

A CABIN

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An unmarked country road led Stevie and Ruth into the foothills. The Appalachians disappeared behind a thick canopy of trees as Stevie slowly drove the car over shallow bridges crossing a spring-fed creek guiding them through the weft of pine and cedar growing thicker with every minute. Their GPS gave out as they drove further in, but hand-painted signs placed by the rental company marked their way to the cabin. Stevie put the car into off-road mode to climb a steep hill, hanging his head out the window to get a close look at the dirt sliding under the tires with each turn.

“I don’t think they rent these cabins only to people with 4x4s, you know,” Ruth said.

“Can’t be too careful right now,” said Stevie.

After the car climbed the final hill, Stevie pulled up to the cabin, coming slowly to a stop. In the foreground rested an amber-colored log cabin guarding

over the view beyond where a single, sloping hill of green farmland grass pointed straight out to the mountains, a picture framed by the pines lifting on either side of their sight, and all of Appalachia filling up the background. Clouds slowly drifted over the big humps in the distance, a blue sky overhead. It could not have been more beautiful. They were here, finally. They had made it out of the city.

Stevie parked the car facing outward, popped the back hatch open, and began unloading boxes of groceries and a cooler of drinks. Ruth got out of the car and took off with the dog, bounding around the cabin and quickly out into the grasses. With each trip inside, Stevie learned more about this space they'd be using for the weekend. It had been built using real wood, but it was definitely a kit order, erected as a single, A-frame home with one big, open room and a kitchenette in the corner. The bathroom took up one corner behind the only walls inside the open cabin, shaping the interior space into an L-shaped studio. An old sofa sat in the middle and acted as a partition between the bed and the kitchen space. It was all very small, but it was a fine enough place to be, especially after all the recent months of being stuffed into their apartment in the city, day in and day out just listening to sirens go by in the streets below. Stevie decided the cabin was a dusty, old place, but he knew it would be good

for them, regardless. They were safe here and they were alone. He finished unloading the car and walked out the back of the cabin to get a look at the view. The patio stood elevated above the ground because the cabin had been built on a slope and stacked on beams, raising the view outward from the cabin above any obstruction to see everything far off and miles away. There were other cabins available to rent, but he imagined a view like this when he secured the reservation, and he was glad to see it now that he was here on the patio, in person. It made up for any of the shortcomings. He'd be spending most of his time out there, Stevie thought.

“Have you looked outside?” Stevie asked Ruth.

“It's magical,” she said.

Sun poured through the blinds, filling the room with orange light. The dust that covered the blinds and sat on all the fixtures stood out in the light of the evening as shadow lines striped the floor, putting everything to sleep. Before he finished setting their things, Stevie picked up the cabin rule book sitting on the kitchen table. He skimmed over it and noted the few particulars, like how they'd have to pack out their trash when leaving. It was unusual, but he did not want to complain. Stevie then placed everything where it belonged and threw a couple drinks into the fridge, moved their duffels over to the bed,

set out the dog bowl, and covered the sofa with a sheet from the closet. He had read about that in the guestbook, and the whole chore seemed a bit unnecessary for places that accepted pets for overnight stays. It was something his mother might suggest if they took guests, and the sheet didn't even match the rest of the linen. But Stevie and Ruth never could keep the dog off the furniture and he worried what would happen here or if he could lose his deposit over something as silly as dog hair on the sofa. Already he was worrying too much, he thought. His worries were supposed to have been left back in the city, where the pandemic made everything impossible, unsafe, and dangerous. He did not come out here to worry, but even having that, it felt like a privilege he didn't deserve. Ruth came in through the door with the dog and Stevie felt calmed.

"I set the bed," he said.

"Is that all you ever think about?" Ruth responded.

"I wasn't even suggesting that," Stevie said. He paused and with a grin replied, "Although."

"It's like there's nothing for you to do during quarantine but drink and have sex."

"You've sure got a handle on one of those."

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Forget it.”

Stevie tried to clear his thoughts. He looked at the cabin, its open space, the warm light from the evening, the view of the mountains visible through the blinds. With everything in its right place, Stevie reached for the remote that controlled the satellite. At home, they didn’t have a television subscription, but there was something enjoyable about bad movies on a vacation. He turned on the TV and let it play.

“Are we cooking tonight?” asked Ruth.

“We can,” Stevie said.

“Didn’t we intend to cook?”

“I wonder if it makes any difference,” he said. Stevie turned his gaze toward the window and for the first time in a long while, he didn’t see a city in disarray but the earth sat still and at peace. “What’s happening out there doesn’t seem real from this distance. Just think of all the people who can’t cook tonight. It’s unreal that we’re even able to be here.”

“Oh, I did not come out here to talk like that,” said Ruth.

“Who are we to take a vacation right now?”

“Two people in need of a break, like everyone else.”

“You’re right,” said Stevie. “I’m going to watch for the sunset.”

Stevie stepped out to the back patio while Ruth moved around inside. The wooden deck stretched from each side and was contained by a waist-high banister of fresh, untreated wood. There were two large, factory-made, maple rocking chairs to his left, and to the right the proprietors had installed a jacuzzi that took up the rest of the outdoor space. Stevie rocked back into one of the chairs on the patio, taking in the scene. And just as he let out his breath, the air-conditioner unit came on and blasted a wave of hot air into Stevie. The noise of the air-conditioner overtook the sound of the crickets and became the only thing Stevie could hear. He got frustrated and wanted to complain about the cheap design, but if they didn’t want to melt over the weekend, he’d have to get over it. There up ahead, unmoved by all the noise, were the mountains changing color in the sunset. It did not seem real to him. It even seemed unfair. A whole world of people existed out there in the distance and millions of them were dying. Stevie sat in the chair watching the trees turn black as shadows came down over them. The jacuzzi turned over occasionally, emitting a low rumble underneath the rustling of trees in the wind. Billows of the grass in the pasture leaned with the touch of the breeze. It was a clearing, all this space behind the cabin. A barbed fence ran through the middle of it, but a tractor

had come through and dragged the grass not too long before. He couldn't think of why anyone would go to such trouble for this small piece of land. There wasn't any access except from the cabin and it wasn't large enough for any gardening, so it had to be cleared just for the view. Stevie couldn't imagine who had the time or the money for such a small thing right now. He was just thankful that he was here, and here with his wife. The sky stayed blue awhile after the sun dropped away, but everything faded quickly on this side of the mountains. Soon, the sky faded into a near-black, only visible against the line of trees hiding the rest of the light.

The door creaked as Ruth stepped out. "I'm getting in," she said, pointing to the jacuzzi. Stevie looked over to see her lifting the cover and holding it over her head with one hand to run her hand through the water. "I guess this is the control for the jets?" she asked. She hit the right button and the water stirred.

"This is your birthday," Stevie said.

"I'm getting drunk in the hot tub," she said.

She went back into the cabin and as the door opened to inside, the dog got out. Stevie went for the leash, tying the dog to one of the beams of the patio. He sat back down in the rocking chair, patting the dog on the head as she came

over, begging to be let go. He looked up just as the last of the daylight washed out. He was glad to have caught it.

Ruth came out just as quickly as she had gone in. She wore only a robe now and in one hand she held a highball glass. She raised the drink above her head and twirled in place. "Look what I found," she said. She moved over to the jacuzzi and pulled the cover all the way off. Stevie heard the jets kick on again, followed by his wife's cooing and wonder. He enjoyed the times when she was happy. It felt good to do good things that made her happy.

"Do you think anyone can see us?" she asked.

"It's just us," he said.

"That's what I was hoping."

Ruth slung her hair back over her shoulders and leaned down to slip out of the robe and just before she slid into the water, she stood there briefly, exposing her nude body. Stevie studied her. She looked back, watching him admire her. She was beautiful. Everything that had happened to this point seemed to make sense, if he could be here with her. It was always so much struggle to get to these moments, but they were in one now. Ruth gracefully stepped over the edge of the jacuzzi and into the water as the light of the tub shone upward to illuminate her slender curves. Stevie never looked away until

she had disappeared into the tub, only her head and hands still above water. He watched a few minutes longer, thinking about how wonderful it was to be alone with his wife in a place like this. Then he had an awful thought.

“What if we brought it with us?” he asked.

“Brought what?”

“*It*,” he said. “Or maybe we got it on the way here, but what would we do?”

“I need you to shut up,” said Ruth.

Stevie tried not to think about it. He looked out again toward the mountains but could only see the dark of night. He stood up and made his way inside.

Stevie grabbed the booze in the kitchenette and started slicing a few lemons on the counter, putting them together in one of the glasses from the cabinets. He noticed that none of the stemware matched. The plates were all different sizes, too, and he couldn't find a good knife to save his life. He poured more booze into his glass. Before he walked out, he looked around again. Nothing played inside and only a single lamp stood lit in one corner, filling the cabin with a soft ambient light. But underneath the warm, orange tones, he could see that none of the furniture matched. It was like everything had been

thrown together. But he could overlook it. Ruth was happy, and that was all that mattered.

Outside again, he pulled a chair close to the jacuzzi and sat next to Ruth as she soaked. The lights in the tub lit up her body, rippling in and out of shape through the bubbling water. She relaxed into a slump with only her hair in the water and a single hand holding her glass along the edge. The sounds of the jacuzzi were equaled by the songs of the crickets coming from the woods.

Ruth spoke. "I realized something," she said.

Stevie took a drink from his glass without answering.

"I don't hear any sirens," she said. "I don't hear anything at all, actually."

Stevie stared out into the dark. There were no lights anywhere and no homes to be seen. They were completely alone here.

"We're not two blocks from a hospital out here," he said.

"Did you ever think it would go on like this?" she asked.

Stevie didn't answer. He knew that he didn't know anymore. He thought about how they spent each day watching the news of it all come down the internet, minute after minute, as often as the sirens went by their window in the apartment. Just looking out at the world as it seemed to fall apart. It had been a couple months now, and it was all they could do to hold on. He was

thankful they both had work. He was thankful for this weekend. He looked out into the darkness again and then back to his wife. She kept her eyes closed. She was at peace. That was all that mattered.

“I think it’s going to be just you and me for a little while longer,” he said.

He took another drink. He didn’t know much, but he knew that he knew that.

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