Summer Cottage

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Abstract

O SCAR POPHAM stood gazing at the huge Northern Pike mounted above the mantle of the lodge fireplace and read again the plaque’s inscription: “Taken from Lake Carlana, 1932, by Oscar Popham and sons.”
OSCAR POPHAM stood gazing at the huge Northern Pike mounted above the mantle of the lodge fireplace and read again the plaque's inscription: "Taken from Lake Carlana, 1932, by Oscar Popham and sons." It seemed like yesterday that he and the boys reeled in that whopper, but sixteen bouncing grandchildren were constant reminders that time had once more marched past Oscar, really faster than he cared to see it go.

It was so early in the morning that the lodge had only just opened and so not many of the staff were at work yet. But they'd all been alerted that the Pophams were coming for their thirty-ninth summer at Lakeview, so their cottage had been opened and clean for days.

Mr. Popham turned as Mrs. Popham came through the screen door and steered her carefully through the dining room till they came upon the table with their nametag on it. It was the same special place they always had, by the window overlooking the lake. Hanging his cane over the back of a chair Mr. Popham said, "Yes, very good. Well, I see they were expecting us. And what pretty flowers on the table for so early in the season. I wonder if they've warmed our coffee cups. You know how we hate hot coffee in cold cups."

"Well, dear, I'm sure they've seen to it. Goodness, how I still love this place even after all the summers we've spent here." And as she talked Mrs. Popham unloaded her straw handbag of its assorted bottles, pills, drops, sweeteners, and instant coffee and placed them all with the salt and pepper in the center of the table. "There now, I'd say we're officially moved in. Wouldn't you?"
In themselves, the Pophams were ordinary people. Mrs. Popham was sixty-six years old and Mr. Popham was sixty-eight. They had seen their children outgrow the lake cottage and go on to families of their own and island resorts; their friends were either dead or settled in comfortable year-round houses. In the winter they told one another that they could not stand their New York apartment while waiting for the summer; in the summer they told one another that the winter was well worthwhile, waiting to get to the lake.

Their pretty new waitress for the summer in her pink pinafore and apron came toward them now with a tray of the “Popham breakfast”: sweet rolls, orange juice, and cream of wheat. “Care for a roll, sir?” she asked attentively. “Oh, why sure. I think so,” said Popham with laughter in his voice, “I feel acrobatic this morning.” And then they all chuckled and the waitress blushed as pink as her pinafore while Popham reached for a roll.

After breakfast the Pophams went to look for the new guide that would stay with Mr. Popham while he fished. Although Mr. Popham was definitely in his own element when he was out on the lake with his rod and reel, he needed someone young along just for company and for a little support in bringing in the big fish. When the Pophams had found the new boy and visited with him a while, they returned to their cottage to get things organized. Mrs. Popham spent the morning lovingly dusting the wicker furniture and shaking the freshly laundered rugs. While she swept the front porch near noon, Mr. Popham went down to get the mail. When he came back he was a little out of sorts; it always irritated him to walk the mile to the mailbox on the state road and come back with nothing, even though he assumed that the walk was good for his health. This morning there was nothing but a circular from a New York department store and their New York paper, which always came doggedly on time. Mrs. Popham sat in a rocking chair on the green lawn in front of their cottage. Although she shared her husband’s annoyance of not having mail when they so anticipated it, she pored affectionately over the department store circular and made a mental note to drop in at the store when they returned to New York and check
on the sale of wool blankets; it was so hard to find good ones in pretty colors nowadays. Dropping the circular into the grass beside her chair she leaned back, her eyes half closed.

“What’s happened to the boys, do you think?” asked Mr. Popham.

Tod, Jerry, and Allen, their sons, were all married, one living in Chicago, one in the Far West; and one in Texas. Their dutiful weekly letters were late; so late, in fact, that Mr. Popham’s annoyance was able to settle on a legitimate grievance. “Ought to realize how we wait for their letters. Surely they remember we’re at the lake by now. Thoughtless, selfish kids. Ought to know better.”

“Well dear,” Mrs. Popham said placatingly, “Wishing won’t bring the mail. Let’s take a nice nap after lunch, all right?”

When she woke from her sleep the room was unexpectedly dark, and Mrs. Popham felt in herself the state of tension that precedes a thunderstorm. But both times when she looked the sky was clear and serene, smiling indifferently down on the Pophams’ cottage as well as on the rest of the world. When Mrs. Popham went a third time to look outside, she saw her husband coming up the path. She guessed he had gone down to check the afternoon mail just in case, poor dear. But now he seemed more cheerful, and seeing her he waved eagerly and held a letter in the air.

“From Jerry,” he called as soon as he was close enough to be heard, “At last—a letter!” Mrs. Popham noticed with concern that he was no longer able to get up the gentle slope of the path without breathing heavily; but then he was in the doorway, holding out the letter. “I saved it till I got here.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” said Mrs. Popham with an eagerness that surprised her. She couldn’t imagine why the letter excited her so, except that it was the first they’d received in so long. It would be a pleasant dutiful letter, full of the doings of Alice and the children, reporting progress with Jerry’s job, commenting on the Seattle weather, closing with love from all. The Pophams could recite a pattern letter from any of their sons. “Just let me get my reading glasses from the bedroom and we’ll read it together.”
Rummaging through the bureau drawers for her glasses, Mrs. Popham frowned when she heard a heavy thud from the porch. Rushing to investigate, she found Mr. Popham slumped over on the floor clutching the letter and holding his left shoulder in an awkward position. In her fright, Mrs. Popham wrenched the letter from his grasp, noting the unusual number of dirty fingerprints on the envelope. "Dear God. Oscar, oh what shall I do? No one's around, no phone. I'll run to the lodge and call a doctor." And as she got to her feet, the wind came up suddenly over the lake, swept around the summer cottage, and slapped hard at the windows.

Test Pattern

by Donna McKee

English, Senior

They played the National Anthem and said the sermonette. Sharon watched the test pattern for a few minutes, and then she flipped the set off. She leafed through an old magazine restlessly. Car lights reflecting off the living room windows sent her flying to look outside. The car passed and she collapsed onto the sofa again. Pete had been due home two hours ago and she hadn't heard from him. Sick with worry, Sharon imagined the worst. She could see the moving van he drove, overturned in a dark ditch, or cut in two by a speeding train. She began to gnaw the pink polish off her thumbnail. Another car's passing made the pain in the pit of her stomach worse. Her hands shook a little as she gulped down a tranquilizer that the doctor had prescribed for her nerves.

Sharon gazed at the phone. Someone was going to call soon, she knew. The caller would say, "Mrs. Thomas, I'm