

The Artist's Conk

by Sara Catterall

We don't enjoy each other's company, but once a year, family is family.

Nearly all of us arrive the Friday evening before Labor Day to claim our assigned rooms, most of them in the lake house, a monstrous old Adirondack-style lodge. This is our own carefully managed ancestral wilderness, larger than the nation of Andorra. There is no cell reception or internet access, and those of us with seniority have banned any obvious use of modern technology whether for work, amusement, or escape. So, once we have slept in and gotten through lunch, most of us are hellishly bored.

We organize elaborate group meals on the long open porches, pick blueberries in the high meadows, empty the boathouse into the lake. The boats give the children something to do, and give the rest of us an excuse to flee each other, for private solitude, conversation, or a fight.

Whenever talk dies, or darkness gathers too closely around the breakfast table, everyone knows the list of ritual activities we can brightly suggest to skip the day forward. There is the attic, crammed full. There are the outlying houses, which younger subsets of us have raided for first editions, prints, and collectible porcelain. There are lawn sports, indoor games, and trips to the nearest towns for ice cream and an impoverished semblance of shopping. And there are family relics to examine and explain at too much length to newcomers and children. One of those is the tree mushroom collection.

For generations we have collected tree mushrooms, the hard, flat kind that grow out from the side of certain large forest trees, as if the tree had decided it needed a little shelving and pushed a segment of itself out into the air. The underside is buff color, velvety to the touch, easily bruised. You can scratch your name in them, draw pictures on them, hence their common name, the artist's conk.

Delicate and responsive when fresh, they dry hard as oak and keep forever if, as Aunt Judy will say, the woodworms don't get them. We have an honored collection of more than fifty prime specimens, decorating the twelve-foot stone mantelpiece over the fireplace in the log cathedral of the main sitting room. The most impressive one is right in the center, a monstrous plate that must be thirty inches across—none of us may bring it down to examine it closely. No other mushroom can approach it in size or quality. A skillful, many-toned impression of our lake with the boathouse and pine trees is scratched into the buff side, and though there is no signature, the year is etched in the lower right corner: 1924.

We are all desperately individual, of course. We have all been, as most of us would not say, very well educated. Private schools, tutors, boarding schools starting as early as eight, pick of the Ivies, the Sorbonne and Oxford, every advantage, every opportunity. We are all top dogs in our various ways, brilliant and well-connected. Only when we abandon work to come up here, only when we are standing around the lawn in the morning with coffee mugs, or in the late afternoon with alcohol or surreptitious highs, trying to stroll away from each other while Frank, the groundskeeper's border collie, tries to herd us back together in a lump, then we feel our shine dim and sputter, and we can't be together a moment longer without some kind of purpose.

Late one frosty Saturday evening after a jarring dinner, we were mostly in and around the central sanctum of the lake house. A large fire of maple and apple logs burned in the blackened maw of the fireplace and several of us were staring at it, brooding, sunk in old feather cushions in the dark wood furniture, while others read, fidgeted, or lay on the threadbare rug to work a large puzzle of the Matterhorn that may or may not have had all its pieces.

Someone, looking at the mushrooms displayed on the mantel like crooked teeth, wondered aloud about the giant in the center: a bright attempt at conversation that seemed likely to swamp in the general fog of gloom and boredom. But then someone else commented that of course that was a long time ago, when the earth

was new, and now what with global warming and acid rain... which of course sparked an irritated rejoinder and denial from at least two others, with a reattribution of blame to the anemic lethargy of current generations. Our blood rose, and within minutes we had ratified a plan to hunt down an equally large or larger mushroom on the following morning.

In the depths of the night, one of us woke. Rather than lie there, waiting for the clutch of old demons, she got up, pulled her coat over her nightshirt, and went out on the front porch. Her bare feet cooled instantly on the smooth floor boards, cold air slipping up her sleeves, up her legs, insinuating itself around her waist. A high breeze rattled the shadowy tops of the trees. The old moon shone in the sky above the lake, a "C" tilting on its back, and there above it were the Pleiades. She hadn't seen them in years. Peering at them she could still see all seven, not bad for forty-eight, not bad at all. There they shone, faint and high, forever bonded in...was it death? Grief? Exile? Not a comforting story. The thought sent her back to bed.

Sunday morning dawned warmer and brilliantly sunny. There was actual cheer in the kitchen over the coffee, the toast, the high fiber cereals and fruit. Tree and mushroom guides cluttered the dining table. Some of us were wearing technical hiking gear, leaning telescoping walking sticks against the walls and the porch railing, organizing sandwiches and flasks and bug spray into day packs.

Melissa is an oddity among us, a classics professor with a nine-month contract. She spends her summers here with her daughters and their visiting friends and father, from May until the end of this mass gathering. If classes started earlier, she would never stay this long, but she has no airtight excuse, and she does stay for us, year after year. She sits all the long weekend doing fine needlepoint in Byzantine colors while her family eddies around her. On this morning we found her sitting in the sun on the porch, working a cushion cover with a geometric puzzle of crimson and gold, dark green, deep blue and black.

"Come on, you have to go. Everyone is going," we cried. A bee zigzagged over her work, mistaking it for blossoms, and landed on her arm, crawling briefly over it to reach the field of colors. She paused for it, but she didn't flinch. Tasting the wool, it withdrew and rose, vanishing high over the lawn.

"What's so exciting?" she said, smiling wide-eyed for the children, dark eyes shining in her pale face, black hair loose around her throat.

When we told her, she said, "No, you're welcome to it. I'll hold the house down. Don't get lost!" and waved us off with an overblown show of gaiety.

Some of us took off for far corners of the estate, individually and in little groups, determined to rely on intuition and paths less traveled. Most of us drove up to an old mixed beech and sugar maple forest, full of ancient giants and scattered with boulders the size of SUVs.

Silver-gray trunks gleamed over a sea of russet gold, the ground more thickly covered with leaves than the branches above, the air rich with the smell of warming pine needles and decay. We wandered through the underbrush, drifting apart like an aging universe, breaking the fearful silence with our rustling and snapping, our voices and thumping feet. Birds sang in distant trees with underwater voices. High overhead, scraps of brown and gold fluttered against the deep blue sky, and around us a dank chill breathed out from the boulders and up from the mossy ground.

One of us was sixteen, and not sure whether this purgatory was any improvement over the one that awaited him the other side of Monday. He was only here because of his father, who dragged him up every year, saying that he would have his cousins to play with: Melissa's five- and seven-year-olds, and a pair of arrogant twin girls, aged eleven, tripwired with allergies, pale and hollow-eyed from a willful lack of sleep and food.

Cold, bored, depressed, he drifted off, skidding down the sides of a bowl that everyone else had skirted, his sneakers sliding on the mulch of leaves until he came up with a jolt against the trunk of a

huge sugar maple, rooted near the bottom of the basin. He edged down around it and bumped his knee on what at first he thought was a bench. It embraced the sunny lower half of the tree, a thick-ringed, brown monster, edges pooling out into the air. He let himself down next to it, slipping a little, griming the seat of his jeans. It was wicked huge. He thought about keeping it secret, and for a while he sat chilling himself at the roots of the tree, hugging his knees and his luck. Then he heard a scampering in the leaves above him and delighted little girl whispers that turned to shouts of his name and a tumble of questions. Ignoring them, he stood and shouted for the rest of us, and shouting to each other, we converged on the basin, gathering around the prize.

It had to be three feet across. There was admiration, awe, and debate. The old maple was dying on the mushroom side, withered leafless twigs in clear contrast to the remnants of a blazing red-orange canopy. Aunt Judy leaned on her walking staff, her wrinkled fingertips white with cold, and stared up at it.

"Grandpa used to say they were bad for the trees. They turn living wood to rot, year by year."

"So we're doing a good deed," said an uncle. "Who has the tools?"

We tried a lot of things, including futile efforts with a screwdriver and a hatchet. Feeling re-diminished, the finder wandered off from us, clambered onto a mossy boulder, and pulled himself up into a red oak tree to watch uncomfortably from above. Finally the groundskeeper arrived with a case of wood chisels, and we took the largest to the base of the giant fungus with the help of a mallet. The hammering set up an echo in the woods that seemed to return from miles away, surrounding us with the reverberating onslaught of our own uproar.

Later, some of us were sure it was the vibration that stirred up the bees. Of course not, said others. The bees weren't in that tree at all. They were in the big, old, half-hollow beech right behind us on the opposite slope. They came out of the hole near the fork. Most of us in fact, never saw them. We only heard the yips of the first two

people to be stung, the cry of *Bees!* and then the shout of the groundskeeper: *Run! Get in the cars!*

Afterwards, nobody liked to mention if they had noticed the pale twins hunting for rocks to throw up at that hole. One of them was the first to be stung, the other was up on the rim of the bowl and ran when she heard her sister shriek. When their uncle looked up and saw the black storm of insects descending, he yelled and grabbed the marked girl, scrambled up out of the hole, was stung himself, ran downhill stripping off the child's shirt, brushing at bees and shouting over her screams, ran for the road, passing her mother and sister who pelted after them as we all scattered for the cars.

The boy was still up in his roost. At first he thought the bees would follow his flailing relations and leave him if he stayed still against the trunk, but then he heard a high-pitched insect whine, and they were on him. Bees filling his hair, pouring into his collar, up his sleeves, a thousand needle stabs of poison. He covered his face with his hands, drove his forehead into the bark, pressed himself against the tree, and yelled in desperate agony, but no-one heard him. At least, no-one mentioned it later. There was a lot of yelling going on.

Once at the cars, the uncle slammed himself into the back of a minivan with the little girl and slapped off every insect he could find, stamping them to the floor, crushing them with fingers, grimly ignoring her melodramatic screams, which were starting to catch in her throat.

Her mom slammed into the van, dragging the other, miraculously unstung sister with her. She had the Epipen right there in her hand. She had never used it, but she had been trained. Everything would be fine. But she froze. Forty-five minutes to the hospital, she saw the red number flash across her vision, 45, we'll never make it. One of us snatched the Epipen from her, uncapped it, but the mother screamed, "No, give it back," and grabbed for it, knocking it out of his hand and under the seat as the driver stamped on the accelerator.

Back at the lake house, nobody missed the boy. Not even his father, who had hardly seen him that weekend and was used to it. Those of us who wanted lunch ate it standing up in the kitchen. Some of us went to our rooms to pack. Others hung around the dining room, near the only working phone.

When the call came, there was a sigh of relief and a general dispersal. The girl was fine. They would be back for their things in the morning. We were all eager to leave, and our annual last dinner around the bonfire by the lake was more lively and generous than any of us would have normally expected. Halfway through the evening, the boy's father wandered among us asking casually if anyone had seen his son. When we said no, he said, "Well, he's probably off by himself somewhere. I'll go check his room in a while." It would be a long drive the next day. His ex-wife had insisted he deliver the boy to school on his way down to Boston, and he wasn't looking forward to it. He drank wine, he drank scotch, he went to bed, and slept in.

Early that morning, when the groundskeeper cautiously returned to the forest to look at the nest, he found the cold body of our boy, hanging by one ankle from the cleft of the oak tree, its crown blazing dark red against the white sky above him. None of us were there.

