

The Bungalow

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I'd never seen Mum so pissed as when Gran said she wasn't going to get treatment for her cancer, not even when she caught Sadie and me nicking her vodka and replacing it with water when we were teenagers. That time with Sadie and me, she ignited at us like gas poured on a bonfire, a sudden whirlwind of unintelligible swearing and who-do-you-think-you-ares. With Gran, Mum silently seethed like embers. We were all home for Christmas, and Gran told us she wanted to "go out feeling like myself, in my own home. I don't have time for that chemo bullshit." Dr. MacDonald had diagnosed her with lung cancer, and wanted her checked into the Victoria General for surgery and chemotherapy. Mum's eyes squeezed shut tightly, her whole body quaking.

"So you're just going to give up?" she had finally whispered.

When we were little kids, we spent our summers with Gran at her bungalow in Cape Breton. Mum would pack the car and we would make the drive from Halifax to Ben Eoin on the last day of school, Sadie in the front seat, and me in the back with the twins, Jesse and Paddy. When we got to the bungalow, Mum would have a cup of tea with Gran on the deck, then turn around and drive the whole five hours right back.

"Water's going the wrong way," Gran would often say, surveying the whitecaps from the deck, cup of tea in one hand, cigarette in the other. It meant the wind was blowing out towards the ocean, rather than into the Bras d'Or Lake. It was supposed to mean the lake would be a little warmer, without the dark cold surging in from the Atlantic.

"Mmm yes, definitely warmer," we would all agree when we swam on those days, my siblings and me, even though I was never really sure. The water always warmed up by the time we made it out to the raft either way. Diving for starfish and rocks, we never wore goggles, our eyes burning with the salt. Sometimes we would put our lifejackets on and drift with the waves from our raft to our neighbour's, tipping our heads back and letting our hair fan out in the water, surrendering all effort and allowing ourselves to be carried by the current. I couldn't imagine anything more peaceful than that.

Gran drifted with us. She was pretty young for a Gran, since Mum had Sadie at seventeen, as a 'wild girl running around Whitney Pier with purple hair,' the story went. Then me fourteen months later, then the twins fourteen months after that. "I never wanted any of you to be lonely for a minute," Mum would say about that. We all lived with Gran together until Mum got the LPN job in Halifax when Sadie was five.

I think back to one of the last summers we were all together with Gran in Ben Eoin, before our indignant teenage rebellions kept us rooted in the city for our Julys and Augusts. Nearly every night after supper we would gather at the kitchen table to play Rummoli, moths with delicate tissue paper wings fluttering at the the light overhead. We anted up with old pennies, scraped out of a heavy Scotsburn ice cream bucket we kept above the fridge, our fingers stained with rust like Gran's stained with nicotine. We sat in our bathing suits although the sun had long set, Sadie and I with our wet hair wrapped up in towels, the twins shirtless in swim trunks faded with salt and sun.

"Time to put your PJs on," Gran would instruct, shuffling the cards and neatly tapping the deck on the table, signaling the game was over.

"One more hand! One more hand!" we would chant, pounding our fists, penny bucket clanking as it bounced on the table.

Sometimes she would let us go for a night-swim while she smoked on the deck, as long as we stayed close to shore and didn't swim out to the raft. Paddy and Jesse would grab our ankles underwater while Sadie and I shrieked and giggled.

"Keep it down!" Gran would hiss between puffs, although she sounded to me like she was maybe laughing too. The orange light at the end of her smoke glowed, appearing to float unattached in the darkness. "You'll wake the whole damn lake!"

In the mornings I would wake on my top bunk, sheets gritty with grains of sand from my feet or dislodged from my hair as it dried overnight. Sadie underneath me on the bottom bunk, a place of prestige entitled to the elder sibling. Even if she were only fourteen months older, that was the natural order of things. I would quietly dangle my head over the side of the bunk, trying to catch a glimpse of the *Cosmo* she read down below, commandeered from Gran's stack by the toilet. We would emerge to the kitchen together and eat warm tea biscuits and blueberry jam with tea for breakfast.

"Warm hands," Mum would say, when we earnestly asked her why Gran's tea biscuits were so much better than hers. "She always has warms hands."

"You had a nice childhood, Jenny," my husband would say many years later, as I rested my legs across his lap in our Toronto loft. I told him how our feet became rough and leathery from walking barefoot all summer, until we could walk across the gravel driveway without flinching. How Sadie, the boys and I only knew what day of the week it was because Mum would sometimes visit on the weekends, driving the whole five hours Friday evenings after work.

That first year we didn't spend the summer in Ben Eoin, Gran came to Halifax for Christmas. She woke up early and baked a blueberry grunt with berries she had picked along the bungalow driveway and had frozen all autumn. I was twelve and Sadie fourteen, sophisticated with her

frayed denim skirts and a knowledge of what was *'so cool'* and what was *'so stupid'* seemingly acquired overnight.

"I am not eating *that*," Sadie had spat out disdainfully at our mother in the kitchen, miffed she was being forced to stay home rather than allowed out with her friends. Her lips slick with gloss. I dutifully rolled my eyes in sisterly solidarity.

"Girls." Mum's tone a sharp warning. "She's a lonely woman. Humour her." And I was almost certain Gran's soft shoulders sagged a little lower at dinner, her eyes tinged with red as though stung with saltwater.

The next summer we didn't make it to Ben Eoin either. Or the summers after. The boys had hockey in the city, and Sadie and I had boyfriends and summer jobs. Gran stayed on the island for most Christmases too. Each year she sent cards with wrinkled ten dollar bills to each of us, with the same hand written message inside; *"The lake misses you. Love Gran."* And as we grew up, we drifted apart, as all kids do. And then one by one we drifted away, as Maritime kids do. Sadie and me to Toronto and the boys to Calgary.

But now we're together again, back at the bungalow, each of us pulled to the island to be with Gran while she dies.

Mum's been here a few weeks now, and the cancer took Gran over faster than we thought it would. She broke a bone in her back a few weeks ago, and could no longer walk out to the deck. She decided then she wasn't going to wait much longer- just long enough for all of us to make our way there. Through the Palliative Care program, Dr. MacDonald managed to get a hospital bed into the bungalow for her, but it didn't fit in her bedroom, so it's set up in the sun room facing the water. Silver oxygen tank on the floor on one side of the bed, a container draining yellowish fluid off her lungs on the other.

When I first arrived, she reminded me of a tea bag you tried to use a second time, shriveled and waned. She'd lost so much weight her bones poked at sharp angles under her quilt, her cheeks sunken.

Every night, the four of us sit on the deck and pass around a joint, our legs covered in musty beach towels, looking out where the raft used to be, while Gran ebbs between wakefulness and sleep. Mum at the bedside, injecting her meds when she moans. In her most lucid moments, we reminisce with her about our summers, until her coughing swallows up her laughter and she needs to rest.

The day it happens is so grey it's hard to imagine there's a whole world outside that thick blanket of fog. Grey rocks, grey water, grey sky all blending together. Wind whips off the lake while we sit on the deck in silence. The screen door creaks as Dr. MacDonald pokes his head out, white hair suddenly swept up with the wind, his eyes kind behind his glasses.

“She’s ready.”

We sit around her hospital bed and I grasp her thin, always-warm hand where Dr. MacDonald had placed an IV minutes earlier. Mum tenderly kisses her forehead and my face numbs with the effort of holding back tears, thinking of all the times she tried to tell us to come back. *The lake misses you.*

“Thank you, Gran,” I whisper, sob breaking through. I look out to the water, wind going the wrong way.

And she smiles so serenely when she closes her eyes I can imagine her peacefully drifting, surrounded by that water that’s just a little bit warmer.