

2022

The Cabin

Zoe Petterson
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Petterson, Zoe (2022) "The Cabin," *Exile*: Vol. 68: No. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol68/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

The Cabin
Zoe Pettersen

It was only mid-September and the aspens were already a brilliant gold—not that the contrast of the pines and rust-colored rocks against the yellow hues did anything to lift Laurel's mood.

So, she grabbed her boots, keys, and a hoodie, and drove up a winding dirt road until it ended at a remote trailhead. She needed to get lost for a few hours and wash the day from her mind.

Which was all very well and good, until her car's whining protests culminated in a choking sound as she forced it to the strip of a parking lot at the trailhead. She cut the engine, and it shuddered and died. With a knot in her stomach, she tested the ignition and the car only coughed without catching. Laurel checked her phone. She had zero bars of service, not uncommon this far up in the mountains. *Dammit.*

There was only one other vehicle parked at the end of the road: a dusty Subaru Outback that had seen far better days. Laurel leapt from her car and peered into the windows, but it was empty, the driver presumably on a hike. She chewed the edge of her lip and considered her options. The mid-afternoon sun was still pleasantly warm, so she resolved to head out along the trail and try to intercept the owner of the Subaru.

Laurel started hiking at a fast clip. Her blood still simmered, and she lost track of the miles—and the shift in the weather.

The sky, which had been a searing blue only an hour ago, was darkened and discontent. The cool fall breeze had begun to gust, rushing through the treetops with that peculiar river-like sound, and the pines creaked and groaned.

She shivered in her hoodie.

The temperature was dropping by the minute, but Laurel only truly registered it when the first flakes of snow dusted her cheeks. She looked at the sky properly and tried to remember how far she had come. There had still been no sign of the other hiker.

The snow thickened and fell in earnest as the darkness of night encroached the sky, though the sun had been hidden behind clouds for some while. Only then did Laurel begin to worry but forced herself to maintain a fast walk rather than dash down the trail. *Where was the other hiker?*

The trail curved around a boulder and she was faced with a clearing that held an old wood-frame cabin. Laurel broke into a run towards it and in the gathering night barely made out the crest above the door of two crossed swords. *It must be an abandoned 10th Mountain Division hut*, she thought. She hadn't realized that there were any in the area. Laurel wrenched open the cabin door, or tried to—it caught in the warped doorframe, until it unexpectedly gave way and she spilled into the room with a flurry of snow. The door slammed against the opposite wall, and it wasn't until she forced it shut that she realized she wasn't alone.

A man stood half-crouched in the center of the little room, lit by a flickering propane lamp, and mirrored her expression of shock. Her pounding heart lurched in her chest when she realized she knew exactly who he was.

"Laurel?" he asked, incredulous. "What the hell are you doing out here?"

"Anderson," she said, the name rusty on her tongue from disuse. "I... I suppose I could ask you the same thing."

"I'm waiting out the weather. You?"

"Car broke down. I was going to find whoever owned the other car at the trailhead and get a jump."

"Well, you found him."

They stared at each other. He'd filled out since the last time she'd seen him, had grown some stubble. She pushed a certain image of him out of her mind, the night everything had changed between them. She needed a distraction—anything. Survival.

"It's too dark to try to go back, at least in the storm. Even if we didn't get lost, we could get hypothermia before we made it back," she said. "We need to take inventory of what we have. Food, water, fuel... Do you have service? Or a sat phone?"

He didn't answer her questions. "Are you cold?"

It caught her off guard. Wordlessly, he removed the flannel overshirt he wore beneath his jacket and handed it to her. She slung it over her shoulders and—dammit, it smelled like him. He must still use the same shampoo he used when they were in college.

"What supplies do you have?" she prodded again, avoiding a *thank you*.

He reached up and pushed his hair off his forehead. "Not much. I came out here for a quick trip and didn't bring many things."

"That makes two of us," she muttered.

"I have..." He rummaged through a small pack. "A bit of trail food, two water bottles, a lighter, and a blanket. I found the lamp here."

"I can't believe you still bring a *blanket* camping."

"I can't believe you were stupid enough to go hiking without a backpack."

A ghost of a smile crossed their faces, but it was gone in a blink. The air felt as heavy and still as the snow outside.

They sat in silence, lit by the uncertain light of the lamp. Outside, the storm still howled, and sent the old timbers of the cabin creaking. A chill draft ruffled Laurel's hair.

"Do you still have that knife?" she asked.

Anderson drew it from his pocket and flipped it open in one smooth motion. How many hours had she watched him practice doing that, sitting around a campfire instead of a half-dead propane lantern?

"Wouldn't go anywhere without it," he said.

Laurel opened her mouth to speak again, but the lamp suddenly spluttered out. The darkness that fell was absolute, and the words died in her throat. So, she sat in a silence that should have been—*used* to be—comfortable, but now just reminded her of all that had changed.

Anderson was the one to shatter the quiet. "We should probably try to get some sleep."

"Conserving energy and all that," she said.

By unspoken agreement, they laid down together in the center of the floor. She drew the blanket over them, but neither touched the other. The inch between their bodies felt like a chasm.

"Do you—"

"I—" They both started at the same time.

"Do you remember the last time we did this?" she asked. *Legs tangled together, his hand on her ribs. Nestled between rows of the other students from college, all sleeping on the floor of a cabin, but they may as well have been alone.*

"Yeah. Yeah, I do."

The question that she'd wondered for years burned on the tip of her tongue. She'd never been able to ask it, and maybe this would be her only chance.

"Why did you do it?" she finally blurted.

His breathing stopped for a moment.

"Do you really want to know?" he said.

Hot tears threatened to seep from Laurel's eyes. "You were my best friend," she said.

"You think I didn't regret it?" Anderson snapped.

"And yet you never said a *thing* about it."

"That's not something you confide in your best friend, especially when that friend was *you*," Anderson said.

"I didn't want to lose your friendship!"

"But you're the one who left."

A few of Laurel's tears spilled over, like water fighting to be freed from a dam. "Why did you do it?" Laurel whispered again.

"She didn't ask for anything more from me."

"What kind of a reason is that?" she said, perhaps too heatedly. She wondered if he could hear the tremor her anger was fighting to hide.

"A perfectly good one, *Laurel*."

"Why would asking for anything more be a bad thing?"

"Ask yourself the same damn question and I think you'll know why."

Maybe it was the darkness, or the charged inch between them, or that they were lying on the floor of an old cabin like they did on the trips in college, that drove Laurel to speak again.

"I thought I loved you," she said. She never thought the words would have slipped from her lips. Not to him, not after finding him entwined with the other girl on the last trip they led together before graduation.

"How was I supposed to know?"

She was glad it was too dark to see his face. It would have hurt too much.

In the morning, after a fitful night of sleep, Laurel woke to a warm body pressed against her own, an arm nestled around her torso. Her traitorous body wanted to lay there, in the comfort that was shockingly familiar, but she forced herself out from under his arm and the blanket, and into the cold air of the cabin. Anderson lay asleep, his face softened.

When Laurel forced open the battered door she was greeted by a blast of frigid air and a landscape transformed. Weak early-morning sunlight sent the snow glittering—at least twelve inches deep. The aspens ringing the cabin, still clad in their autumn foliage, drooped under from the weight of it and some branches had already broken. A snap cracked in the distance like a gunshot as a tree succumbed to the weight of unexpected winter.

Anderson stirred behind her, woken by the cold.

She shouldn't have cared, but she still muttered "Sorry" and shut the door.

They shared the last granola bar he'd packed. It didn't do much to fill the hollowness of her stomach but it was better than nothing.

"We need to get moving," Anderson said, the first to break the silence that had settled. "The snow will slow us down, and we have a long way to go." Neither acknowledged the previous night.

They left the little cabin as barren as it had been found and set out. The trail was easy enough to see, but the deep snow made travel difficult. They hiked for several miles in silence, though Laurel's mind churned with the things she wanted to say but was too afraid to admit. She occasionally stole glances at him and saw his eyes hold an intense focus, the same look he'd get while doing first aid on college trips. The look that said, *I will make you okay*.

Laurel tore her gaze from him and noticed a disturbance in the trail ahead. "Look," she said, pointing. Large pawprints marred the snow and disappeared into the trees—a mountain lion, probably. And if they were atop the snow that had fallen only last night, it wouldn't be far.

"Shit," Anderson said, and scanned the trees around them while turning a slow circle.

"We need to go *now*," Laurel said, and plowed ahead through the deep powder. Anderson's longer stride easily matched her own.

They hurried through the trees as fast as they could manage, but the snow impeded their progress. Laurel's fingers and toes soon went numb, even as a chill sweat formed on her brow and her breath came in quick huffs from the exertion.

"Talking might help scare it off, if it's still out there," Anderson said.

"Have you ever seen one before?"

"No. And I hope to God we won't."

"I only know one person who has." Laurel cast another careful look at the trees around them.

"What happened?" Anderson asked, if only for the sake of making noise.

"He was attacked. Spent a week in the hospital and needed twenty-seven stitches, but he fought it off. He survived."

Anderson shook his head in disbelief. "How'd the lion do?"

She was silent for two heartbeats. "It was shot a few days later."

They were all too aware of the sharp vastness of the woods around them, how the pine-scattered snow deadened all sound. It could be anywhere—behind the next bend or a half a mountain away.

"We need to keep talking," Anderson said. "Keep making noise."

Laurel's mind went empty save for the words that had been echoing since the previous night.

Ask yourself the same damn question.

"I was thinking about last night," she said.

"Yeah?" he replied. His tone was even, but she knew the neutrality was only a façade.

"What if...what if I hadn't broken off our friendship?" Laurel said cautiously.

His mouth quirked to the side. "What kind of answer are you looking for?"

Without thinking Laurel swatted his arm, just like the old days. "Stop answering my questions with more questions. I *meant*, how would you have felt?"

"You were my best friend. Of course I didn't want to lose that," he said plainly, and she knew him well enough to recognize he was sincere.

"And..." Laurel ground her teeth together and forced the words out. "You had a point. With what you said last night. I shouldn't have gotten upset about what you did, then or now. You're your own person."

He gave her a sidelong glance. "Is this supposed to be an apology?"

He wasn't going to make this easy for her. Fine—she probably deserved it, after the way she pressed him last night.

"Yes," she admitted. "I'm sorry." Laurel exhaled, and felt...lighter for having said the words. Like a burden had been lifted from her shoulders, one she'd carried for so long that she'd almost stopped noticing the weight.

"Did you think about what else I said?"

All night long, and then some.

"Can I ask—" He fell silent as a deep hiss came from the trees to their left. It began almost inaudibly, beyond the range of any human ear, but soon filled the air and settled in Laurel's chest. The hairs stood up on the back of her neck and she grabbed at Anderson's arm.

person she'd loved, or thought she'd loved. "I'm glad you were with me." She steeled her courage. "About last night—" she began and halted.

Anderson gave his crooked, perfect smile. "I was going to bring that up again, too."

"I know my problem," Laurel said quietly.

"I think I do, too," Anderson said. "You need to stop running away."

"I wanted to stop running last night. I thought knowing *why* you did it would be what I needed to—get over you," Laurel confessed.

"Did it work?"

And she continued to meet his eyes when she said, "No."

"I was trying to get over you. That's why I did it." He scuffed his boot in the slushy gravel.

"That doesn't make it right—"

Laurel held up a hand. "This isn't on you," she said, and maybe it still hurt to admit but she knew it was true. "But...I want to try doing *us*. Properly, this time."

Anderson's eyes glinted in the sun. "I missed my best friend."

"Me too."

"Let's get off this damn mountain."