From Small-Town to Smaller-Town

My mother and I drove along the Alaska Highway from Fairbanks to Canada, then from Canada to Haines where we would stay before taking a ferry over to Juneau, then crossing a small bridge into Douglas. My mother had grown up in a small home at the top of a hill overlooking Douglas with her three siblings, mother, and father. Her mother and brother stayed in Juneau after all of the kids had grown up, and so she liked to visit her home away from home and wanted to take me with her for the first time. However, to get there was quite the process. We drove sixteen hours from Fairbanks to Haines, where my grandma owned a cabin by the water where family stayed to wait for their ferry that was scheduled to arrive within the following couple of days.

On the journey to the family cabin, I wondered what it might be like. My mom told me it was a simple, bare-bones cabin without any frills. I wondered how different it could be from our simple, boxy grey house in the middle of the woods back home – the potholes and spruce lining our dirt road, the sun filtering through the tall trees that clambered over each other for a glance at sunlight. I was sure that the cabin’s fireplace I’d heard about would be like they are in the movies, where orange flames would press flickering fingers against hot glass, working hard to warm cold nights. It’s strange how all of the movies I’d seen involving the outdoors or cabins could not have prepared me for the dark, small little grey-wood cabin with a deck overgrown with brambles and devil’s club. The main road we took bent around a natural spring and an old, red cannery that stood unevenly in a shallow bay. Five minutes down the road, we turned down a dirt road that fell steeply from the paved one and into a winding, overgrown path through large wooden homes surrounded in fir trees that wore moss like wedding veils. The cabin was three houses down, but I couldn’t see the driveway, train, or cabin from the road.

The driveway was a hardly-cleared out spot just off of the winding, mulchy trail of the road that continued in a loop that rimmed another small bay. As I was the first to explore new places, I leapt from the car and waded through tall shrubs that lined the driveway to find the overgrown trail to the cabin. At the end of the rocky path, there were two rotted and splitted wood planks that bridged the gap between the ground and the edge of the deck. I hopped across them and ran around the little house over the unsanded greying wood deck that bent slightly under my powerful strides. The cabin looked out across a small field of berry bushes to a rocky beach with gentle waves pulling seaweed from the rocks and, just beyond the bay, snow-capped mountains punctured the peaceful water and loomed over the cabin. I waited for my mother to make it down the steep trail to the front door to let me explore more. She reached behind one of the posts of the shed that held firewood for two small keys dangling from a small nail. After nearly dropping them through the slats of the porch, she quickly unlocked the screen door, then the splintering wooden one, and then set the keys down quickly on the countertop just in front of her. There were long-term houses in the neighborhood, but this cabin was more of a vacation retreat for my truly Alaskan family that thrived on canned and dry goods and looked forward to winters every year. Although it couldn’t really be seen as “roughing it”, to a child at least, it was definitely different from a more typical neighborhood near a city with more than one grocery store.

Walking into the cabin, I looked for a light switch everywhere. My mother laughed, shaking her head, and told me there were no lights. It was like a power outage, but all the time, and on purpose. No electricity, no internet, no lights, no running water, no bathroom. Being raised by a woman born in Bethel and raised to appreciate Vienna Sausages, I grew up pretty comfortable with having to go to the bathroom in the woods and understanding the concept of no running water or electricity. However, I had never really been exposed to an outhouse before, and walking with my mother along the short trail up to the wooden box that was caving in and held Haines’ population of large spiders and their nests was awakening in the worst way. I preferred peeing in the woods. There were fewer spiders, or maybe they were diluted with fir trees, but either way I could remain oblivious to them. I remember that I couldn’t carry a lantern or flashlight with me to pee in the woods, so I’d have to make do with wishing for a full moon to illuminate my walk into the forest.

The fireplace was not the kind from the Christmas movies. It was a small wood-stove that had an old-fashioned hinged door on the front, the top got hot enough to cook cornbread, and a pipe trailed up from the back of it through the cabin’s attic and out through the shingled roof. An axe leant against the wall behind it for chopping firewood, but it also rested next to the entrance and I think it also served the same purpose as a baseball bat by the door. We didn’t cut any firewood on that trip, we just took a pre-cut logs from the shed to toss in the stove to stay warm. When the sky got dark, we opened up the couch bed, pulled out air mattresses and our fluffy down sleeping bags, turned on the small lantern that hung from the ceiling, and got ready for bed. We went outside to brush our teeth by pouring water from our water bottles over our toothbrushes and spitting over the deck railing. Afterward, we went back inside and warmed up by the fire, putting a couple of extra logs next to the stove in case it got cold during the night. My mom pulled a dusty old book of fairytales off of the crooked bookshelf that was nailed to the wall and began to read to me about how fairytale characters fared in the woods, and I drifted off to sleep smelling the forest, and ocean, and imagining myself to be in that storybook.

In the morning, we didn’t need an alarm clock to wake us up, since the sun filtered through the murky glass of the cabin’s large front window. I went out to brush my teeth on the deck, watching how the sky slid from purple to green to yellow then a pale blue. I’m not much of a breakfast-lover, but I’ll never forget our morning meal at the cabin that became our traditional cabin breakfast for all of our following visits. Our “pantry” was stocked with rice, ramen, canned soup and beans, dry noodles, condiments, and gas-station food, which doesn’t sound great but small-town gas-stations have food equivalent to large-city gourmet grocery stores so our lunches and dinners were always pretty good. Or maybe it just seemed that way. Breakfast, however, was a little more unconventional. It was made up of powdered Donettes, gas-station danishes, and Chex Mix. Cabin food, camping food, and boat food all get an automatic pass for having funky combinations and “unhealthy” options. After breakfast, we cleaned up the cabin a little bit. We threw out old food, dusted the folding table and plastic camping chairs in the “dining area”, washed the windows, and swept the entryway. We also made sure to clean out the cobwebs inside and clear out the mouse traps that lined the deck. After our cleaning, we made tea on the porch to brew in the heat of the day using the freshwater held in bright blue tanks that we filled from the natural spring just down the road. We used the tepid water and about three black tea bags in a large glass pitcher covered in Saran wrap that we set out to soak up hours of sun rays. While we waited, we fished from the algae-covered beach for small little inedible fish we’d just return back to the bay. I remember the familiar casting motion and the tight grip of the rod’s cork handle and the way the fishing line felt wrapped around my palm. I don’t recall ever learning how to fish, which means I’ve been fishing for as long as I can remember. I moved my body to the pace of the waves, throwing my arm and the fishing rod around my shoulder with ease, sure I would get a fish, only unsure what it would be. The waves washed over the toes of my rainboots and I leaned toward the ocean, tugged the line a little as it was swept in and out by frothy waves. I had to move my feet back and forth every so often in the rocks to rest them on the rougher stones that weren’t coated in slick algae so I could stay upright while I casted.

After fishing for a bit, we headed into town so my mom could introduce me to the downtown scene of Haines. First we went to the Mountain Market & Cafe, the Haines equivalent to the Co-op Market, Sunshine Health Foods, and Alaska Coffee Roasting Co. combined with a large selection of seeds and granola, bulk containers of Dr. Bronner’s, local products, and a delicious deli and cafe. They made me the best hot chocolate and the yummiest egg salad sandwich that I munched on while I roamed around the aisles of odd collections of organic and vegan products. After lunch, we headed out to the public library. The library was my favorite part of downtown Haines. It had free internet, even though I didn’t have anything to actually do using the internet at that age other than listen to my undownloaded music, and it had so many books and study spaces and it felt so cozy I could’ve taken a nap right then and there. The best part about that library that I discovered on that trip was that my late grandpa’s name was engraved in one of the metal tiles in the floor that every library donor received. A brass-colored tile that shone under the bright overhead lights, and I felt a little more connected to him because of it. He helped make the library that I loved so much, and even though I hardly knew him, we had something in common. I stepped on his tile walking in and walking out as a hello and a goodbye before we continued on our Haines exploration.

Also in town was an intricate playground that I’m sure violated so many safety codes but has remained there to this day. The playground was in a large pit filled with soft reddish wooden mulch and held a large castle-like structure as well as an American Ninja Warrior training course with oddly tall rings, monkey bars, and other elements that, looking back, were definitely unsafe for a young child to be playing on. I wore myself out on that play structure. I mostly focused on completing the intense training course, swinging around on a tire swing before launching myself toward the bendy bridge, rope bridge, monkey bars, and hanging rings, going through it faster and faster to perfect my times. After awhile, a couple more kids showed up, wanting to play tag on the castle structure, so we all took our positions and scrambled around the castle for at least an hour. It was a puzzle of a structure with random drops straight down from the floor, little hiding spaces, and thin, twisting, maze-like hallways. We eventually got so comfortable with it that we began climbing around the outside edge of it, which resulted in a lot of slips and I was immediately grateful for the mulch that caught my falls. Once I had fallen too many times and gotten too tired to climb back onto the castle, the other kids and I reconvened and declared a truce, followed immediately by one of the kids tagging the other, and then we all ran back to our parents’ idling cars ready to take us home.

The trip back to the cabin was a blur. I remember stopping to refill our water containers at the natural spring before we drove back to our little cabin that was watching the start of the sunset. We made our way down to the cabin. While my mom began making spaghetti on the stove, I was sent out to retrieve the tea from the deck. The pitcher was still warm and the tea was perfectly steeped by the sun. I brought it back inside, poured my mom and I each a glass of the warm tea, and stuck two sugar cubes in each glass before sipping it. It tasted like dirt, but the way good dirt smells in the rain, and like honey, and it made my chest feel as though it were being warmed by the dropping sun. After a bit, my mom drained the spaghetti but before we made the sauce, she took me outside to sit on the decomposing wooden bench positioned at the front of the cabin and we watched as the sun fell quickly over the edge of the mountains, instantly dragging the stars out into a deep-purple sky untainted by city lights. When our remaining tea got cold, we got up to finish cooking dinner, ate the pasta ravenously, and then quickly got ready for bed and set an alarm to wake up before the sun to catch our ferry to Juneau the next morning. We curled up in our sleeping bags and immediately fell asleep without reading another fairytale.