

The Cottage

by Audrey Harris

Every summer I would go to Gran's cottage. The cottage was in the middle of nowhere, with only one winding road traveling through the curvy hills of Appalachian Kentucky. Hidden amid the towering trees and fierce wildlife was Gran's cottage. The cottage itself was nothing special, in fact it was far from a suitable home. The walls of the exterior were covered in overgrown weeds and moss, creeping up walls and entrapping the structure. The front porch leading to the torn screen door was unstable, each plank of wood either already broken or barely hanging on. Inside, there were two rooms. The first was divided in half, one part belonging to the living room and the other the kitchen. Between these two areas was a small wooden table with one worn-in cushion chair and the other still wrapped in plastic. On the couch in the living room lay a quilt, the one Gran had made for me for my tenth birthday. It was full of different patterns stitched together creating a messy work of art. I slept on that couch with that quilt when I stayed with Gran. The second room that made up Gran's cottage was her bedroom. I rarely got to go into her room, except for on stormy nights.

I was seven when I spent my first summer at Gran's. I remember clinging to Ma's skirt as she tried desperately to leave. I spent the rest of the day crying and when I couldn't cry anymore, I screamed. I don't remember falling asleep; exhaustion must have caught up to me. What I do remember is waking in the night to a window-rattling rumble coming from outside. Unfamiliar with my surroundings, I whimpered in fear of the rain, darkness, and unknown. The only thing I could think to do was sob. Suddenly, my attention was diverted to the creaking of Gran's door. Seeing Gran standing in the doorway, I leapt off the couch and barreled into her, clinging to her as I wailed. She bent down and lifted me up, settling me on her hip. Carrying me into her room,

she sat me on her bed. Curious about my new surroundings, I looked around at the portrait of the Virgin Mary above Gran's bright green dresser and the rosary she kept on her unstable bedside table. My tears began to dry up as Gran lay me down next to her on her bed, humming as she stroked my charcoal hair. Within the next few minutes her soothing voice lulled me to sleep.

My summers with Gran taught me many valuable lessons. Lessons that you just don't learn growing up in a city like Louisville. She taught me to laugh too loudly, to not care if overalls were in style, and to love everything that has been given to me. From Gran, I learned how to love life, no matter how painful it may be. Gran lived life the way it was meant to be lived, with so much love it seemed to overflow like a river. She felt love for the coyotes that howled in the distance, for the racoons that would rummage in her garbage bins, even for the spiders, which I hated. She refused to cut the vines that crawled up the sides of our little cottage, saying they were Mother Nature's way of giving us a hug. Gran always gave the best hugs, the kind of hugs that you knew were bursting with love.

Every night just before I fell asleep, Gran would sit down with me on the couch and we would hold each other, listening to the frogs and crickets outside. She had taught me how to stoke the coal stove next to my couch so that I wouldn't freeze through the night. I couldn't sleep without a light, and the cottage only had one working outlet which was in Gran's room. This was her way of giving me a nightlight. Even after she would tuck me in and head for her own room, the warmth of the stove made me feel like Gran was still giving me a bear hug. After she taught me to tend that stove when I was nine, I never had trouble sleeping.

One routine of hers that I always loved was our morning hike. Every morning at six AM sharp Gran would drag me out of bed, leaving no room for compromise. She would put apple cider on the stove, adding cinnamon and sugar, creating a delicacy for us to share. As she stirred

the pot, I grabbed two mugs from the cupboard. Once the cider was steaming, Gran would pour it into the mugs. The cracked mug, which I had dropped when I was eleven, would spill cider onto our fingers. Gran always took the cracked one saying I can't wrinkle my fingers just yet, I'm not old enough. I would then grab my battered-up quilt from the couch and Gran and I would make our way outside. Off we would go, step by step up the hill. She said it was a mountain, but I knew it was a hill. When we finally reached the top, we would lay down the quilt and sit side by side. Gran would wrap her arm around me and whisper tales of the creatures that wake up with the sunrise just like we do. Silly or sorrowful stories about the mischievous fox or the courageous chipmunk. These stories were just for us and the creatures all around listening. This was our special place, our special moment. I never showed this place to anyone.

I have recently moved into Gran's cottage. After graduating high school, I find myself in need of some peace and quiet. Or maybe I just need to feel a little closer to Gran. So, today I wake up at six AM sharp. I wrap a blue plastic poncho around me because I can hear the rain pitter-pattering outside. I'm not scared of thunder anymore. Going over to the stove, I pour apple cider into the pot and add a dash of cinnamon and sugar. While it is steaming, I grab the cracked mug from the cupboard. I shattered the other one when I was sixteen, throwing it at the wall after an argument with Gran. I pour the steaming apple cider into the mug, ignoring the pain as the liquid burns my fingers. Gran never flinched when she got burned. Grabbing the quilt from the couch, I make my way outside and begin to trek up the mountain step by step. At the top I lay my soaked quilt down onto the grass, taking a seat and sipping the now watered-down sweet apple cider. I look out as the rain pours on me to see a glimmer of bright orange emerge from the trees. I begin whispering stories about the creatures around me, imagining that I am leaning on

Gran. Her leaning just a little bit on me and me leaning all the way on her. I can almost imagine her whispering along with me for only us and the creatures to hear. Finishing my stories, I take one last sip of my cider as I stand to gather my quilt. As I go to trek back down the mountain, I glance one more time behind me at the sun, waking up for the day just like my Gran should have.