

## Cottages Watched, Monuments Restored

When the realtor pulled up to my father's house, I said, "That's it?" And to myself I added, *so that's where the jerk lived*. His place was as small as a detached garage, tall and narrow with gray weathered shingles, located in an undefined area not far from Rockland, Maine. I wondered how he'd ended up in cold, lonely Maine, a place I'd never visited until now, during my four days of bereavement leave. The house had a deeply slanted roof, as if two giant hands had pressed hard on either side, giving an elongated effect. It reminded me of watching my ancient TV; a world no longer formatted to fit my screen.

The tires crunched along the drive of black cinders that formed a loop past the front stoop. We rolled to a stop. The house was a good five feet up on its foundation with steps up to a miniscule porch containing one plastic chair. Lilacs were in bloom to either side. "Cottages Watched, Monuments Restored," claimed a wooden, hand-lettered sign that had been nailed to a magnificent horse chestnut with blossoms held forth in proud white cones. A smaller board below listed a phone number. I pictured the Washington Monument with a man at the base, scrubbing.

"Your father was a respected man, Ms. Baker," the agent, Mrs. Hull, said as she slammed the car door. I asked her to call me Belinda, or Lindy like everyone else. "He knew a lot of people around here, did odd jobs, worked for me from time to time on fixer-uppers. A quiet man. I liked him. We're all in shock over how he died."

"He was not the most popular guy in my family."

Mrs. Hull paused and looked me over again, frowning. "I didn't realize until you

and the lawyer called that he *had* a family. I'm sorry."

Put in my place. "Oh, we're all sorry."

Mrs. Hull was a little older than me, perhaps forty-five, perhaps fifty, with whacked-out frizzy blond hair. She wasn't fat but she wasn't fit either. Parts of her kept sloshing when she paused at the top of the stairs and fished for the key. "In any case, he made a good life for himself here. Do you have family yourself? I mean children?"

"No. My brother has one kid but I've sort of lost track of her. She's with the Mom. Divorce." I shrugged. My brother Buddy was on his third wife.

Inside at first glance was neat and clean, if a little stale. I didn't even know enough to remember whether or not my father had been especially orderly back when he lived with us. I was only seven when he left and maybe it was not the sort of thing I would have noticed. To the right was a bench, similar to one in a park, green metal wrought iron with ornamental curved arms. Under that were all manner of shoes and boots, their mouths gaping and tongues lolling. They looked like an insane choir at full throttle. Two steps forward and I reached a bar-height table that defined the kitchen space beyond. Three black bar stools, one with a seat worn more than the others, lined up in a row with their backs to the entrance. I wondered if my father drank. To the left was the living space containing a leather couch draped with a blue beach towel to hide a low spot, a worn chair, and a TV placed on a black steamer trunk with tarnished brass fittings. The sloped underwall of stairs led to a loft for sleeping, Mrs. Hull said. A bathroom was built into the triangular space created by the stairs. That was pretty much it.

I was walking with hands clasped behind my back like someone in a museum, afraid to touch. I tried to feel some sadness—the sadness that I didn't even know him

well enough to grieve—but in truth I felt nothing except maybe a tight, out-of-breath feeling on behalf of my mother, her quiet resignation, the smooth birthmark on her neck like a splash of rosé, her habit of resting her fingers there as if taking her own pulse.

Mrs. Hull led the way up the steep stairs, her hips bunching under the lattice pattern of her skirt. When my head crested the floor level I felt like some surfacing beast. Mrs. Hull moved to the side and I saw my top half reflected in a mirror set against a large bay window that took up most of the rear wall. The window was not visible from the front of the house but faced a long slope of overgrown lawn leading to a tangled marsh that would no doubt belch mosquitoes at dawn and dusk. Here and there lichen-covered boulders shouldered through the undergrowth.

“How much land?” I asked.

“About five acres. Three are registered wetlands, no development. He did the work on the house himself, blew out some of this back wall, extended it, supported it to create a porch below and this deck up high.”

In the center of the room—the only place to stand upright—lay a futon mattress. I stepped on it, testing: queen-sized and hard as a rock, a down quilt encased in blue flannel folded at the base. No pillows. Did I remember that, no pillows? I guessed it was about fifty degrees upstairs.

“Built-in shelves.” Mrs. Hull pointed. They were open shelves stacked with sweaters, jeans, shoeboxes. I supposed I would have to go through all of it. Maybe I’d find a stash of baby photos tied with cute pink ribbon, or letters of regret. Was I really that pathetic after so many years? But it occurred to me I *did* want to see evidence of my mother, to see her represented here somehow.

The house had been left to both my younger brother and me, but my brother, as usual, had copped out on settling things. “You head out there. I trust you,” he’d told me.

“Our inheritance,” I said, following Mrs. Hull on the way down. She stopped and faced me abruptly in a way I was already recognizing as a trait of hers, as if she had to quit moving to absorb new information. I almost ran into her. “The house,” I clarified, taking a step back up. “Good old Dad came through for us.” Mrs. Hull reminded me of someone. Her face had a silvery sheen, her skin was bad, her eyes were liquid and dark-rimmed, her sharp nose just slightly blunted at the tip. She looked like she was about to cry. I’d think of it eventually.

She wanted to say more to me, I could tell. I waited, but nothing came. How well did she know my father? She had the house key, but then again, she was the realtor.

She locked the door behind us and we strolled around the boundaries of the tamed portion of the yard. His truck had been towed to a spot under a lean-to carport which was attached to a shed that held a lawnmower, truck tires, empty rusty coffee cans, a bike missing a wheel, a water tank with a sprayer, a can of shellac, rakes and shovels and the other miscellaneous and external junk of an interior life I didn’t know much about.

I had time to kill until 3:30 when I had an appointment at “the scene” with the homeowner, one of my father’s cottages-watched clients. The lawyer had persuaded him to let me visit where my father had died. Around here they all knew each other, which helped. Mrs. Hull offered to take me around a bit until then, get a feel for the place, as long as I didn’t mind stopping by her house to let the dog out. I didn’t mind.

On the way over I called home on the cell. “I was just at his house,” I told my mother. “The realtor was kind enough to take me.” I glanced at Mrs. Hull but she was pretending to pay attention to the road.

“And?” my mother asked.

“And it was sort of a pointy little place—neat, clean, impersonal—on five acres, half swamp.” (Wetlands, my ass.)

“Did you see any pictures?”

“What? On the walls?”

“Don’t be obtuse.” My mother might seem fragile but she still has some steel under that surface. Then she sighed. “Well, don’t blame me. I’ve always been curious how he aged.”

“I haven’t been through everything yet. Photos? There was nothing obvious. No sign of anyone else either, if that’s the real question.” It occurred to me too late I could have said something else, that I’d run across some memento of my mother, proof she’d mattered. What might it be? I imagined a little shrine matching the one at home: my mother’s wedding photo flanked by a few candles. Would it be a consolation to her or would it make things worse?

“Mom?” A silence. Mrs. Hull made a right turn. I was inches away from a telephone pole placed right at the edge of the road, which had no shoulder. The road’s double yellow lines were bright, freshly painted, but the worn pavement was marked with the S-curves of out-of-control braking tires.

“Everything here is quaint,” I went on. “For example, we just turned off Buttermilk Lane.” I wished, even after all these years, that I had a cigarette to fill the gaps

with my mother. Sharp inhale. “I saw the lawyer. His office is sort of a storefront in Camden, I swear to God, with gold lettering. I don’t know, twenty minutes from here? I don’t know where I am exactly. Like the lawyer said, he—I mean Dad—specified cremation and no services. Thank God he had the sense not to have a funeral. It’s all over. There was nothing to do but sign some stuff. Buddy will like this part: there’s some money. He must’ve been a saver.” I waited again. “Mom, say something.”

“Are you going—there? I mean to the spot?”

“At 3:30. The lawyer talked him into it. I said I had to see it. I think the deputy or whatever will be there, too. Officer. I only saw part of the report. It had a bunch of spelling errors. Wedged was spelled w-e-g-g-e-d.”

At the top of a rise we veered left onto a driveway. Mrs. Hull’s house was white with black shutters and trim. A matching black and white ceramic cat crept up the side of the garage.

“You were in his thoughts. You and your brother.”

“Right, Mom. He never once contacted us, but we were in his thoughts.”

“He did call once, early on.”

“No way. What? You’re making things up.”

“I said it would just confuse you two. I said not to call again.”

“You said what?”

“Well, Lindy, I certainly thought he’d try harder. I didn’t know he’d be so literal minded. But he wanted out. Out is out. You can’t have it both ways. I swear, this whole thing has got me--”

I told her we were at the realtor’s. I had to go.

“More, later, then.” She sounded tired. She always sounded tired--beyond tired. Mrs. Hull was mouthing something. Her condolences, I realized. I passed them on.

When Mrs. Hull opened the front door a black Lab barreled out of the house and ran in circles, barking. Over the din she asked if I wanted some lunch, but I said no, I’d had a large breakfast with the lawyer. Such hospitality all around. I did ask if I might use the bathroom and lie down a bit. She left me to it and went to make herself a sandwich. The bathroom floor had linoleum tiles from another era, ornate orange, tan and white emblems, practically mandalas. The bathtub was ochre, and black mold stained a small section of grout in the corner tiles. The adjoining guest room had a double bed and on the dresser was a metal watering can filled with plastic daisies. My father had tried to call us, Buddy and me, years ago? I took off my shoes and fell back on the bedspread. On one wall was a print of a room with a window and through the window, pines. Next to this was the actual window, and through it, too, pines. Either way, pines. At the corner of the window frame near a crank type opener was an orange sticky note warning *Do Not Open*. I closed my eyes.

Half an hour later we were on the road again, plunging up and down the twisting two-lanes, headed in a roundabout way toward local color: a lighthouse, which also happened to be where the lawyer had dumped the ashes as stipulated by my father. I thanked Mrs. Hull for carting me around.

“I wish it were under better circumstances.” She turned briefly to face me, and it hit me. She reminded me of the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*. I can’t really say why, something about the nose. *If I only had a heart*. Now all those songs would get in my

head.

I turned to look out the passenger window. Shrubbery flashed by, some evergreen, some graced with the barest of spring gauze. Green boxes for the Bangor Daily News nestled next to their regular mailbox neighbors. We rushed past boats up on blocks, tarps over woodpiles, a tractor tire marking a driveway, white tanks like giant lozenges, and everywhere bald rock dotted with age. And the vocabulary of the place—harpoon this, harbor that, Hart’s Neck, points, quarries, coves, seals, sails, driftwood, lobsters, docks, ports...it was such waterlogged Ye Olde Americana. I was almost enjoying myself.

We passed through a stone gateway to a road that narrowed even further. A sign warned of a hidden drive. Why single out this particular one, I thought. Around here they all seemed hidden.

“Marshall Point,” Mrs. Hull announced. There was a museum but I wasn’t interested. A white ramp or walkway led to the lighthouse, which wasn’t open and was much smaller than I’d imagined. Didn’t lighthouses have to be tall? I stood out there a while in the breeze—the cold always invigorates me—then retraced my steps and clambered over rocks to get closer to the ocean, which roared and hissed in a satisfying way. So that’s where he was now, lapping at rocks.

Mrs. Hull had wandered down a slope to a large black granite memorial. Eventually I joined her there.

“This is new,” she told me. Etched in a curved line were the words, “St. George Fishermen Memorial” above the image of a guy in a cap steering a ship’s wheel. Names of the drowned were etched on the opposite side and the whole thing was set on a giant compass rose.



“Picturesque.” I waved my hand at the entire spread.

Mrs. Hull nodded. The wind whipped a strand of hair into her mouth and she hooked it away. At some point she’d pulled on a lumpy gray sweater, but still her nose dripped. I thought of the Tin Man greased to life by the oilcan.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been keeping you out here. I’m weird. I don’t really feel the cold like other people,” I said.

“No.” She wrapped the sweater tighter. “It’s just—it’s almost time.”

Rough-hewn boulders and low-slung telephone wires lined the causeway leading to the island. We rounded a curve and turned down a steep drive, a tunnel in the foliage with pines crowding on either side making a brushing sound against the car. “Hardly a cottage,” I said when I saw the house.

“No.” Mrs. Hull agreed. She pulled in next to a squad car. “I think I’ll wait here.”

“You might as well come in,” I said.

Wet blossoms fallen from a pink rhododendron plastered a boulder by the front entry. We rang the bell and they must have been waiting right there because the door opened immediately. We stood awkwardly half in and half out for a few moments as everyone introduced everyone else. The police officer looked no older than a high school kid, a long skinny face and big oval teeth.

Roger, the homeowner, shook his head. “A terrible thing.” He was a hollowed-out guy of about seventy, still large-framed but he’d lost some power over the years. “I’m sorry this is so difficult.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I really didn’t know him well. He left us when I was

seven. My brother was five.”

“Still, it must be difficult.”

I wasn’t going to argue with him about it. We traipsed upstairs to a large open living room with a vaguely red, white and blue theme jarred by one incongruous pale pink armchair. A floor-to-ceiling wall of windows faced the ocean. I walked across the room to the windows. The house was built into the rock slope of the island and the restless water below sparkled with light. Through the trees I could see a huge cylindrically shaped boulder, like a giant can with a crack in it, and beyond that a few other pine-studded islands, their rock bases stained up to the tide line where stone bleached white in the sun.

“Incredible view,” I said.

“I’m fortunate.” Roger paused. “I’m never sure with folks around here if tomorrow means tomorrow—but with your father it did. I mean to say, he was very reliable and I depended on him each year to air out the house in the spring and to shut it down in the fall. I knew I could count on him to keep an eye on the place when I wasn’t around.”

I nodded. Now I was looking at a large unframed acrylic painting above the fireplace. Lots of movement, a landscape of a mountain painted with the slashing marks of a large brush or palette knife, predominately blues and grays but with wedges of white and streaks of pure red. It looked as if someone had crumpled the canvas in a fit of rage and then tried to straighten it out again.

“Mount Katahdin.” Roger said and Mrs. Hull nodded.

I realized the officer—Jeff—was watching me. What did he expect from me?

“Maybe we should get on with it,” I said.

Roger opened sliding glass doors and we stepped onto an upper deck. I was struck again by the underlying brackish tang of the sea. At the waterline ugly brown seaweed swayed sluggishly under a few wheeling gulls. Roger led us down outdoor stairs to the lower deck, down more steps to the opening of the crawl space. “He was going to come by a few days before I got up here for the summer. I was delayed, though. I’ve been thinking about that.”

That meant he might have found my father in time, I realized. “It’s not your fault,” I said.

“It was an accident,” Mrs. Hull echoed.

Roger bent to pull up a tiny sapling. The place looked wild but I could see he’d done a bit of work keeping it under control. Groundcover was all in bloom, tiny white blossoms mixed with a few random violets, and the lime green of new growth tipped the branches of the pines. It really was a beautiful spot. The opening to the crawl space was about a yard square.

“He couldn’t have gotten stuck here,” I said. I crouched down to see in and Jeff squatted next to me, pointing.

“See to the right? That’s where we found him. That other window. South side.” A few words from the report floated through my head like sunspots. Five to seven days.

I shaded my eyes to see better. Algae grew thick and green on the frame of the opening. The foundation or floor of the crawl space appeared to be concrete poured over lumpy bedrock. This surface sloped up toward the back of the crawl space, narrowing from the height of a stooping man to less than six inches. Blackened posts supported the

house above while pipes wrapped in crumbling insulation snaked here and there, draped with cobwebs. The whole damp dark underside looked like something no one should know about. No wonder old Roger had hired someone else to go in there.

“Why did he go over there?” I asked Jeff. “Why didn’t he just go in here?”

“Well, he did go in here. We could see the scuffmarks. He propped open both smaller windows from the inside, for ventilation, then came back out.”

We stood up.

“Come around here,” Jeff said. I could tell he was in a subdued way enjoying himself, unveiling the mystery of it.

We trooped through undergrowth around the side of the house, past a coiled hose, pinecones crunching underfoot. The original window opening at ground level was about two feet square. A chunk had been cut away, I assumed to remove the body, leaving a patch of fresh raw wood.

I squatted again, with one hand down to steady myself, and peered in.

“Which way?” I asked.

“Facing inward.”

Facing out would have been a whole lot better, I thought. At least he would have had a view. He might have been heard calling for help. Maybe he could have survived drinking dew, eating grass, or something. I looked at the ground, my hand against green: moss, some delicate star-shaped bursts, a few ferns still in a fetal curl. Behind me I heard the chugging drone of a boat and the insistent, loud piping of some bird. I lost my balance and went to my knees onto soft red pine needles. I was aware this movement looked like sorrow, but it wasn’t. Jeff once again hunkered down next to me.

“His head, left arm and shoulder were all the way in. His right shoulder was through but the arm was wedged along his side. He made quite an effort but he couldn’t move either way, in or out. He really fought hard.” Jeff sounded impressed by this. “His cell phone was about six inches beyond his reach. We think it fell out of his pocket when he was in there opening the windows. Then he went to look for it and noticed it right near this window and thought he could reach in real quick from the outside and got stuck. We think it went something like that.”

Jeff stood and brushed himself off. He held out a hand to me. I ignored it despite feeling a little dizzy getting up.

“You can’t get a signal out here all the time anyway,” Roger said. I nodded even though his comment didn’t make much sense in light of the circumstances. I tried not to look at Mrs. Hull, who had taken a deep shuddering breath. I was having a hard time imagining the whole scene but I felt I owed it to my father to try. I pictured the initial disbelief and the struggle, which I saw as an animal writhing in a trap, desperate enough to gnaw off a limb. He was caught so thoroughly, though, so centrally--there was nothing to gnaw. The house loomed above. When did he recognize he would never get free? For the first time I wondered if my father had had his reasons for leaving us all those years ago, reasons of pure survival. At this point I saw quite literally a black curtain descending, keeping me from my father and any more thoughts.

I realized I had closed my eyes, like a long blink. Maybe they thought I needed to pray because Mrs. Hull said, “We’ll leave you here for a moment.”

I gathered a couple violets and dropped the miniature bouquet into the crawl space. This made me feel foolish or false in some way, so I turned back to the ocean. It

seemed rougher now. Maybe the tide was coming in, inevitable as memory: Buddy and I got home from school and I ran to my mother as usual and she held up her hand. “Not now, Lindy. I need a moment of silence.” My brother and I waited squashed and fidgeting side-by-side in the blue recliner as the room grew darker and darker and my mother stared at her hands curled together on her lap. Finally Buddy asked, “When are we going to eat?” This was just like him, to think only of himself. I punched him on the arm as hard as I could to shut him up, and what I recall most is his look of pure surprise—usually we were on the same side—and then my mother’s voice, coming automatically, “No hitting.”

“And after that—” I said aloud, “They lived silently ever after.” Had my mother really done that to us? Cut us off from him? I dug around for my cell phone. Roger was right, though, I couldn’t get a signal on the island.

“I can’t help it,” I said to Mrs. Hull, as we headed back toward my father’s house. “I find *cottages watched* ironic. I find *monuments restored* even more ridiculous. The loftiness of it all.” Something had been let loose. I didn’t care what she thought of me.

“You *do* know what a monument is.” She sounded annoyed or accusing or maybe just upset. “It’s a gravestone.”

“I know,” I said even though I honestly hadn’t been thinking in that vein.

“The weather around here is hard on stone, let alone houses. Salt, ice, soot, fungus, algae. Even acid rain. They all corrode the surface. Cleaning these stones can be tricky. Bleach is a no-no, it exposes the underlayer to decay. You never clean a stone that appears to be distressed. Surface cracks, flaking, scaling. Stone has a *skin*. You have to be

gentle.”

“Show me.” I was suddenly angry at the prim little lecture. “I have the urge to visit a cemetery.”

She made a quick turn, causing a box of tissues to slide viciously from one side to the other near the back window. I tried to call my mother but she didn’t answer. Why didn’t she pick up? Superimposed over these twisting roads I saw the straight grid of streets in our old neighborhood out west. I was on my bike and my dad drove by and stopped at the sign. All he had to do was make a right and two driveways down was our house. But he just sat there, hands on the wheel, looking forward. Maybe I was about to call out and wave, get his attention. Maybe I was going to race him home on my bike. But I didn’t do either. For years I was stuck on this moment, a child believing in my own magical significance. I thought if I had just called out to him the whole course of events would’ve changed. I know better now, of course.

A few minutes later we pulled onto a dirt shoulder at the head of a U-shaped gravel drive in a flat area cleared of trees. I climbed out of the car, ignored the looping drive and set out amongst the stones. Mrs. Hull was right. Several of them had seen better days and were hardly legible. A faded plastic Winnie-the-Pooh sat at the base of stained white marble and, just beyond, a high school senior photograph beamed from a frame mounted on a gleaming granite facade.

Mrs. Hull’s shoes crunched on the gravel. She continued past me, her steps going silent on the grass as she aimed for a small separate area set off by a low, ornamental fence. I followed.

In the fenced area four stones all displayed the same last name, DARST. One was

a double monument shaped like two side-by-side hearts that reminded me of a snapshot of my niece taken when she was about a year old, the heart-shaped lenses of her sunglasses. I checked the dates. The girls buried under that double headstone were born on the same date—twins—and they'd both died on the same day, too, about eight years later, May 7, 1983. Three other gravestones nearby had different birthdays but all that same date of death, May 7.

“Your father worked on these,” Mrs. Hull said.

“You know the family? Did he?”

There was that funny little pause of hers while she processed. Then she shook her head. “A whole family, wiped out in one day.” Out came the crumpled Kleenex. I understood then. She hoped to restore my father to me and me to myself, wanted him to die twice and me to suffer it twice. She wanted me to feel the pain, she'd been waiting all day, taking me from place to place, expecting me to collapse under the great weight of human tragedy. I wanted to tell her, *my loss is not your loss*. She could wait as long as she liked here in this graveyard with her pockmarked skin and her skirt flapping against her thighs and the low clouds scudding overhead. It wouldn't happen. I was not the sort to crack again.

Back in the car I contemplated the full weight of my inheritance. Tonight my shoes would join the jumble under the bench and I'd climb the stairs to the loft, where I would lie flat and alone on that hard and pillowless futon, keeping careful guard over the damaged cottages of the past and polishing the tomb that is my heart.

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