

Adult Short Story
Honorable Mention

By Laura Van Oudenaren

When my father called us to that plot of land in Bramwell, West Virginia, we came. From Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles and Brooklyn, we came. Like lambs to the slaughter, we came.

As children, we dressed for dinner in suits and ties, pale pink dresses for me.

“This is how the Roosevelts dined,” he would say, surveying the four bowed blond heads at his altar.

My father was a man of Joyce and Proust, of history and tradition. He could recite the classics word for word and explain how rocket engines worked. Every morning he rose before dawn and padded to his study to write essays on a yellow steno pad with Ticonderoga pencils he selected from a long line of sharpened points. When the points were dulled and the steno pads full, he typed them on a Selectric typewriter and mailed them to editors who never responded.

Outside there was a modern world of cell phones and big screens, and my father wanted none of it. Within the walls of his home, we felt like prehistoric beetles trapped for an eternity in amber; every night we read our books before a woodburning fire, ignoring the modern thermostat beside it.

At 38, I still could not shake the childish belief that my father knew everything. Like a potter at a wheel, he had shaped my brothers and me—stand up straight, take pride in work, *Thessalonians 3:10*, “For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.”

In the airport, I spotted my brothers immediately, their heads rising above the crowds like driftwood on an undulating sea. “You are of pure Dutch stock,” my father used to say, as if our hair and height were not a proverbial string-around-the-finger of our heritage.

A journalist from Dallas, an investment banker from Brooklyn, a statistician from Denver, we met at the baggage claim in Terminal 3 because our father had called us, the tinny ring of the phone no different from the golden bell that summoned us to dinner in our childhood.

John, the oldest, spoke first.

“I don’t know the first thing about building a log cabin.”

“I only took a week off work,” said Adam, rolling his eyes and shouldering his bag.

“Let’s just take an Uber,” John was already opening the app. “It’s a few hours away. We can split the fare.”

My father had called us to a 7-acre plot about 15 miles west of a 400-person town in West Virginia, a five-hour drive from Montgomery County, Maryland, where we grew up. On the phone, he had been cordial, asking about my business and my health. I was reading tarot cards for a living, not because I believed in them, but because my clients did, and because my rent on El Segundo Boulevard was \$950 a month, and a reading cost \$115 an hour. My father rarely called, so I stayed on the line until I heard a long sigh accompanied by the creak of a chair as he announced, “I’d like you to help your brothers build me a log cabin.”

He spoke of hard work and not taking short cuts, of the importance of nature and the need for solitude. A log cabin in the woods was a dream of his, like Thoreau, he told me, but he would only be satisfied if he built it with his own hands, like Thoreau, he repeated. I had to move money out of my savings to book the ticket: *Eight of Swords*, feeling trapped and out of options.

In the car, we talked politics and I asked about my brothers’ wives. As we pulled down the dirt path that could hardly be called a driveway, Daniel, closest in age to me and the brother who had strayed furthest from the flock—a cocktail-drinking investment banker—ventured, “Maybe he has cancer.”

We digested this possibility in silence. In the seat behind Daniel, my Facebook wouldn’t load, and I suddenly grew aggravated that my father, true to his nature, found land with no cell phone service.

“F**k,” I heard from a few seats over, and I knew that John had come to the same realization fruitlessly reloading his e-mail.

He didn’t have cancer. He had red cedars, two chain saws and a rented stump grinder. He was standing in the middle of a small clearing, squinting as we pulled up. My father was tall and fat, with a grizzled beard and a bald head. In his later years, he had relaxed the formal attire he

donned in our childhood and had turned to brown corduroy pants hitched up by a pair of navy-blue suspenders slung on either side of his belly.

My brothers climbed out of the car like drips from a leaky faucet, each one hovering in the doorway to survey the clearing before dropping onto the needled ground. The last to emerge, I knew only that what I was seeing was not what I had expected.

“I thought he would have ordered a kit or something,” I heard someone mutter, and I realized that I, too, was expecting something more than a clearing and a chainsaw. When my father had called to ask me to help him build a log cabin, I didn’t actually expect to have to build one. Not like this.

My father, smiling, rushed forward with his hand extended. He shook my brothers’ hands and hugged me, asking how our travel went.

“We really should get started,” he broke off, just as Daniel was telling him about a long layover. “Don’t want to lose any daylight.”

“Do you know how to do this?” Adam asked.

My father ignored the question.

“Why don’t you set your tents up here?” he said instead, pointing to his blue and gray single-person Coleman tent. Adam helped me erect my Walmart-brand one. I ripped the tags off and stashed them in my bag. When we were done, we had built a semi-circle village, a half-moon of fraternity nestled in the forest floor.

My father had brought a plastic picnic table, upon which he laid out a cabin floorplan, stenciled on yellow steno paper and a dog-eared book titled, *How to Build a Log Cabin*. He summoned us to the table, where we waited, expectantly. As children, my father had often arranged us in the same way, circled around him so that he could bestow some kind of knowledge upon us—the genus and phylum of a butterfly he had found, the ashy quality of a soil sample, a notable passage in a book he was reading, or a lesson on morality from Corinthians.

When I was younger, my father wielded the inevitability of adulthood like a foreign enemy for which we must train to outwit. Every lecture was dictated with urgency, as if it were his last chance to equip us with knowledge for that afterlife that followed childhood, the vast unknown

that struck fear into my father's heart, the fear that we would be inadequately prepared for life beyond his erudite wing.

We were grown now. I ran my own business. In adulthood, I seldom reached for the tools my father had so carefully crafted for me. I never needed to discuss Dostoyevsky at a dinner party or know the genus of a species. I did not want to learn how to build a cabin. In my mind, I flipped a tarot card. *The Hierophant*, "have faith that you are a master in the making."

"First we need to fell the trees," my father explained. "We're looking for 30 to 40-foot pine trees. We're looking for consistency in thickness."

"How many trees?" John asked.

"I've estimated about 61."

"You want us to cut down 61 trees?" Adam asked, elongating the *s* in *61* so it sounded more like a hiss than a number.

My father looked up from his floor plan, which was nearly gray with penciled notes in the margins.

"Abby, what did you think I meant when I asked you to come help me build a log cabin?"

While John and Daniel nervously compared the heft of the two chain saws, I volunteered to drive to town to buy enough food and water for the night.

"Get beer too," John called to me.

I didn't need to be told.

Route US-52 was a shaded winding road fortified by a slash of trees that bled into the town below. I steered my father's pickup truck into the parking lot of the Dollar General. I bought white bread and chips, jars of peanut butter and jelly, cold cuts and prepackaged sliced cheese, Oreos, crackers and M&Ms, food that would make my father fatter.

Growing up, we ate like the characters in my father's classic novels. I was raised to help my mother cook pots of stew and fresh bread, nothing packaged or modern. The first time I drank soda pop I was 15 years old, and it felt like the devil was dancing in my mouth.

But I watched the rigidity of my father's rules soften as each of my brothers departed for college, the great unknown where my brothers spoke of not just parties and alcohol, but people who had televisions in their bedrooms and who played video games instead of going to class. When I joined my brother Adam at the University of Maryland, I felt as if I travelled not just through counties, but time.

Then there were the days when my mother fell sick and could not cook for my father, and then, too sick to rise from bed. I came home from college to find the kitchen packed with frozen pizzas and packaged Triscuit crackers. I imagined my father standing in the aisles of the grocery store, the purity of his ideals powerless before the reality that he had never learned to cook. I imagined him trapped inside the labyrinth of numbered aisles, brow furrowed before the menagerie of peanut butters.

Then were the years after my mother passed, when he no longer needed to cook for two, when I found McDonald's wrappers and half-eaten KitKat bars in the trash, the convenience of the modern world seeping into his cells like the cancer that took my mother.

The blue-eye shadowed woman at the Dollar General eyed my cart warily above the metronome of the scanning barcodes, pausing briefly at the stack of paper plates.

"You camping around here?" she finally asked, unable to stifle her curiosity.

"My father just bought property about 20 miles west of here."

"Oh, no s**t? Out by the Sullivans' old land?"

"I don't know."

"What's he doing out there?"

"We're building a log cabin for him. Kind of like a writing cabin, I guess."

The scanning stopped. She blinked so slowly I could see the blue eye shadow crusted in the corner of her eyes.

“You’re building?”

“My brothers and I.”

“You buy one of them kits?” she punctuated her words with the *beep* of a gallon jug of water.

“No,” I answered.

She scanned the rest of the items in silence.

“\$182.43 is your total,” she said with a final beep.

I stopped at a liquor store that looked more like a bookshelf squeezed in the corner of a local bar. I looked for Sauvignon Blanc and craft beer, but the best I could find were four cases of Bud Light and a bottle of Lord Calvert.

An old country station playing Hank Williams serenaded me back to the dirt road that led to my father’s land. Through the trees, the bright colors of our tents looked like pockmarks on the face of the forest floor, primary-colored blemishes against the monochrome of brown and green.

There was my father’s blue and gray dome, my shamrock Walmart tarp, the yellow of John’s North Face wind flap. But I couldn’t find the neon-red of Adam’s two-sleeper.

As I pulled the truck closer, I saw it. Our little half-smile of a campground slashed in two by a felled tree, its branches reaching out to the unscathed tents like grasping tentacles, the folds of Adam’s crushed red tent peeking out from its edges like a pool of blood, shards of the plastic picnic table littering the ground beside it.

John was in the middle of it, using the chain saw to break apart the campsite intruder, his foot leveraged against the tree, wadded up tissues in his ear to drown out the sound. He powered down the saw when he saw me approaching.

“I cut it the wrong way,” he said sheepishly.

And then, before stuffing the tissues back in his ears and turning his attention to the saw, “Adam can bunk with me tonight.”

“57 trees to go,” Daniel said dryly as he reached for a Bud Light in the cooler. John and Adam were hauling the remaining logs from the campsite, taking shreds of Adam’s tent with them. My father was prodding the campfire with a branch from the offending tree, and I was stirring a can of Campbell’s soup set up over the propane stove.

“Abby, you can start debarking the trees tomorrow,” my father said. “I’ll show you how.”

I wondered if my father had ever debarked a tree before, or if it was simply something he had read about in his books. Sometimes he blurred the lines between what was real to him, and what was real to the characters in his novels.

When dark fell, we were nestled around a campfire with bottles of Bud Light and a plastic carton of Oreos resting on a log.

Daniel and Adam argued in hushed voices about politics. John and my father stared into the fire, with John occasionally looking up to ask a question about the cabin—did the trees need to dry? My father didn’t think so. What came after debarking? Splitting.

I watched the flames lift their arms to the heavens and fought the urge to check my phone.

“Abby, how’s Paul?” My father asked the question I had been dreading since the plane touched down at Dulles. I felt my face grow hot with the shame, not just because of my looming future as a single 38-year-old, but of relinquishing my grip on the last person who kept me tethered to the possibility of a white picket fence and children.

“We’re getting a divorce,” I said sharply, leaning back in my camp chair so my father could not see my face.

My father had never liked Paul, but he liked the institution of marriage. Daniel and Adam’s conversation halted.

“That’s too bad,” my father said.

“Sorry, Abs,” John added.

Beneath their placid tones I felt the stirring of judgment, little waves of thoughts I tried to keep at bay. I was the last to get married and the first to get divorced. Our relationship only lasted two years and eight months.

“I’ve already signed the papers,” I taunted, growing irritated at the mere possibility that my father should question me. “And don’t give me any crap about Tolstoy’s Karenina refusing divorce. Paul was messaging 22-year-olds he met on Tinder.”

My brothers looked up at my combative tone. I couldn’t remember if any of us had ever spoken to our father that way.

“Tolstoy never had Tinder,” my father placated.

I waited for more, but it didn’t come. When the fire started to die, no one reached to put another log on it.

I was the last to retreat to my tent. From my station at the fire, I could see little stars of reading lights twinkling through each canvas. Inside my tent, my own book waited for me, a copy of *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith and a dollar store reading light, my own star to add to the constellation, a family crest by my father’s hand. He was in our bones, I thought, looking out at the muffled lights.

That night I fell asleep to the snap of dying embers and woke up to the sound of a chain saw.

My father gave me a hatchet, a draw knife and a 5-in-1 painter’s tool. He showed me how to strike the hatchet into the bark with enough strength to sever it, but so gently it left the tree beneath unscathed. Then he slid the painter’s tool under the crack and began peeling the bark away like shells from a hardboiled egg.

I found that if I slid the flat blade of the hatchet underneath, I could peel off swaths of bark at a time. Sometimes I could free a section the size of my torso, revealing the smooth underbelly of the tree beneath. But when the bark was moist or the tree healthy, I could only chip away at miniature sections, releasing them to the forest floor like a dog shedding its winter coat, one hair at a time.

I worked to the rev and buzz of the chain saws, the low wail of progress. Every so often its sound would cease for a few moments and I imagined my brothers pausing for water, taking turns with the saws until their arms tired. By mid-morning, my own forearms were aching, and my fingers were cramping from gripping the tools too tightly. I had heard the crash of three trees since I began working and absorbed their tremors through the soles of my feet. Fifty-four more to go.

At noon we stopped for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and handfuls of Cool Ranch Doritos. We ate as if we had not eaten in days, reaching for another sandwich just as we finished swallowing the one before it. John walked me back to my clearing, and I felt a twinge of pride when I saw that I had almost finished two trees in their entirety.

I wished Paul could see me with my hair pulled back under a ball cap, my forearms sunburned, and my belly swollen from overeating. He had often complained that I was too obsessed with my appearance, too *Los Angeles*. He called my makeup routine pageantry and my Instagram account a farce.

When I found his Tinder account, I called him a hypocrite and a liar, flinging words, wishing they were objects—a dish, a coaster, a faded paperback. I remembered my mother once hurled her dinner plate at my father, but she missed and hit the wall behind him.

They were fighting about whether my brothers and I should be allowed to listen to the radio—my father won, the house stayed silent. But my mother's plate shattered into seven slivers, and the mashed potatoes from her dinner slid down the wall behind my father like a single bloated tear. Later that night my mother woke me up and lead me to the car in my pajamas and slippers. She punched the dial on the radio and we sat in silence for a few minutes, listening to a stream of achy female voices begging, *Do you have to let it linger? You've got me wrapped around your finger.* "It's the Cranberries," she said before turning it off.

I whispered that song to myself as I straddled the tree trunk, cutting and scraping. Maybe we were destined, my mother and I, to fight but never win. Beneath me, the bark peeled and peeled, free at last to float to the forest floor.

I was just starting on the base of the third tree when I heard it. The sun had just decided to begin sinking toward the horizon, and my forearms were pulsing with the ache of overuse. A

man's voice cut through the forest, a loud yell. *Gaaaaaahhhhh*, I heard. And then, Goddamn it. *GODDAMN IT*. Adam, I thought. Or maybe Daniel.

I ran toward the voice, my feet crushing every growth in their path, leaving behind a trail of bent grass kowtowing toward the forest floor. I was the last to reach the clearing, the sun peering through the holes that two felled trees had left behind. The trees lay flaccid on the ground. Adam crouched above one, clutching his hand. Blood flowed from it freely, leaving wine stains on the earth below.

"S**t, s**t s**t," moaned Adam.

"I'll get ice and a bag."

John was gone, peeling off toward the campsite.

"S**t, s**t, s**t."

"Let's get you to the truck," Daniel nodded to me to help Adam up. He was standing over Adam, one hand on his brother and the other held outward, palm up. As I walked toward Adam, I saw why Daniel stood so still—in his hand he held Adam's fingers, two sheet-white severed digits punctuating the palm of his hand, a quotation mark in a pool of blood.

"Let's go, Adam." I grabbed him beneath the armpits. "We have to get you to the hospital."

Adam whimpered, but he stood up, clutching his damaged right hand in his left. Daniel grabbed one elbow with his free hand. I looked back at the clearing, the sun setting on the gaping mouth cut into the base of a half-felled tree, the blood that now looked like dirt, and my father, his eyes wide and his face pale, staring at the place where Adam had been.

"Let's go, Dad," I said over my shoulder.

In the hospital waiting room, Daniel clutched a ziplock bag, inside of which rested a bed of ice and Adam's pointer and middle fingers. John filled out the paperwork, and a chubby black nurse wearing lavender scrubs ushered Adam behind a curtain.

The waiting room was sterile white, and we were flung over chairs like discarded garments. Our skin and clothes were flecked with color—dirt, bark, sawdust, blood. We were all sunburned, the top of my father’s head a dusty rose.

“You done cut off your fingers,” I heard the nurse say from behind the privacy screen. “How’d you do a thing like that?”

I couldn’t hear Adam’s response, but I could hear hers—a raucous, tipped-back head kind of laugh that resided deep within her ample belly.

“You?” she laughed. “You tried to build a *log* cabin? Boy, you can’t be serious.”

I thought of Adam, tall and thin, a Denver statistician who liked board games, baseball and Izod button-down shirts, trying to maneuver a chain saw, and suddenly I was laughing too. My throat was tight from holding back tears, so the laugh came out strained, almost choked.

Like the cautious crescendo of a wind chime in a light breeze, my brothers joined me in my laughter, and, then, finally, with a great gust, my father chortled.

We laughed and laughed. Each time I thought I had wrung the last one from my body, another emerged like a deep primal roar. Together we formed a concerto, my father’s chuckle, Daniel’s staccato, John’s belly laugh, my throaty bursts, and somewhere behind a curtain, Adam’s strangled giggles.

John, the oldest, spoke first, to my father.

“You probably should have just bought a kit.”

My father wiped a tear from his eye, a lingering reminder of the laugh we shared.

“Next year,” he nodded. “We’ll try again next year.”