sure. Then it was limp. Its mouth and nostrils ran blood. "Good," said the man.

The boy was disappointed. He had expected more, but didn't know what. He had thought that somehow this would make him a man – but it had made no difference at all. A glint caught his eye. He retrieved the empty cartridge case. It was hot with the smell of the gun. The boy was amazed that so much power had come from something so small. He put it in his hip pocket. Then he stood up.

co'agulate størkne
skirt gå langs kanten af
patch område
scrub krat
crisp frisk
bank bred
gum gummitræ
stained-glass mosaik
clear one's throat rømme sig
he braced his legs wide han stod fast med spredte ben
snuggle lægge godt tilrette
sight sigtekorn
roo kangaroo
guts indvolde, tarme
barrel løb
skull hovedskal
rattle ralle
re'trieve samle op
'cartridge case patronhylster
a'mazed forbløffet

They followed the bank of the river. "Don't walk behind me," said the man.

They came to a large mob of browsing kangaroos. With their heads in the grass and their backs humped the roos looked like rounded red and grey rocks. The boy watched while the man aimed, not at the closest kangaroo, but at one that had lifted its head on the far side of the mob. He fired. The kangaroo spun and fell down. A grey raised its head like a periscope from the grass. The man shot it at once. The mob became restless. The man shot rapidly as the kangaroos began to move. They shuffled at first, not knowing which way to go, then leapt wildly in every direction. The air was full of flying kangaroos.

A few remained perfectly still.

Without meaning to, without knowing what he was doing the boy raised his rifle and shot the closest kangaroo. A small grey hopped towards him. He aimed into its chest and shot five times before it fell. Another raced across his front. He swung the rifle and the roo tumbled into the grass. He shot until his ammunition was spent.

Suddenly the roos were all gone. The boy was surprised to find himself with an empty gun in his hands. He pointed the empty gun towards the man.

"Don't ever do that," said the man.

"It's empty."

The man kicked the doe in the stomach. It didn't move. He kicked its head. "Dead."

The boy watched in silence. He watched while the man strolled among the cripples blessing each with his wand. The boy didn't move to assist. He waited while the man shot each kangaroo in the brain. Something inside the boy died.

The man rolled a cigarette. He stood aggressively with the rifle hanging loose in his arm. He gestured widely at the magnificent sky. He said, "It's going to be a bloody good day."

"Yes it is," said the boy. He looked at the burning blue sky, then at the man. He tightened his grip on the gun.

The man blew smoke in the air.

The boy pulled grass seeds from his socks. Several had worked down inside his boots where he couldn't reach them. They scratched him each time he moved. "Re-load," said the man. "We'll look for stragglers. Some of them won't have gone far."

They crossed the flood plain, treading carefully on the uneven soil. The man was upright, his rifle in front of his body, his gaze

mob flok
browse græsse
hump krumme
shuffle stå og trippe
spent opbrugt
doe hun(kænguru), (*hannen:* buck)
stroll vandre om
bless velsigne
wand stav
mag'nificent storslået
tighten stramme
straggler en, der kommer væk fra flokken
flood plain flodslette

levelled far ahead. The boy trudged with his head down, the rifle like lead in his hands.

"Don't walk behind me."

They moved away from the river. There were no big trees here. The open grass of the plain was interspersed with outcrops of rock and patches of thick gidgee scrub. They trod a corridor between two patches of scrub.

The boy wasn't aware of aiming the rifle – nor did he hear the sound of the shot. The first kangaroo fell at once. The second bounded away. The boy waited. He knew it would stop to look back. When it did he shot it in the throat. "Jesus you can shoot," said the man.

The boy finished the stricken kangaroo the same way as before, while the man sat on a rock and rolled a smoke. Standing over the second corpse the boy sensed another presence. Hairs crawled on the back of his neck. He saw a huge buck on the far side of the clearing. It was the grandfather of all kangaroo. It glowed red gold in the sun. The boy was mesmerised by the big kangaroo. It was a magnificent beast. This one, this big one, the boy knew, would make him a man.

He planted his feet wide and braced himself firm as a tree. He aimed over the head of the big kangaroo. It was a very long way. The boy paused for some time watching the big red buck past the sights of the rifle and holding his breath. He lowered the rifle. He sighed. "Shoot it," said the man. The boy hesitated. He shuffled his feet. "Shoot it." The boy was entranced as the rifle raised itself in his hands. The sights dragged his eye to the kangaroo's throat. He fired. The big roo didn't flinch. The boy thought he had missed. He shot again. The big red didn't seem to hear the bullets go past. The boy shot again and again. The rifle clicked empty. At the same instant the big kangaroo crashed full length. It fell like a tree. The boy stared at the place it had been. It had been so far away. He stared stupidly across the clearing, the gun loose by his side. "Reload," said the man.

The boy knelt in the wet grass. He laid the rifle over his knees and fumbled the magazine free. He choked it with cartridges, thumbing each down against the pressure of the spring until it locked under the turned metal lip of the magazine mouth. The magazine grew heavier with each shell. The spring tightened. His hands shook. They were slippery with sweat.

He clipped the magazine to the rifle. It felt as heavy and hard as a brick. He stood slowly. He didn't want to see the dead buck, but he followed the man. He watched the man's head. He noted the

level rette
trudge traske
lead bly
inter'spersed with afbrudt af
outcrop *her:* forekomst
gidgee en buskagtig akacie med ildelugtende blomster
tread træde, trampe
bound springe
'presence tilstedeværelse
'mesmerise hypnotisere
braced himself firm as a tree stillede sig op solidt som et træ
'hesitate tøve
shuffle one's feet flytte fødderne frem og tilbage
en'trance hensætte i trance,
drag trække, slæbe
didn't flinch rørte sig ikke
crash brage omkuld
choke fylde op, propfylde
thumb stoppe ned med tommelfingeren
spring fjeder
lip modhage
shell patron
clip spænde fast

hollow above the collar where the man's spine joined the base of his skull. The boy raised the rifle. It was heavy in his hands.

"Don't walk behind me," said the man.

The boy lowered the rifle. He joined the man by the great red kangaroo. Its throat had been pulverised by the slugs. The boy imagined it full of maggots, with goannas crawling inside it to eat out is guts. It would rot and dismember and its bones bleach and crack in the sun. The man kicked its face.

"Dead," said the man. "Just like that."

The boy bit his lip. He flushed. Tears came to his eyes. A solitary crow barked far away.

The man turned his back. He started for the car. He said, "That's enough for today."

The boy raised his head. The world was blurred by his tears. He took a step after the man but staggered and almost fell. He paused to gain his balance.

The crow barked.

Suddenly the boy felt very calm. His eyes saw his hands lift the rifle. He felt nothing. He felt as if he were dead. The sights, blurred by his tears, danced about the man's head. They steadied a moment. "Dead," said the boy.

1987

hollow fordybning
spine rygrad
slug kugle
maggot maddike
go'anna (aust) stort firben
guts indvolde
dis'member falde fra hinanden, opløse
bleach bleges
'solitary enlig
blur sløre, udviske
stagger vakle
steady blive rolig

Alice Walker – *The Flowers*

It seemed to Myop as she skipped lightly from hen house to pigpen to smokehouse that the days had never been as beautiful as these. The air held a keenness that made her nose twitch. The harvesting of the corn and cotton, peanuts and squash, made each day a golden surprise that caused excited little tremors to run up her jaws.

Myop carried a short, knobby stick. She struck out at random at chickens she liked, and worked out the beat of a song on the fence around the pigpen. She felt light and good in the warm sun. She was ten, and nothing existed for her but her song, the stick clutched in her dark brown hand, and the tat-de-ta-ta-ta of accompaniment.

Turning her back on the rusty boards of her family's sharecropper cabin, Myop walked along the fence till it ran into the stream made by the spring. Around the spring, where the family got drinking water, silver ferns and wildflowers grew. Along the shallow banks pigs rooted. Myop watched the tiny white bubbles disrupt the thin black scale of soil and the water that silently rose and slid away down the stream.

She had explored the woods behind the house many times. Often, in late autumn, her mother took her to gather nuts among the fallen leaves. Today she made her own path, bouncing this way and that way, vaguely keeping an eye out for snakes. She found, in addition to various common but pretty ferns and leaves, an armful of strange blue flowers with velvety ridges and a sweet suds bush full of the brown, fragrant buds.

By twelve o'clock, her arms laden with sprigs of her findings, she was a mile or more from home. She had often been as far before, but the strangeness of the land made it not as pleasant as her usual haunts. It seemed gloomy in the little cove in which she found herself. The air was damp, the silence close and deep.

Myop began to circle back to the house, back to the peacefulness of the morning. It was then she stepped smack into his eyes. Her heel became lodged in the broken ridge between brow and nose, and she reached down quickly,

unafraid, to free herself. It was only when she saw his naked grin that she gave a little yelp of surprise.

He had been a tall man. From feet to neck covered a long space. His head lay beside him. When she pushed back the leaves and layers of earth and debris Myop saw that he'd had large white teeth, all of them cracked or broken, long fingers, and very big bones. All his clothes had rotted away except some threads of blue denim from his overalls. The buckles of the overall had turned green.

Myop gazed around the spot with interest. Very near where she'd stepped into the head was a wild pink rose. As she picked it to add to her bundle she noticed a raised mound, a ring, around the rose's root. It was the rotted remains of a noose, a bit of shredding plowline, now blending benignly into the soil. Around an overhanging limb of a great spreading oak clung another piece. Frayed, rotted, bleached, and frazzled – barely there – but spinning restlessly in the breeze. Myop laid down her flowers.

And the summer was over.

The Elevator

by William Sleator

It was an old building with an old elevator – a very small elevator, which could carry only three people. Martin, a thin twelve-year-old, felt nervous in it from the first day he and his father moved into the apartment. Of course he was always uncomfortable in elevators, afraid that they would fall, but this one was especially unpleasant. Perhaps this was because of the poor lighting and the dirty walls. Perhaps it was because of the door, which never stayed open long enough, and slammed shut with a loud clanging noise. Perhaps it was the way the elevator shuddered each time it left a floor, as if it was exhausted. Maybe it was simply too small. It seemed crowded even with only two people in it.

The stairs were no better. Martin tried them one day after school. There were no windows, and the lights were not working. Martin's footsteps echoed behind him on the cement, as though there was another person climbing, getting closer. By the time he reached his home on the seventeenth floor, he was gasping for breath.

Martin's father worked at home. He wanted to know why Martin was out of breath. "Why didn't you take the elevator?" he asked, frowning at Martin. You're not only skinny and weak and bad at sports, his face seemed to say, but you are also a coward. After that, Martin always took the elevator. He would have to get used to it, he told himself, just like he got used to being bullied at school.

But he didn't get used to it. He was always afraid that it would stop suddenly and he would be trapped inside it for hours by himself. But it wasn't much better when there were other passengers. He didn't like to be close to them. He also disliked the way people tried hard not to look at one another, staring at nothing.

One morning the elevator stopped at the fourteenth floor, and a fat lady got on. She was wearing an old green coat that ballooned around her. As she waddled into the elevator, Martin was sure he felt it sink under her weight. She was so big that her coat brushed against him, and he had to squeeze himself into a corner. There was no room for anybody else. The door closed quickly behind her, and instead of facing it, she turned around and stared at Martin.

He looked at her for a moment. She had large fleshy cheeks and no chin, just a huge mass of neck. Her blue eyes were tiny but sharp. They seemed to be boring into Martin's face.

Martin looked away, but the woman didn't turn around. Was she still looking at him? He glanced at her quickly, then looked away again. She was still watching him. He wanted to close his eyes, he wanted to turn around and stare into the corner, but how could he? The elevator creaked down to twelve, then eleven. The piggy eyes were still looking at him. She had to be crazy. Why else would she stare at him like this? What was she going to do next?

She did nothing. She only watched him, breathing loudly, until the elevator reached the first floor at last. Martin wanted to run past her to get out, but there was no room. He could only wait as she turned and moved slowly out into the lobby. Then he ran. He didn't care what she thought. He ran nearly all the way to school.

He thought about her all day. Did she live in the building? He had never seen her before, and the building was not very big. Maybe she was visiting somebody? But 7.30 in the morning was too early for visiting.

Martin felt nervous when he got back to the building after school. But why should he be afraid of an old lady? He felt ashamed of himself. He pressed the button and stepped into the elevator, hoping that it would not stop, but it stopped on the third floor. Martin watched the door slide open, revealing a green coat, a piggish face and blue eyes which were already staring at him as if she knew he would be there.

It wasn't possible. It was like a nightmare. But there she was. "Going up!" said Martin, his voice little more than a squeak. She nodded, and stepped on. The door slammed. He watched her pudgy hand move towards the buttons. She pressed, not fourteen, but eighteen, the top floor. The elevator trembled and began to go up. The fat lady watched him.

This morning she got on at the fourteenth floor, so why did she get on at the third floor today and go up to eighteen? The elevator seemed to be moving more slowly than usual. Martin wanted to press seven, so that he could get out and walk up the stairs, but he couldn't reach the buttons without touching her, and he didn't want to do that.

When the elevator stopped on his floor, she hardly moved out of his way. He had to squeeze past her, rubbing against her horrible scratchy coat. He was afraid the door would close before he could get out. She turned and watched him as the door slammed shut. "Now she knows I live on seventeen," he thought.

"Have you ever noticed a strange lady in the elevator?" he asked his father that evening.

"Can't say I have," he replied, not looking away from the television.

Martin knew he was probably making a mistake, but he had to tell somebody about the woman, "She was in the elevator with me twice today. She just kept staring at me. She never stopped looking at me for a minute."

"What are you so worried about now?" his father said, turning impatiently away from the television. "What am I going to do with you, Martin? Honestly, now you're afraid of some poor old lady."

"I'm not afraid."

"You're afraid," said his father. When are you going to grow up and act like a man? Are you going to be timid all your life?"

Martin didn't want to cry in front of his father, so he waited until he got to his room. His father probably knew he was crying anyway. He slept very little.

In the morning, when the elevator door opened, the fat lady was waiting for him. Martin stood there, unable to move, then backed away. As she saw him, her expression changed. She smiled as the door slammed.

Martin started running down the stairs. The stairs were dark and he fell. His father was silent on the way to hospital, disappointed and angry with him for being a coward and a fool. Martin had broken his leg and needed to walk on crutches. He could not use the stairs now. Was that why the fat lady had smiled? Did she know what would happen?

At least his father was with him in the elevator on the way back from the hospital. There was no room for the fat lady to get in, and if she did, his father would see her and maybe he would understand. When he got home, he could stay in the apartment for a few days. The doctor said that he had to rest as much as possible. Martin felt quite safe from the fat lady now.

"Oh, I almost forgot," his father reached out and pressed number nine.

"What are you doing?" asked Martin, trying not to sound afraid.

"I promised to visit Mrs. Ullman," said his father, looking at his watch as he stepped out of the elevator.

"Let me go with you. I want to visit her too!" Martin pleaded, struggling to move on his crutches.

But the door was already closing. “Afraid to be in the elevator alone?” said his father. “Grow up, Martin”. The door slammed shut.

Martin hobbled to the buttons and pressed nine, but it didn’t do any good. The elevator stopped at ten, where the fat lady was waiting for him. She moved in quickly, and he was too slow to get past her in time to get out. The door closed and the elevator began to move.

“Hello, Martin,” she said, and laughed, and pushed the Stop button.

Barbara Summers

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 upstream[1]. 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 Superior[2]. 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 awning[3] and the empty bird feeders, belonged to Grandma Archer. Our cottage stood in the shadow between these two, tucked behind a tangle of chokecherry[4] trees. It was a simple bunkie[5] with faded green trim[6] 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, pungent[7] 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 tethered[8]. 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. […]

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[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. Perched[9] 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 fiddled[10] with various tools and equipment. Mom and I were picking berries when Grandma Archer invited me on a short canoe ride to see the rapids[11]. […] I felt caught between the two of them, sawing back and forth like the rope in their tug of war[12].

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 sprouted[13] bulging lumps of fungus[14] on their branches. He assessed[15] 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 canopy[16] 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 away[17] her concerns. Grandma sidled[18] 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 handle[19] and squeezing the throttle[20]. He held it for a moment, then extended the handle of the chainsaw toward me.

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[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 reverence[21]. 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?"

"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 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?"

He smiled at me and ruffled my hair. Startled[22], 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 pivoted[23] 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.

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.

"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. […]

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 father ruffled my hair again. Aunt Jane clapped her hands and Uncle Harold punched my shoulder.

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[21] ærbødighed
[22] Forskrækket
[23] drejede

Mom listened to the story, quietly pecking at[24] 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.

There was something about hearing the story in Mom's presence that blunted[25] 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-layer[26], 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.

"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.

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 windbreaker[27]. 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.

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.

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