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INHERITING AN ALASKAN LOG CABIN

We should have known that first visit back to the cabin in Alaska would be different. I had been coming for fifteen years to my family cabin, but my husband Peter had been only once before, on a snowy Thanksgiving several years prior. To return to a place we had been before only as guests—but this time as owners, as inheritors of a place after my father and stepmother died—could never be the same. Now we were responsible. Now our visit carried the weight of attention.

It was fall. Sun sifted through yellow aspen and dark green spruce, spattering the gravel driveway leading directly off of the two lane Parks Highway. We drove down the driveway with eyes wide and scared as new parents, as if adopting a child with no notice, not knowing the first thing about how to take care of it. How do you earn ownership? How do you deserve inheritance?

Walking onto the deck of the small cabin, we looked down the bluff to the river below. The mountains beyond spread like soft folds of fabric, blues and greens painted with swaths of gold. Just past the cabin sat the outhouse, also on the bluff, a wide window on the front wall looking out to the river. A propane tank and an oil tank sat outside of the cabin. We put the key in the lock of the heavy door. It needed a firm push to open. We walked inside.

The well-trod plywood floors creaked underfoot. The smell of dust hung in the air, rising from the forty-year-old gold carpet in the living room. Narrow stairs, also carpeted, led from the kitchen to two upstairs bedrooms. The spruce log walls stood out as the primary feature, a warm amber hue from years of mellowing. Propane lights hung on the walls, remnants of the cabin's earlier years without electricity. Electric lights were sparse. The view through wide windows showed the river curving west and then east, making its way north.

We didn't have to be experts to understand that, as much as the logs from which they are made, cabins are structures of stories supporting memory and possibility, past and future. We had heard the stories over the years: how the original owners of the cabin cut the logs and pulled them by dogsled, three at a time. How they let them dry for a year, and then peeled them by hand. How when cabin dwellers visited each other in the winter months, the knock on the front door was called "the call of the wild." Some of these stories proved

true; some, I found later, were an intricate blend of myth and history.

Any place requires care and Peter and I needed to learn to be stewards. Advice trickled in: burn the wood stove hot to rid the chimney of creosote before letting it burn slow, since chimney fires are the biggest cause of cabins burning; put sugar-water (a natural anti-freeze) down the drains before leaving the cabin in the winter to keep the U-joints clear.

Without the stories, the history, and knowledge of maintaining a log cabin, we didn't know where to begin. It seemed to make sense that we start by talking to the old-timers. These were people who were part of the history holding up the cabin. This was an adoption, after all, and not a birth.

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It was the end of the week when we visited with Bill and Ree. It was Bill's eighty-ninth birthday. He wore a plaid wool shirt and suspenders, and was stouter than earlier years. Blind for twenty years, Bill's resourcefulness was legendary. After losing his sight, he plumbed his own cabin by feel, using a file to mark the length of the pipes he measured so that he could read where to cut them like Braille. Bill loved opera, mostly the Italian ones, and read investment books using a large reading contraption sitting on the kitchen table.

Ree was a quilter of international renown, an art form she came to after developing an allergy to the materials she used for silk-screening. Bill and Ree raised two sons in their cabin sitting on the edge of the tiny Deneki

Lake. Until recently, their cabin was dry, the term used for cabins without running water. Over the long winters, Ree melted snow for water for all of her household tasks, including washing cloth diapers.

Bill sat on an ancient gold couch facing a large picture window. My husband and I sat opposite him on handcrafted rocking chairs, and Ree glanced at us from the kitchen.

“Our neighbors say you’re the one who taught them how to build a cabin,” I said to Bill. “How did you figure it out?”

My speech felt awkward, halting with guilt that I was asking for stories we hadn’t yet earned, stories that would come naturally if we were residents, if we’d put in our time and had something to offer in return. We had nothing to offer yet, no knowledge, no skills, and precious few stories. Bill didn’t seem to mind.

“I guess I just got a book,” he said, a mischievous smile on the corners of his mouth crinkling his eyes. “I think it was called *How to Build a Cabin*. Just a small book.”

“Paperback,” Ree added.

“That’s right, just a small paperback book,” Bill said, nodding slowly. His watery eyes looked toward the light from the window opening out to the lake and Carlo Mountain beyond. “I helped out the chief ranger with his cabin in Cantwell after that. Guess I just learned from reading and doing.”

So that’s all there was to it. We just had to figure it out. We would learn it, slowly, the way you learn about a person, conversation by conversation, experience by experience. I felt desperate to earn our place there, to anticipate needs, to put in work, to bind our lives to the cabin. So we started with the stories, letting them sink into us.

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On our trip to the cabin the next fall, I noticed the logs looked a little bit weathered, the stain on the deck worn thin. Fall had always been my favorite time at the cabin with my family, and I easily convinced my husband to make our annual visits at the end of August and early September when we could pick berries in the crisp air and watch the tundra turn red. It was still early enough in the season to get work done, too. When not at the cabin, we lived in Seattle where we hired specialists, people who did roofs or gutters, landscaping or electrical work. In remote areas, everyone was a generalist, because they had to be. In *Building the Alaska Log Cabin*, Tom Walker warns that, “There isn’t any substitute for hard work, sweat and patience.” To live in this cabin required that our sweat mingle with the life of the logs and their history.

One of the best things about our log cabin was the very thing that put it

at risk. It was an organic structure, subject to the same process of decay as all things organic. We had to work with the logs to protect what we loved about them, that they were made of the forest around us, from the very things we treasured. I suggested log oiling to my husband, tentatively, because I had no other ideas.

Doing our best to ignore feelings of inadequacy, we lay old bed sheets and newspaper on the deck. Peter used blue painter's tape to cover the windows. We dipped brushes into a can of log oil, letting oil soak into the bristles, saturating the bush. Then we took our brushes and began stroking the logs. The bristles distributed the oil with each pass. The logs on the cabin's weathered north side gulped the layer of oil thirstily. We applied another layer. My shoulder and back muscles started to ache. I saw the logs as if for the first time, the grain of the wood, the places winter storms had been most cruel. This work required attention, not just to the labor, but to the cabin, to this thing that held our lives.

It was a few years later that the kitchen got to me. Peter and I bumped into each other one too many times in the dark corridor, the lamp on the rickety refrigerator and the propane light on the wall both inadequate to the task. I was annoyed that washing dishes required a headlamp. We didn't have the skills to do the overhaul required, but a neighbor who worked in Denali National Park and Preserve did. He was another old-timer. How did they all figure out how to do things? He laughed, looking at the floor. "None of us knew a damn thing!" he said. "Hell, the guy who built your cabin didn't know one thing about it. He got a book at the library and read it. I think he has two left thumbs and one's crooked, but your place has held up great." This time, his story comforted me. Even the people learning as they went made it work.

Sketching out plans with pen and paper, we considered how the family we hoped to have would use the space, what we would want to include, how it would be crafted. As we talked, it occurred to me that we were doing new things. We were making new decisions. We were, as Bill had explained to us, figuring it out. Somewhere we transitioned; we turned a corner we didn't even see. This was our cabin now. I smiled to myself as Peter looked over our notes. We thought we were adopting the cabin, but perhaps it had adopted us. There was no earning ownership, or deserving inheritance. There was only acceptance of the gift. I ran my hand slowly over one of the logs. It was rough and strong and beautiful. It held up the cabin as it was, and as it will be.

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It is an early March evening and Peter and I are reading to the sonorous music of Johnny Cash, our newly assigned soundtrack for the cabin. I am lying on the couch, my eyelids falling with the darkness. Heat from the wood

stove nestles into the fleece blanket covering me as the scene outside fades into reflections of lamplight on windows.

Peter's voice breaks through my reverie.

"Shannon, did you hear that?" He appears suddenly around the corner of the wall separating the dining and living rooms.

"What?" I ask, squinting against sleep.

"Owls! The Great Horned Owls!" I sit straight up, all vestiges of relaxation gone.

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This is the time, early March, when we hear them along the bluff, calling for mates, their deep "Whoo's" called and answered in the darkness. We hear them most frequently on trips to the outhouse, inviting us to the mystery of their world, a world surrounding us even if we cannot always see it. "You can always hear them," a neighbor once told us, "but you won't find them."

We put on our boots, parkas and hats, grabbing flashlights as we run out of the cabin into the moonless snowy night. The abrupt transition from the warmth of the cabin to this frozen world slashes at my face and neck. In the below-zero temperatures, snow squeaks under our boots. Silhouettes of spruce take shape as our eyes adjust to the dark.

We are moving too fast; the sound of boots and panting take over. We stop and stand still, listening. The owl is just in front of us now. "Whoo, whooooo," comes the call. Farther down the bluff another answers it, the call riding the breath of wind through twisted branches of spruce and graceful lines of leafless aspen. Peter shines the flashlight to the top of the tree in front of us. Only scraggly branches show. We take another few steps forward, and the white beam of light slices through the dark, leaping to the top of another tree.

I see the owl. It is an extension of the tree's form, black on blackness, telltale ears pointing straight up. The owl's head swivels, and enormous eyes glare down on us, round and bright. Its body seems too big, unwieldy, impossible for the tree to support. Then it makes another, different sound—a raucous screech like a needle pulled across a record. It is a creature of and in the night, of and in the wild. I am speechless and I am scared. I inhale and the winter air stops at the back of my mouth.

We are intruding, inviting ourselves to bumble out of our cabin into this wild space. I stare, grateful and embarrassed, and turn back to the cabin hoping for forgiveness. Peter lingers. “Did you see its wingspan?” he asks. I didn't—I turned in the dark too soon, just before the owl lifted its body on wide wings as easily as if it were made of air. Peter was right to linger. This is part of our education, too. We shut ourselves in and away from our world at peril of our lives. Understanding this connection to life outside, how we are part of this mystery even in observation, might change life as we know it. Understanding this connection is grace itself.

More slowly than we left the cabin, we make our way back. The glow from the window is yellow as a flame. We enter back through the heavy door, bringing a little bit of wildness inside with us.