

Summer's End

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Viewed from the water, my grandparents' summer cottage at The Cove stood tall and spindly, like Grandfather himself, poised right on the brink where the lawn dropped off six feet to the rocky beach below.

Like us, my grandparents lived year-round just five miles away, but they were old by the time I came along and seldom came to The Cove anymore. My siblings and I spent every fair summer weekday of our childhoods at The Cove, often with friends in tow, my mother driving us there in the station wagon from the farm where we lived. After we'd left the main road, we bumped along on the dirt one that led down to the shore, past rocky outcroppings and small cottages nestled in the woods, until we came to a hand-painted sign my older cousin Mark had posted years earlier which read: "Dangerous Curve. Speed Limit 100. 95 Night."

After my mother had negotiated this sharp turn downhill, passing treacherously close to a ledge, we could smell the salty spruce-tinged air, and seconds later, after she'd pulled into the grassy parking spot, we tumbled out of the car and ran to the rocky beach to see whether the tide was in or out. High tide was better for swimming, low tide better for finding shells and starfish.

After we'd run up the creaky porch steps of the old cottage and entered its dank interior, we stowed our bologna sandwiches in the 1940s refrigerator. The sweet scent of the spring-fed water wafted up from the rust-stained sink, mingling with the smell of must and mold from the oilcloth floor.

After climbing the stairs and changing into our swimsuits behind an old-fashioned dressing screen, we clambered back down. If it were low tide, we opened the door to the "back kitchen," releasing an overwhelming stink of stale sweat, seaweed, and mildew. Among the black inner tubes and orange life jackets, dozens of salt-encrusted sneakers in various sizes, faded to grays and dull pinks, were scattered about in pairs.

Though lined with gravel, and frequently, spiders, we shook them out and wore them into the water. Barnacles and sea urchins were plentiful underfoot at low tide; the sneakers, despite the potential spiders and foul odor, protected our feet.

The bay was always cold, but westerly breezes brought the chilliest water of all. Sometimes, when the tide was on its way in, we'd sit on the stony beach, our legs straight out in front of us, just inches from the water's edge, waiting for the tide to gradually drench us. Just when we thought it would never reach us, the water lapped at our feet, our calves, our thighs, until we were sitting in an inch of water. The tide slowly rose higher, acclimating us to the chill. We were in no hurry. Each day at The Cove, and the summer days collectively, seemed to stretch out endlessly.

We knew where all the large rocks were, even when they were submerged at high tide. One of them was covered at just the right depth for us to climb and sit on as the waves lapped around us. My father, as a boy, had once drilled a hole a few inches deep in the top of this rock, planning a diving board that never materialized. The hole filled with water every high tide, which I plunged out with my index finger, a ritual like so many others.

When we tired of swimming, or our mother insisted we get out because our lips were turning blue, we often played "restaurant" on the solid rock shelf that we called The Ledge, stirring the algae-filled tidal pools as if they were pots of soup, scooping up tiny yellow periwinkles and pretending they were corn, and serving them to our imagined guests on platters made of large clamshells.

Between swimming and playing, we visited with relatives whose cottages bookended that of our grandparents. Aunt Alice, my father's oldest sister, summered next door in a cottage with a long, glass-enclosed porch that looked out on the bay. She lived the rest of the year in Bangor, where we usually joined her for Thanksgiving. Aunt Alice was a tall, patrician-looking woman with white, upswept hair, who had been widowed in her fifties. She generously invited us to use the playthings of her now-grown children, including the swing in her garage and a croquet set. She and my mother got on well, despite an age difference of seventeen years, and on weekends there were often family suppers on the porch of either cottage.

A narrow path on the left side of my grandparent's cottage led to Cousin Ruth's. She was about the same age as Aunt Alice, and cousin to Alice and my father. She lived the rest of the year in upstate New York where she was a librarian. Her cottage was trimly kept with a welcoming, wrap-around porch and a bright flower garden. Ruth was lean and plain, with heavy-lidded eyes and a mild smile, and could usually be found on her porch on summer days, surrounded by a coterie of guests, unmarried women like herself and people she knew from her library.

Though not one to gush, Ruth always seemed pleased to see us. She listened more than she talked, and she offered us the use of her colorful hammocks, introduced us to any young guests she had, and, if the timing was right, allowed us to raise the flag on the pole attached to the porch.

Once, when I was eight, Cousin Ruth asked me to go beachcombing with her. The damp, salty stink of low tide was thick in the air as I skipped along the beach, naming for Ruth all the large rocks in front of our relatives' cottages. After showing her The Chair Rock, and The Giant Clam, I ran ahead to a smaller, angular boulder.

"Here's The Sandwich Rock." I touched its ridged edges. "See? These layers are lettuce, bologna, and cheese."

Ruth bent down for a closer look, her skinny legs poking out from her knee-length skirt, while she balanced, a little pigeon-toed, on the rocky beach. She ran her crooked fingers over the ridged edge, and a smile spread over her face

"It's even cut down the middle," I said, pointing to a big crack across the top.

"A lovely sandwich." Ruth's grey eyes popped out a little from her thin face, scanning the beach before she picked up a round rock the size of two fists and placed it on top. "An olive for your sandwich!"

I lay down across the warm surface of The Sandwich and pretended to take a bite. Then I stuck out my tongue and licked the rough surface of the rock-olive.

"I bet it's salty," Ruth laughed, and she was right. In a minute we continued our walk, picking up the faded orange shells of crabs, and the flaky ones of razor clams.

The Cove, I was certain, would always be as perfect as it was that summer day. Like everything else in my well-ordered, sheltered little life, I took it for granted, just as I

believed the grown-ups, buildings, and natural world around me would continue, forever, just as they were.

But things did change. First, Grandmother died. Then, a year later, when I was ten, after a terrifying quarrel in which my father hit my mother—something that had never happened in our house before—she left him, taking the three of us children with her. Aunt Alice helped my mother escape, sheltering us at her house in Bangor for a few days. It was June, just before the start of our usual summer days at The Cove. Mum moved us in with her mother in Pennsylvania. In the sweltering heat and cataclysmic upheaval of that summer, The Cove seemed like a distant dream, almost a fantasy.

When the divorce was final, Mum was awarded full custody, Dad the right to have us at Christmas and for the entire summer. Though we were happy to see Dad and our old friends when we returned to Maine, the atmosphere at The Cove was entirely changed.

Dad never forgave Aunt Alice for her role in helping our mother leave with us, which he called “kidnapping.” Trips to The Cove became painfully awkward, as Dad now referred to Aunt Alice as “that witch,” and refused to speak to her, adding to my confusion about how and whom to love in my newly remapped world.

Alone among our relatives and family friends, Cousin Ruth did not ask the uncomfortable, prying questions about our mother or our situation, to which I was becoming accustomed. Though we saw her less than before, her porch felt like a safe harbor in the raging family battle.

The farm where we’d grown up remained unaltered in its appearance but was a different place without our mother. And at the same time that my pubescent body began erupting in unwelcome and alarming ways, it seemed like every structure I’d ever counted on was disappearing.

Our grandfather died a year later and his big old house, which like the cottage housed so many memories of my childhood, was sold and divided into efficiency apartments. That same year, the old church, which we’d once attended, was torn down.

Despite all this destruction, I'd maintained a certain trust that, just as the tide would predictably ebb and flow, the cottage would remain as it was. But my father, who inherited the place at The Cove, soon announced his plans to tear it down.

It was too close to the water, he said, in bad repair, and a nor'easter could knock the whole thing into the bay. He promised he would build a new cottage further back on our lot.

And so, while we were back in school in Pennsylvania, he emptied the place of its furniture, stashing it all in our barn. We arrived the next summer to find the cottage half gone. He'd taken off the roof and walls where the bedrooms used to be, and as we walked up the rickety old stairs, he joked that we now had a penthouse view. I tried to laugh, too, but I felt stricken when I saw it.

When we were younger, Dad had sometimes taken us into houses under construction, where I'd been fascinated to see the skeleton of a new building rising, fresh with the promising smell of sawdust. But standing in the fog on the spot where we'd once put on our swimsuits, I wanted to cry. This was not a home under construction, but one being systematically destroyed, and its destruction echoed everything else in my life—once-safe places ripped apart, the locus of childhood memories disappearing into sky. If I stepped wrong, I could go over the edge.



Suzanne Ketchum Adams grew up in Maine and Pennsylvania, and has worked as a librarian and archivist. Her short story “Misplaced” won first prize in the online fiction contest *On the Premises* in 2014. Suzanne has performed at several storytelling venues in the Boston area, including *The Moth* GrandSLAM and WGBH’s *Stories from the Stage*. She is currently at work on a novel.