

Barry Dempster

The Advent

We came up the long rise to the top of the Cobourg hill at about fifty, which was all the car would do, and then we could see the entire eastern end of the approaching valley. Dark green fields dipped and rolled, some being used for corn, others under grass for the cows. On the flanks of each field, to the south, were remnants of the forest: tall evergreens and thin, strong maples making a shield between one plot of cleared land and another. From the hill it looked like a large topographic map.

I was driving and my mother was sitting in the front seat with me, her eyes rimmed and bright red from a day of crying. She sat with most of her weight shifted on to her right hip and she stared out the side window, watching her own reflection, pale and distorted in the dusty glass. Periodically she dabbed her nose with a torn kleenex or sniffed hard to clear her head.

As we started down the grade I let up on the gas, and the old Volkswagen began backfiring. There'd be the beginning of a roar and then as if the tailpipe was giving it second thoughts, the noise would die away, until suddenly it would come back with a pop, like a half-silenced gun. My mother gave tiny "ohs" with each bang and would close her eyes. She felt the car was too small for highway driving. Each time a gust of wind hit the side, she was sure we'd be tipped over or slide across the white curb line to hit the guard rails and topple over the hill into the dark green valley.

"Damn car," I muttered to myself making sure I had complete control over the steering wheel. There would be no sudden shifts while I was driving.

"I don't know why you ever bought this thing," my mother said, still peering at her own face in the window. "But when you went away to college, you seemed to lose your common sense."

"Come on mother," I half-joked. "Let's try and keep it friendly." I reached over and patted her on the knees.

"Well, it's just that sometimes I'm not sure too you really know what you're doing. Sometimes I'm just not."

"But it's not the car," I said.

"At the moment, it certainly is," she answered, turning even farther away from me and taking a small bite off of one of her fingernails. "How can a body worry about anything else in a death trap like this?"

"He'll love you. I'm sure of it."

"Keep your tongue to yourself," she said.

"I'm sorry. I wish you could relax a little and let whatever will happen just happen." I noticed her face was screwed into an expression that was part fear, part fantasy. Her eyes were the swollen eyes of a middle-aged woman but the way she held her mouth and the pink spots that showed on her cheeks were those of a young girl's. I wanted to tell her but couldn't think of a way to describe the extremes where she wouldn't latch on to the age half and start to cry again.

"I'm not worried, only having doubts," she said.

"You still love him though, don't you?" I asked.

She bit her lower lip and I watched it turn white. "I always have. Even as I was shoving him out the door. Out the door and into her arms. Oh God," she moaned and I could see the tears wetting her eyelashes, welling into pools, ready to fall down her face.

"Shut up mother, okay? Just shut up," I said and turned away from her. "He's your husband and my father. Let's just forgive him and work at forgetting."

"But I don't see . . ."

"That's enough."

"Michael . . ."

"Shut up mother."

That calmed her down a bit, but I didn't look over at her, because I knew the corners of her mouth would be twitching and her eyes drowning in tears.

I turned right onto Highway 7 at the Norwood cut-off. We had to drive slowly for several minutes, past a few shops, a diner for truck drivers and then the Norwood falls and park, where dozens of children were splashing in the pond and running around on the grass below the bridge. Then we were back on the highway, doing fifty, running parallel to the railroad tracks.

Once into Havelock, I turned off the main road onto the country one. It had been oiled only a day or two before and the smell was strong, the oil sticking to the grooves in the tires. I followed the tracks of a number

of cars and at each farmhouse there was a swing of wheels to the right or to the left, wherever the gate was.

I turned for the last time at the dump road. There was a series of grand hills ahead and you had to slow down at the top of each incline, in case a small group of sheep or a stray pig was wandering down the middle. Twice, cars doing at least seventy came leaping over hills and seemed, for a moment, to be headed into the ditch. My mother squealed each time it happened.

At the cluster of mailboxes on the cottage road, I stopped the car and got out. The box with Gibson on the side in crumbling green letters was empty. I got back in and drove on. Soon there were cottages and summer homes on our right and in the spaces between them, the lake lay like liquid glass, a cool colour of blue. We were driving on dirt now and I rolled up my window in defense of the clouds that came rushing in at my face.

I turned into the driveway, the one with the Gibson sign on the birch tree. Our names spelled in pop bottle caps, rusted years ago. I parked behind my father's car and waited for my mother to step out her door.

"Don't be afraid," I said.

"How not?" she whispered.

"Courage," I said, getting out before her.

I stretched my legs and then took the key from the ignition. I opened the trunk and left our bags lying there. One step at a time. Looking up at the cottage I could see my father's face, framed in the curtains, watching and giving us time. I helped my mother out and walked beside her up the path. She stopped once to comment on a bed of marigolds.

When we turned the corner he was on the porch waiting for us. Fifteen years older than the last time; grey haired, a slight stoop because of arthritis, lines in his face that seemed to grow out from his eyes. He looked his sixty years. Smiling, he reached out for my mother's hand. She hesitated but finally gave it, and their two hands closed the gap of the years.

I stood there on the porch looking at the lake, which is several yards away; from that point the water seemed to be rising, growing over the bank towards our feet, washing all the questions and wonder away.

•

On an impulse I started off into the bush. We'd eaten lunch and my father was ready to talk to my mother seriously; I could see it in his eyes and my mother was at the point of trusting him enough to listen. I could

see it in her smile. They didn't need their twenty-eight year old son around.

My whole childhood, up until I was thirteen, was spent here, at least the summer part. When school ended in June, my mother and I packed up our suitcases and set up house in the cottage until after Labour Day. My father, then working at the museum (an anthropologist) was able to join us every weekend and for the month of August. The forest was like my backyard. My toys and playthings were unlimited. I had miles.

I walked to the edge of the swamp and found the dead frame of my most elaborate fort. I built it out of maple saplings with pine boughs woven around the branches to fill out the walls. More saplings were laid across the top to act as a ceiling and there was a door stolen from an abandoned sugar shack that actually opened and closed on makeshift hinges. Now the pine needles had long fallen and the roof was missing a branch here and there, making patches of sunlight shimmer on the ground. But the frame was intact, the shape apparent.

Happy things happened here and a tragedy. It was where I would sleep out when friends came to visit, with only a flashlight and a collection of large rocks to throw at any animals. It was a respite from mosquitoes. I would spray an entire can of repellent on the walls and no bug dared to come near. It was the only place I got to know my father.

When I was twelve we shared the cottage with my father's brother and his wife. They'd just lost their little daughter in a hit and run accident and were pretty shaken up and my mother was just beginning the change of life. All the women in her family began early and she sat me down and explained so I'd understand whatever changes might come over her. I had a picture of her turning into a completely different person and was constantly prepared to deal with it. I was also expected to help cheer up my Uncle George and Aunt Sybil. My father and I were to be the strong ones that summer. We were to be buddies.

As August wore on, things became more strained and the days felt hotter than ever. The cottage sizzled in the heat, it suffocated you. Words hung in the air like smoke. My Uncle George had taken to blaming my Aunt Sybil for the death of their Adrienne. He insinuated she sent the girl out on the street with orders to walk in front of a speeding car. He even went so far as to accuse her of paying the driver to hit the girl. My father told me that grief not only clouds the mind, it can alter it into a state where reality is dim and many-sided like a midway of mirrors. He said we must have patience with Uncle George.

But while Aunt Sybil sobbed in her bedroom, my mother started cursing us all. She'd throw our food on the plates so that the potatoes would

be scattered all over the vegetables and the salad was mixed in with the meat. She stopped doing the dishes, wouldn't bathe, began calling Aunt Sybil "a murderous bitch."

My father tried to explain this one to me as well. I told him that I was ready for it and although I didn't understand it, I remembered my mother telling me that any change in her was only temporary.

One day I was in swimming, sliding in and out of an inner tube. The rubber was boiling hot and I had to wet it each time before I could climb back up. The sun sucked it dry in minutes. Aunt Sybil came down to the dock and dived in the lake without her bathing cap, surfacing close to where I floated. She pushed her wet hair out of her eyes and swam towards me, took hold of the inner tube and dumped me backwards. I was afraid for a moment and stayed under the water, watching her legs rippling and the sun above me hitting the water like fire. I thought that maybe she really had killed Adrienne and was going to do the same to me. I swam away from her, kicked my way to the top and looked over at her. She was laughing, looking incredibly young, pushing at her breasts as they rose out of the water. "Race you," she said and we sped towards the dock. I touched the wood first and gasping for air, looked up to see my mother leaning over me. She ignored me though and as Aunt Sybil grabbed the dock, my mother took ahold of her head and pushed it back under, holding it down by the hair. I could see Aunt Sybil's face near the surface, swollen and on the brink of screaming, swallowing the lake. I yelled and tried to pull my mother's hands away but she stuck like a nail. My father came running from the back of the cottage but before he could get to us, I latched hold of my mother's hair and yanked. She fell in on top of me, scraping my face with the toes of her sneakers, and Aunt Sybil came wheezing up into the air. She was nearly blue.

My father and mother went back to the fort in the bush. I could hear her half-mad shrieks from the porch steps and at one time, I heard what sounded like a loud slap. Aunt Sybil sat beside me, flinching with every raising of my mother's voice. She swore she wouldn't live with us anymore, that she was going back to Toronto that very night. My Uncle George alternated between being alarmed and loving and muttering about how the devil must pay for his deeds. My Aunt Sybil ignored him.

After that day things were calmer. My mother (under what I later found out to be a threat of a mental hospital) rarely spoke, keeping out of everyone's way. Uncle George began going into town every morning to the beer store and drinking himself silly all day. Aunt Sybil relaxed and my father was much friendlier, his worried look fading away.

He and I spent the last night of August in the bush together, bundled

up in sleeping bags in the safety of my fort. We had coles in the middle of the night and he gave me a whole cigarette with the promise that I'd keep my mouth shut. Near dawn we spotted a raccoon just outside the door and we threw cookies out the spaces in the pine boughs and watched the creature pick at them. A couple of nervous chipmunks came too and when the sun was riding up the sky in a red blaze, we saw a lime green grass snake slip under our door, go across the room and slide out the opposite wall. We laughed hysterically and forgot the craziness back at the cottage. Around seven in the morning, we sneaked down to the lake and stripped, swimming naked in the cool water.

I slept most of that day out on the hammock and when night came, I was wide awake. I lay in bed until past midnight, drowsing now and again, and then I got up and went outside. I couldn't find my father's flashlight so I took a box of matches from the stove top and went outside. I'd stolen some cigarettes from my father days before so I slipped off into the black of the bush for a smoke. I was feeling giddy—like an adult. I felt trapped by the irony of my own body but it wasn't a claustrophobic feeling, it was more of a tickle.

Stumbling once or twice, I reached the fort and thought for a moment I could see a light, a kind of glow from the ground. I pushed open the door and saw my father, naked, lying on one hip, one of his legs wrapped around the legs of my Aunt Sybil, her breasts and stomach a blush in the paleness of the flashlight's beams.

I never let on to a soul, although I avoided my father for the next few days, sticking close to my mother. We went back to the city and he was busy at the museum, staying away from home more and more. But it wasn't until the next spring that it all broke. My Uncle George and Aunt Sybil were getting a divorce and my father was named as correspondent. My mother and I were raking leaves from the beach when my Uncle George came striding up from the driveway. My father, who was burning the piles we provided, tried to stop him but Uncle George shook him off like a spider. He walked up to us, handed my mother a piece of paper. His eyes were darker than usual and his mouth was set so tight that it was quivering. My mother went pale and said: "I thought as much."

There were tremendous fights for two days and when Monday morning came around and we were due back to the city, my mother took me and a group of suitcases, climbed into the car and drove away.

I came out of the bush, looked around me, and glanced at my watch. They'd been alone for over an hour and I thought that it was probably long enough. As I sauntered to the driveway and up the path, the sumachs on the edges brushed my face with their furry red fruits and my feet crushed the dark wine ones that had matured and fallen to the ground. I left patches of dark blood on the sand.

I was nervous because after that spring, I'd never seen my father again. It was my choice at the time, more to make my mother happy than out of any anger of my own. But my father and I had never been close. One night of friendship on the fringes of a swamp wasn't enough. Years later he wrote to me and by the time I was eighteen, I was writing him regularly. He always invited me to visit him, for years in Ottawa where he was working for the government and then at the cottage where he semi-retired a year ago. But I never did, half out of the feeling that I would be betraying my mother, half because I knew we could never be as close as our words on paper. Only at Christmas did I relent in any way by phoning him for a three minute conversation. Thirty minutes, a half hour in ten years.

He lived with my Aunt Sybil for seven of those years and that was what I wondered whether my mother could ever forget. He never wanted to marry her though even when my mother offered him a divorce. When eventually he left her, he wrote me: "It wasn't so hard a parting, never is when you've lived with guilt. I can't even remember her face, only the hurt and hate in your mother's eyes."

This is what I showed my mother nearly three years later. That was how it all began again.

They were sitting on the front porch when I came around the corner, their chairs pulled close together, my mother with a fat beagle hound in her lap. "This is Flossie," my mother said, rubbing her chin over the dog's head. "He's your father's."

I smiled at her and turned to look at my father's face. I could still see the glint in his eyes that a man has when he looks at a boy and it made me feel good. After all the man was in a drawer, written on blue notepaper. The boy had finally come to visit.

"It's going to be alright from now on," he said to me and my mother gave me Flossie to hold while she kissed my father on his cheek, and we all cried, pretending sobs were chuckles, the ones I buried in Flossie's coat.

Standing beside the lake thinking, I heard the car drive away. They were going into town, to the hotel, for a celebration supper. I begged off saying tonight was my gift to them. They relented and were happy.

Strange sensations were going through my brain. The place, the cottage, the bush, it all swept over me, melting me until I felt twelve years old again. It was like I had left here and only dreamed I was growing into a man but now that I was back, the years peeled away and I was ready to begin again. I couldn't feel like a man, on that shore, although my hands were large and the hairs on them were dark. I was tall, I had the beginnings of a beard, my voice was bass and the reflection I cast into the water, came back to me as a man's. It was only in my brain that I remained a boy, only in the context that one part of my life had been interrupted and now was back again, bringing the me of fifteen years ago with it.

Later that night I was sitting on the dock under a sky so scattered with stars that it was unreal, like a ballroom ceiling full of lights. Frogs made their thunder sounds and once in a while, cutting into the night like a light, a loon shrieked. My father came to me and without speaking, sat down. He trailed one hand in the water, moving it back and forth, making tiny black waves against the shore. After some minutes I turned to his outline and said: "I'm glad."

"I hope so," he said. I couldn't see his mouth move but I could feel his breath on my face. "Do you get something from this?" he asked.

"Yeah, I do," I answered.

"What is it?"

"I get a part of me back, something to work from."

He didn't say anything for a few minutes then answered: "I think I understand."

"I think you do," I said.

Without my moving, he came closer, first putting one arm around my shoulder, then placing the other one over my chest to meet the first hand. He put his face against my head and hugged me. It was the adult equivalent of a swim in the nude.