

The Place That Held Us

WHEN A LADY FROM MAKE-A-WISH SHOWED up at the hospital to talk about a wish for my son, I wanted her to go away. I told her we would be fine. Sam would be fine, and we could afford a vacation when this was all over. But Make-A-Wish doesn't work that way. They grant wishes for kids with life-threatening illnesses regardless of the family's capacity to afford a vacation. They insist. They find the thing that will make the sick kid happy, and they arrange every detail with a dose of grandiosity, knowing that if the sick kid is happy, other family members might briefly unearth a long-forgotten genuine touch of delight. I didn't want Make-A-Wish in our lives because I didn't want Sam to be on their list of kids with life-threatening illnesses.

She asked: "Sam, is there something amazing that you would like to do when you're feeling a bit better? Maybe a trip to a place you've always wanted to go?"

Sam's usually bottomless idea tank was empty.

Typically, big ideas energized Sam. Because he also had strong negotiation skills, those big ideas exhausted me. Normally, the invitation to concoct a grand plan would prompt a long-winded series of unreasonable ideas, one leading to the next, until he became fixated on a proposal I would ultimately have to talk him out of. Like

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the time he wanted to hold a car wash to raise money for disabled orphans in Vietnam. I'm all for investing in philanthropy, but Sam's car wash plan involved twenty-five of his second-grade classmates equipped with Super-Soakers and squirt guns at a local Walgreens parking lot. The event was to be executed without hoses, sponges, or anyone over the age of eight. I suggested we practice washing a car with Super-Soakers and squirt guns and a handful of his classmates to see how that might play out. He refused and classified me as an unfair mom, restricting her child from changing the world, one washed car at a time.

When the lady from Make-A-Wish was unable to engage Sam in her wish-granting dialogue, it was as if the chemotherapy had suffocated his ability to dream. Disneyland, Hawaii, a giant water park—nothing seemed to turn his light back on. The long slow drip of toxic drugs left him cocooned in a white hospital blanket with the nurse station call button and an open can of Sprite both within reach while he waited for his anti-nausea meds to kick in. After a short, somewhat somber visit, the lady from Make-A-Wish left and promised to circle back at another time.

"I just want to go to Poppa's cabin with Cedar," he told me later when the room was empty. A couple of tears spilled onto his pillow, and I sat at the edge of the bed and promised to fulfill this simple wish when he was done fighting cancer.

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Poppa's cabin in the woods wasn't a place we needed Make-A-Wish to arrange, but the last time we were there happiness permeated every member of my family. Maybe that's why the cabin was Sam's first request. Before the nausea and needle pokes and unsettling conversations with doctors, he had played in the woods and explored the beach and ran with his happy dog. It was a place that induced reasonable bravery and age-appropriate imagination, and gave me confidence that I could provide a few recommended ingredients for a healthy childhood.

It's also the place where I found the tumor.

"Mom, we have to go to Poppa's cabin before

school starts!" Sam pleaded with me on a hot August afternoon when the back-to-school supply lists came in the mail. With the signs of summer coming to an end and his first season of football ahead of us, we wouldn't have much time left after Labor Day to get away. I felt the end of summer panic too. Sam and I were alike in our craving for warm weather wilderness time. We made quick plans for a trip to the cabin while the reality of school and the Pacific Northwest weather patterns threatened to dampen our daily routine. Literally.

The cabin sits on a five-acre forested lot near the Hood Canal in Washington. My dad built it. It's small and red and rustic, in a clean, orderly, and functional sort of way. It is far from luxurious. But for some of us, this quiet, wooded piece of nature and solitude is a lovely secret escape. Dad and I are the introverts in the family and the only ones who delight in extended time alone. Sam loved to be there with the family, especially his big sister Natalie, who managed to have fun with anyone willing to play nice.

My dad built his one-room retreat when I was ten years old. Before there was a cabin, we called it "the property." The land seemed like an expansive mountain range back then. My dad's 1971 mallard-green Ford pickup truck carried us from Shoreline onto the Washington State Ferry for a light drive through the mossy green Pacific Northwest forest. The truck was loaded with pre-cut lumber and tools for building. He always packed a chainsaw. I often tagged along with my friend Andrea because she was adventurous too.

"Want to get lost in the woods?" one of us would suggest some time before dark. Being the young survivalist thrill-seekers we were, we'd leave Dad to his foundation-measuring, ground-clearing, access-building work for a braver-than-the-average ten-year-old expedition into the deer-inhabited woods of the Kitsap Peninsula. Between the road and the water there was little risk of us actually getting lost, but we had seen enough early 1980s horror movies to stimulate the fear circuits in our young, impressionable minds. This was the fun kind of fear and we played with it well.



Once the cabin began to take shape, we'd spend nights there in sleeping bags on yellow and white plastic-covered mattresses on plywood flooring, usually after a few games of Uno or Go Fish played by a battery-lit lantern. One last trip outside to pee before we slept tended to poke the

adrenaline receptors again, leaving us tossing over the soft popping sounds of those mattresses, afraid of bears, Sasquatch, Jason, or that creepy blonde ghost from *The Watcher in the Woods*. But it never stopped us from accompanying Dad the next time as he continued to build that little red cabin.



Eventually, my dad added a thin green carpet and a wood stove. He built a kitchen around some wooden cabinet doors he found at Mr. Plywood in Shoreline for a dollar a piece. The large pane windows came from a junk store on Highway 99 and were originally used in a 1930s railroad roundhouse. He refurbished everything and constructed his hideaway with meticulous detail acceptable to the obsessive Boeing engineer that he was.

Over the years, the cabin grew in comfort and function and even a bit of style. There has never been

running water, but the outhouse has a view, and there is plenty of washing up water in the large pickling barrels next to the outdoor kitchen. Sometime after Dad retired he added a bedroom with carpet, a cozy red comforter, and an electric blanket for frosty winter nights. The addition expanded the total space to a roomy 298 square feet.

The cabin is tidy, the woodwork is polished, and the minifridge is always stocked with butter and milk, and a jar of mango chutney. There are pieces, like a carefully crafted section of a fir branch, flattened on one side

with four slits just big enough to secure the cord of a phone charger because . . . Heaven forbid there would be a loose cord lying about. The space is filled with well-designed details that leave first-time visitors in awe and family members teasing him for being a little over the top.

Five acres of forest overlook a body of water so flat that it could be mistaken for a lake, even though the beach is covered in oysters and smells of the sea. The fern-lined trail to the beach is steep but well groomed. Some of us see it as part of the adventure, and we make the climb back up with the help of our strong legs and open lungs.

The still waters of Puget Sound settle me. It's the kind of place that reminds me who I am: a Washington girl with a craving for a crisp sort of solitude that comes with an early morning cup of coffee outside among the trees, wrapped in a warm down blanket. If intimacy can be experienced between a human and the earth, I have known it at the shores of Puget Sound. It tells me that I am always welcome to be blessed by the light and life of a beautiful place. That somehow we are related, and our kinship is worth cultivating. Places contribute to the formation of our identity the same way people and circumstances do. I've had the privilege of being molded by the Pacific Northwest.

A stroll along the beach grants a moment alone with every light-filled organism around me. I collect smooth, bluish-gray rocks, tiny clam shells, and bits of driftwood to set on a shelf in my home, as if those objects could return me to the serenity of the shore when life feels unsettled. My face softens, my mind slows, and my lungs delight in the purity of their intake. This place helps me let go of what is wrong and rediscover all that is beautiful in the world and in myself.

I should come back here in the fall. Alone. Like missing someone before they're gone, I begin crafting a plan to come back. I like who I am here, still being molded by the nature I love.

As Natalie and Sam grew into their own personalities, the cabin also influenced the people they were becoming. I liked that. I could see their confidence in the forest and the way they brushed off an unexpected spiderweb or

buzzing mosquito. The small fears they could overcome with a mid-ranged bravery. I saw their curiosity along the beach, and the kind of imaginative play that Andrea and I had when electronic entertainment was limited to our Atari Space Invaders game during a weekend sleepover.

The cabin had its impact in the way a place can, and it was the last place my own young family enjoyed together with carefree ease before Sam was diagnosed with cancer. I've never seen a bear, a ghost, or any sign of Sasquatch in those woods. Instead, cancer is the thing that showed up to ignite an inferno of fear.



On the day of our trip, my mom packed a Trader Joe's cooler bag full of ham and cheese sandwiches, melon slices, salt and vinegar potato chips, and a bag of Jet-Puffed Marshmallows. Cedar, our darkish-red golden retriever, bounded around the property off-leash, tongue floppy and visible, searching for new smells and old spare-rib bones my dad may have chucked into the woods after a satisfying dinner. The dog pranced and ran and wagged his tail for hours.

The cabin had room for only two to spend the night, so the seven of us intended to stay for a day of beachcombing and marshmallow roasting. My sister's disability made navigating the trail a challenge, so she and my parents stayed while Bob, Natalie, Sam, Cedar, and I wandered down to the oyster beach, regularly harvested by a local seafood company.

After an hour of marine exploration, rock skipping, and handling dozens of tiny jittery crabs, we rambled back up the trail with a bag full of oysters to share.

"Gran, look how many oysters I collected!" Natalie bragged, but quickly followed with "Can we roast the marshmallows soon?"

"Poppa, can you cook these for us? If I find a pearl I can probably sell it for a lot of money." Sam invited my dad to affirm his latest money-making scheme.

While Dad lit the barbecue to cook the oysters, Natalie and Sam engaged in some sort of adventure game in the low, shaded shrubs. I

grabbed a chair in a spot where the sun poked through the trees while my kids created a battle scene, equipped with sword-like sticks they'd found in the woods. At ages nine and eleven, their days of imaginary play were quickly disappearing. But an adventure in the forest was hard to resist.

"Ching, ching, ching!" Natalie made sword-clanging sound effects as they duelled with their sticks until she was interrupted with a loud and overly dramatic yell from her brother.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow!" Sam stumbled out of the shrubs, leaving his role as victorious thirteenth-century war hero to get a little help from his mom. His left calf had found some sharp foliage that scratched his skin and caused small amounts of blood to ooze out. It hurt and he let us know with tears and shouts of nine-year-old agony.

I took a close look while he insisted that I doctor his calf, which was only worth doing to assist him with his emotional regulation. I found an ace bandage in my dad's well-stocked first aid kit, alongside Band-Aids and a travel-size can of Bactine. Sam's tears dried on his soft round cheeks and the sniffles subsided while I wrapped his leg with care.

Once the sores were thoroughly protected, my little wounded warrior went tromping in and out of the forest foliage again. While I watched him play, my eyes fixated on his leg.

His left calf, the wounded one, looked thicker than the other leg. I didn't think he had the type of injury that could cause swelling. It looked more like a strong calf muscle, but much stronger than his right leg. It didn't make sense. He's been riding his Lazer scooter, I thought; that could make one leg stronger than the other. Football? Was it because of football? He had recently started daily football practices, so was surely developing new muscle, but the lopsided appearance was odd, and while the play and conversation around me continued, my mind started running around with nowhere to go.

"Sam, come here and let me see your leg again." I wanted to investigate.

"It feels better, Mom. I'm fine." He darted in the opposite direction with Cedar trotting alongside him, tongue hanging out and panting.

"Just a quick second, I want to see something

on your leg!" He meandered over to the wooden steps at the front of the cabin and sat down.

"Natalie! Wait for me over by the tree trunk and try to find another good stick over there!" He was willing to appease me for just a moment, but his focus was keenly and competitively still on his sister's play. I knelt down and wrapped my fingers around his calf.

I expected to feel muscle, but just under the skin was something firm. It was hard like a bone. That strong-looking calf felt like rock from the beach, covered by young flesh. It was most definitely not muscle.

I pressed my fingers into his leg, searching for edges and grooves under the skin, for some sort of clue that might help me define what seemed to be a subtle deformity in his bone. My brain didn't know how to interpret the sensation that came through my fingers, so it stirred the emotional commotion that comes with an undefined threat.

Even when we don't yet know what's wrong, we usually know when something's not right.

A wave of worried energy dampened the delight that had surrounded us all day, and I couldn't reason it away. I disengaged. I sat on the wooden step, elbows resting on my knees, still focused on Sam's left leg while my heart beat into my throat with a pounding that could not be ignored. This was a new kind of fear, and it intended to stay.

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It wasn't until Sam got cancer that I recognized how a place can become a profound resource for resilience. Like that friend who consistently sees the best parts of me, or the other soul that can infuse bits of brilliance into my scared and depleted being, some places influence me. Some places equip me with an energy source I can't get from another cup of coffee or the latest best-selling spiritual read. Some places seem to express a type of Divine love. If I were a doctor, I would tell my patients and their caregivers to pay regular visits to the places that they know will nourish them: go to the sunsets, the mountain views, the bodies of water. We can trust those familiar places to hold us. I found



my places here and there that softened the fear and expressed compassion when I needed to release a bit of grief. They shared my burden and infused me with grace.

Places can also ignite feelings of trauma. A haunting disturbance. The smell, structure, and colors of a place where the bad thing happened can activate an inner scream, a momentary panic, and the torment of encroaching danger. Places have their power in our lives. We enter them for the good vibes we bring with us and the positive experiences we expect. But we know there are also places where pain will happen, like the locker

room that seems forever fouled by bullying. Or the home where the drunken father unleashes his rage on whomever he shares space with. It's not the place's fault.

Cancer treatment confined us to sterile hospital rooms with little boxes of scratchy tissues and green bins for capturing vomit. Pillow cases are stamped with red institutional identifiers. The aroma of disinfectant pervades every bathroom, hallway, and clinic room in the hospital.

It was a nice hospital. We saw compassion and comfort and a therapy cat named Floyd. But there's only so much comfort to be found

in a tightly regulated environment designed to prevent the spread of bacteria and viruses among the kids on the Make-A-Wish list.

Several months into his cancer treatment, Sam started to feel nauseous when he walked through the doors of the hospital.

“Can you please step back?” He said to his nurse as she was setting him up for chemo, “You make me nauseous.” She understood. His leg had been amputated, his pain scale trended toward 8 (on the scale of 1 to 10), and nausea dominated the hours of being infused with bags of high-dose chemotherapy. The place that was supposed to heal him had become toxic. It wasn’t the hospital’s fault.

Sam finished his cancer treatment ten months after I found the tumor on Labor Day weekend at the cabin. He had taken a beating. By the time he finally finished, he was bald, skinny, fatigued, pale, and missing a leg. Sam was a very sick boy.

As promised, we scheduled a trip to the cabin in the summer of 2011, two months after his treatment ended, and four months after his amputation. Sam was still on crutches and without a prosthetic leg. His hair was beginning to emerge on the surface of his shiny bald scalp, and his spirit was back; he was ready for adventure.

All of the same family members loaded up for the drive to the cabin in two separate vehicles, Sam riding in my dad’s most recent restoration project: a 1980 Jeep pickup truck. Apparently, along the drive Sam opted to ask his grandfather if he could inherit the truck when my dad died, because grandparents are supposed to die before their grandchildren and this seemed like an acceptable topic to discuss.

Returning to the place where I found Sam’s tumor was not something anyone wanted to acknowledge, but it dominated my emotional attention and I was unsure of whether my new companion called fear might present itself with some degree of intensity. Stepping out of the car, I wanted to get past the first moments of remembering as quickly as possible. I moved slowly near the bench Sam had sat on when I inspected the mass on his leg, and I was careful

not to draw the attention of any of my family members. The space that held us when I found cancer did not assault me with anxiety. Instead, it invited a moment of grief, the kind where I could control whether the tears emerged or stayed hidden for another time, and I decided I would come back on my own some other day to let those tears fall. Instead of anxiety, the cabin in the Washington woods reminded me that its purpose is to nurture me and to be the restorative place my family needed.

Not long after we unloaded the coolers and day bags, Sam asked if we could go down to the beach. Against the advice of his grandparents, he navigated that crazy steep fern-lined trail on his crutches while I insisted Bob walk below him and I walk above him.

“Careful, Sam.” “Sam, watch out for that branch.” “Sam, why don’t you let your dad help you down that one?” He appeared to ignore me and made no observable effort to settle my worry. After four months of moving through space on one leg and two crutches, it was as if they had become a part of his body. His arms had grown strong, and his motor skills adapted. Present an obstacle and Sam would take it on before any opportunity to consider safety precautions. The trail required maneuvering over and under fallen trees and down steps made of treated two-x-ten-inch cedar blocks held by lengths of rebar that secured each step in the muddy hill. Sam was still a kid who broke the rules to get the most out of life, and he brushed off the concern of his family members who had been riddled with worry since our last trip to the cabin when I found cancer in his leg.

Down the steps, over the fallen trees, through the unsuspecting spiders and their intricate webs, Sam reached the beach for a hit of fresh sea air and bright views of gentle waters. He loaded himself into the little rowboat my dad had tied up at the shore, and Sam paddled alone over clear calm water, hoping to come face-to-face with one of the local seals. As we watched, it seemed like the woods and water infused him with a dose of their own energy, because he belonged there too. This was his place, not a pediatric oncology room.

As he rowed away from the shore, we watched him transform for a while. His body showed glimpses of a healthy child again. His cheeks were full and pink. Reddish-brown hair emerged on his eyebrows, eyelashes, and scalp. He sparkled along with the light hitting tiny ripples in the water all around him. He smiled a soft smile, and I think he knew how much I loved to see him happier and stronger.

After some time, Sam’s cancer came back. He fought that beast for six years, and now he’s been gone for five. I am sad every day, and challenged by the task of figuring out how to

exist in this world without my sparkly son with big dreams and an affinity for a quiet forest and calm water.

There are places in this world that seem to express care and invite me into fellowship. The cabin on Puget Sound is special. These days I tend to go there alone. I savor the early morning cups of coffee outside among chirping birds while the sun rises and shows itself through the trees. I talk to Sam. I grieve, but it’s the kind of grief that honors what has been lost and is grateful for how the place wrapped me with compassion on the day I found cancer in my son. ❁

