

Remembering Summer

I found the photograph behind the freezer. I have no idea how it got there. In this final storm, the house has cast up, from odd corners, all kinds of flotsam. It's a black-and-white snap, but my memory easily supplies the colours. Lemon for my mother's dress. She looks so young, her face full, her hair a high, rounded helmet, but her expression already holds hints of the ancient weariness that was to engulf her. A lemon dress against a background of peeling, reddish walls.

The hut — for us children the words conjured a magical, summertime terrain. A railway carriage set high on iron stilts, in a sloping field. From its windows, we saw hawthorn hedges, a succession of fields, the sea, an unmoving view from an aged, finally-halted train, and yet, peering out, we had distinct, exciting sensations of travel.

The hut was owned by my father's eldest and most enterprising sister, the one who was always buying and selling property, and organising coach trips to religious shrines or beauty spots. Courtesy of her, every year we fled the crowded and dull backyards, to spend a week or two in the sea air.

Perhaps I could go there now. I have no real desire to move to my new, hastily-chosen apartment. In the hut, I could contemplate the sea again, and wait at the window for the slow, regular wink of the lighthouse, warning of rocks hidden in the wide grey mouth of the estuary.

I found the photograph behind the freezer. The freezer itself is proving to be a problem. Neither of us wants it, nor do the people who are buying our house. Advertisements in the evening papers have brought no response. It's an old-fashioned, cumbersome, chest-style model. Our other joint possessions have been divided or disposed of easily enough, but the freezer stands, unplugged and enormous in the middle of the kitchen, and my mind baulks at it, like a horse at an insurmountable jump.

Last night I dreamed I was in a cabaret night-club, seated alone at a round table. Oddly-shaped lanterns cast a yellowish light on the low stage before me, where a man in an cloak and vampish make-up made elaborate bows and brandished a saw. *See me*, he said, *saw the lady in half*. The saw sank surprisingly easily through the cold, white metal. With a flourish, he turned the two halves, so that the cut edges faced outwards, to show that the lady had indeed been sawn in half. Blood seeped from her grisly, severed flesh into a crust of winking ice-crystals.

In the photograph, I sit at my mother's feet, my hair chopped at ear-level, my smile uncertain. Even sunny little Éamonn looks hesitant. I get the impression that

perhaps we had only just arrived, that we were not quite 'settled'. My mother thought a great deal of being settled. Perhaps my father, in that impulsive way of his, unearthed the camera before we had even unpacked; before sheets were laid on the horse-hair mattresses that crunched when you turned over, before the gas had grumbled and become a ring of little, ghostly sharks' teeth biting at the blackened kettle in the tiny kitchen.

My father's sisters were very different from my mother. Far from wanting to be settled they seemed always to be on the move. When any of them visited us at the hut, a walk or swimming expedition was quickly organised. When they did still, it was evening and they drank endless pots of tea and smoked, and their voices were on the move, rising and falling, flowering into laughter and creeping about in tortuous whispers. I loved when they told ghost-stories, but was bored by the gossip from town, the deaths, the pregnancies, the affairs.

I have never met the woman David now loves, nor do I wish to, but despite my best efforts, my imagination has given her a face, and that face is June's. June and my mother had been friends since childhood and when she visited, they giggled unexpectedly together, and sometimes my mother allowed her to paint my nails red. I'm sure June must have come to the hut, at least once. Yes, I see her standing on the iron veranda, looking out to sea, sunlight glinting on her amazing, bouffant hair. I thought her wonderful then, but now I seem to recall that there was a certain smugness about her neat, pretty features.

The adults kept to the veranda, and the field, or garden as we called it, in which the hut stood, was our preserve. Éamonn and I divided it between us, negotiating new boundaries every year and detailing elaborate punishments for territorial infringements. He always promptly trampled the neck-high grass flat, except for two tall tufts left standing to serve as goalposts. I used to make an elaborate warren out of my section. I would select a patch of long grass, jump into the middle and roll a circle flat with my body, leaving grass walls standing around it. Narrow, carefully-beaten paths connected my 'rooms', where I lay watching the sky, surrounded by the attentive, secret whisperings of luxuriant growth.

I can never forget the day I burst expectantly through the lopsided gate to be confronted with a desolate expanse of short, burnt-looking stubble. James, the husband of my enterprising aunt, with probably the best intentions of making the place more habitable for my family, had taken a scythe to the grass which, he explained, had been impossibly tall that year.

As far as I can remember, that was the last summer that we went to the hut. I tried to reconcile myself to the shortened grass by playing football with Éamonn. In the evenings we played cards with my father. But our fortnight there was imbued, for

me, with a feeling of loss. Several times I retreated to the dark, quiet, insect-ridden spaces under the hut, to lean against its solid stilts and wrestle with a vague, lumpy-throated grief.

It's a silly thing to cry about now, all these years later. That awful stubble; I can still feel it claw my legs. I feel hot, hot from remembering summer, and I am very tired. I will lie here on top of the freezer for a while, for a rest. My head burns, and the white metal is cool against my cheek. My sobs are loud, but beneath me, the sawn-up woman is silent.

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