

**Thomas Maxson** just finished his third year at Prescott College in Prescott, Arizona, where he is studying literature and creative writing. He was born and raised in the Los Angeles area. As he grew up, he and his family visited his grand parents in Colorado twice a year. They spent most of their time in a cabin in Leadville owned by the family. Now he spends his spare time rock climbing in remote desert climbing areas and reading when he is too sore to climb. He lives in Prescott, Arizona where he has two more years until his anticipated graduation date.

## Cabinets

Sixty years ago my grandparents bought a cabin at the Homestake Trout Club in Leadville, Colorado. It was one simple room, no plumbing, no electricity. For heat there was an old coal cooking stove. Since then the cabin has gone under some facelifts. Linoleum floors that look like fake wood cover the sparkly retro tiles leftover from the fifties. White kitchen cabinets scrounged from a house in Colorado Springs appeared forty years ago, around the same time as the poorly constructed bedroom.

My grandfather Bob had the room built in the sixties. The contractor he hired used half logs so it only looks like a log cabin from outside. Inside the walls were bare plywood. They still are bare plywood. My Mom always thought they would look good if we white washed them, my sister wanted to cover them in hundreds of old ski maps from Vail, Copper, Cooper, all the resorts and mountains in the state, which we would someday visit. I took almost no notice to them. I spent most of my time outside, digging miniature mines in the silver laden soil. Whenever the cabin remodeling conversation started I left. I worked on new tunnels to my extremely profitable miniature mine. I knew it was all talk, that the cabin would still be the same when I was my dad's age.

During the winters when my family visited to ski, we spent the whole time in that tiny bedroom since the big room was entirely un-insulated. After a few hours in the big room lips would crack and noses would be rubbed raw. Often, temperatures dropped below zero in there. One morning last winter and it was fifteen below when

we woke. “ Oh no, the waters frozen.” my dad said pointing to metal basin we had used to melt snow with the night before. Three inches of solid ice stuck to the bottom. After we melted it again the bottom was permanently deformed, it would wobble on the stove forever and we would never get rid of it. On the same fire we made coffee with an old aluminum percolator stained brown from decades of use. We both drank our coffee black, holding the thick green mugs with long plumes of steam close to our faces.

My Dad loved the cold, insisting on sleeping in the big room with several Hudson Bay blankets and an old heavy down sleeping bag. He wore a facemask and warm hat while he slept to avoid frostbite.

My Dad is almost sixty. But I still have trouble keeping up with him when we ski. We do all the hardest runs at Vail, get excited when snow falls at night. We are an unstoppable team. On the lifts my Dad always talks to our lift mates, asks where they're from, what they do. They're usually from Denver, my Dad tells them he's from Colorado Springs and skied here at Vail opening day, when a lift ticket was a pricey five dollars when you could get a season pass for ten at Copper hill. They're always amazed; lift tickets cost close to a hundred now, and how is this salt and peppery guy with a fanny pack on this lift that is only reached via double black diamonds? We like to leave them wondering.

Summers at the cabin, we hike, climb mountains, chop wood, shoot guns and fish for our dinner. Summertime is the time to flourish at the cabin. Waking up at six isn't hard like it is in the winter. All it takes is one look out the window at the lake, glassy and golden, reflecting the tall pines, to get me out of bed. In the big room my

Dad has been up for hours, fully dressed and ready to do an assortment of things. He's probably already packed some snacks and prepared for the long hike we will inevitably find ourselves on. Hours pass as we walk silently on those hikes. We find old cabins, abandoned a hundred years ago, we pass timberline, stopping to look at wildflowers and eat our Caramello bars. Then the ground levels off. With nothing ahead of us anymore we turn around and walk back to the cabin trying to decide what to eat for dinner. "We had trout last night, lest go to town and get some burgers" my dad would say. So we would all pile in my grandmothers old gold Volvo station wagon and drive to town.

After my parents divorced when I was 17, going to the cabin changed. I started to drive there from California to spend weeks alone, silently keeping busy, keeping my mind off things. I still wandered the wilderness, chopped wood, shot guns and fished for my own dinner. But without a companion to share my experiences with they seemed insignificant. I began to confine myself to the porch where I would read books like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Then I would drive home in one long day. Fourteen, fifteen hours of driving, blurred landscapes passing my window, turning my mind to Jell-O; the simplest of thoughts became more profound than anything an ancient Greek philosopher could come up with. At one a.m. I would stumble up the stairs at home, crawl in bed and sleep until three the next afternoon, when my mom would wake me up and ask me how the cabin was. She always wondered. After the divorce she stopped going there, the plywood walls would never be white-washed.

Two years ago I went to the cabin with my Dad, my stepmother, Peggy and my grandmother, Helen. It was standard cabin time: hiking and climbing during the long, warm summer days and stories at night. Helen told me about my grandfather's love for restoring old cars, Cadillac's in particular. I had only seen pictures of 37' La Salles parked in my grandparents' driveway, my twelve-year-old dad in the driver's seat, making car sounds with his lips. My grandfather restored dozens of cars, Cadillac's, Pontiacs, Fords, but had to sell them all before I was born, except his 1967 Cadillac Coupe Deville, the only car he ever bought brand new. I loved to go into the garage and sit in that car, making car sounds, imagining myself cruising down 66 with my Dad in the passenger seat. Helen told me about scrounging for parts in Kansas, where people took their cars when they croaked. She told me about the time my grandfather had ordered a dozen windshields from a plant in Brazil because the original manufacturer had just discarded the molds. Helen revealed a lot to me that night, her stories were told with urgency, as if they needed to be told.

The power went out that night; a lightning strike left the county powerless. After years of smoking Helen was on oxygen. Her machine needed electricity and we had no idea when it would return. She had eight hours of bottled oxygen, enough for the night. Helen and I slept in the big room. My Dad and Peggy took the bedroom. Peggy cant handle the cold, if she could she would spend the rest of her life wrapped in an electric blanket. So I slept in my Dad's normal spot, on the hide-a-bed under the deer trophy that used to have a Marlboro dangling from its plasticized lips. I had

to wake up every couple hours to change Helen's oxygen tanks. I had it wired since I had helped her before.

"I can't see it, Thomas will you help me?" She would ask in her diluted Texas accent. Of course I would. It was usually me who would take her arm on icy streets, usually me who carried her bag. On the drive up we had stopped at a family friends house. We needed to walk up a tiny hill for maybe 100 feet to get to the front door. I barely noticed the incline and walked at my normal pace. At the front door I turned to see Helen leaning on a pine tree, gasping. She was ten feet from the car. I went back and held her warm, skinny arm while we inched our way to the front door. I was proud to help her; she had done more with her life than I could ever hope to do with mine.

At 4 am, the power came back on. Suddenly all the lights were on and the oxygen machine came back to life. I got up and turned off the lights and gave Helen the correct tube. I slept to the drone of a machine I had become accustomed to a few years before. My grandfather had one just before he died.

I woke up the next morning while my dad built a fire and made coffee. We decided to stay at the cabin that day so we could spend some time with Helen, who was restricted by a fifty-foot tube. We were anxious for work. We could cut wood or touch up the green paint on the log ends. Suggestions were being tossed around when Helen spoke up.

"I would just love it if you took out those ugly cabinets. I've hated them since we put them in."

We decided that it was possible, we had enough storage space to keep the old cans of borax and pancake mix housed within them. We cleaned them out, finding all kinds of funky unopened products from decades past. My Dad and I got to work, prying, unscrewing, more prying. We struggled with the cabinets for an hour before we got the first one out, the second followed closely and then they were gone. I took them to the dump that night. We cleaned off forty years of dust from the bare logs the cabin had been built out of in 1927. We found a date on one of them. Helen was happy, we all were happy to finally see those things go.

Now that the cabinets were gone, my dad became inspired to give the cabin another facelift. Tear down the bedroom and start from scratch, increase the angle of the roof because the snow is heavier than it was before. The roof and floors would be insulated, a well would be dug, and the linoleum would be removed to expose bare pine planks. The cabin would be different, modern conveniences mingling with the old, microwaves and hundred-year-old cooking stoves in the same room.

Every once in a while my dad emailed me drawings done by an architect he hired shortly after we removed the cabinets. He sent the drawings wanting to know my opinion on them, which did I like the best? He wanted me to help him decide on the cabins fate. Our cabins decor was treated like it was more delicate than an Easter egg. Just one wrong piece of furniture could throw the whole thing off balance. My dad didn't want to ruin the cabin I grew up with, he wanted me to continue to return for my whole life to chop wood and climb mountains, with or without him.

“She was short of breath so she went to the ER” my sister told me over the phone three days before Halloween my sophomore year of college. “When the doctor came in to see her she stopped breathing. They tried to resuscitate her, but there was nothing they could do.”

Two weeks before, I had called Helen, just to talk, to see how she was doing. After a lifetime of smoking cigarettes she had just been diagnosed with lung cancer. The end of her life was no longer some fuzzy vision years in the future, it was clear, focused, right there.

“Hi Helen” I said.

“Is that Thomas!?” she said with gusto.

Yeah, how are you? ” I ask.

“I’ve been feeling much better, thank you.”

We didn’t talk about her cancer that topic was avoided at all costs. We talked about the Cabin. She was looking forward to the demolition of the little room, to the running water, to the promise of convenient heat. It was unspoken that it was impossible for her to see the next facelift. All she would see before her own end was the first tiny step, the removal of the cabinets.

The whole family met in Colorado Springs a few weeks after Helens death. We held a memorial service, which Helen had planed for herself. She had owned a catering company and had an old friend from the business do the food, which had to be served on real china, no paper plates. She planed the menu, the music, everything. It was just what she wanted. When my Dad spoke, tears erupted from

deep within, the dam I had built three days before Halloween finally broke. He talked about a time when he was very young, when he had been frightened on a cross-continent train trip. His mother held him tight; and he was overcome with the feeling that he was safe. I had the same memory, but it happened at the Cabin. I was scared of the noisy darkness outside so Helen held me close to her, I played with the fish pendant suspended on her neck by a gold chain and I knew that nothing out there could get me, that I was safe.

While my plane took off from Denver, I stared out into the darkness. I watched the ground grow distant, the hustle and bustle turned into tiny pinpricks of light and then they were gone. We were over the mountains now. Below, there was just empty space, a sea of cold tar. Somewhere in that void the cabin stood, filled to the roof with memories that came spilling out every time the door was opened. Memories of the wilderness, the sun glistening on the pine needles, memories of cabin repair, Memories of my family.