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It's Hot in Here

I am staring at a picture of my grandfather. In the photo, he's leaning up against the sauna and smiling from ear to ear, and I think back to the first sauna that I can remember. I believe I'm about six years old. My family lived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, but we often journeyed on the weekends to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, or the U.P. On this particular weekend, we have arrived at my great-grandparents house in Mass City. The white farmhouse is showing signs of age, but it is quaint and quite charming, with a big porch on the front. The steps leading to the front porch have wilted, much like the leaning dandelions that are scattered in the yard. As my family and I walk up the steps and onto the porch, I remember the sun shining brightly and the sky is a soft, powdery blue with puffy cumulous clouds.

When we enter the house, my great-grandparents, Jalmer and Hilja are waiting for us. During this visit, the great-grandparents don't speak much. However, when Jalmer speaks, it is mostly in Finn. He looks at my sister and me longingly. "*Puuvilla pääs,*" he says with a wink and a smile. My grandfather often called us that, so I knew what my great-grandfather was saying. He was referring to the fact that we are children with bright, almost white, blonde hair. I know it is a term of endearment. I notice the gnarled white hands and the cataract-glazed eyes of my great-grandparents. I'm trying to wrap my 6-year-old brain around who they are to me. I don't

know what to say. Due to their age, and the lack of conversation, I'm not sure if they even know who I am, or if they'd understand me if I tried to speak.

After visiting for a bit, my mother announces that it is time. "Where are we going, momma?" I ask. "We are going sauna," she says with a smile. Just off the kitchen is a door that leads to the backyard. I look to the distance and see a small, greyish, clapboard building with a blue and white Finnish flag waving proudly from the pole. It looks like a dilapidated shed except for the fact that there is smoke coming out of the chimney. The first room is the changing room. There is just enough room for my mom, sister, and I to undress as we bump elbows. It is warm in there, and the cozy heat envelopes me like a baby joey snuggled deep in momma kangaroo's pouch. I can see the flicker of flames peeking through the air vents on the wood burning stove as the sweet smell of cedar enters my nostrils. The changing room walls are lined with wide plank, honey colored cedar. There is a wooden bench for sitting and hooks for towels are above it. A second door piques my curiosity; I open it to see what's on the other side. Glaring back at me is a tree stump with a grumpy, old axe stuck in the center. However, beyond that are acres of tall grasses, wildflowers, and dandelions. To my left, I see a barbed wire fence and hear the soft nickering of a horse nearby. "Close the door! You'll let in the flies," scolds my mother. I snap out of my curious state and back into the present.

The final door of the changing room leads to the sauna. The humidity is slightly oppressive and tropical, and I see that the walls are lined with the same honey colored cedar. "Be very, very careful around the stove. Sit on the benches or you could trip and get burned," warns my mom. The top bench is bigger and wider, and we can climb up to sit on it by stepping on the other bench below. Soap, shampoo, loofahs and metal cooking pots of various sizes are

scattered like toys in a playroom up on the top bench. The bottom bench is home to two large, black, rubberized tubs. I imagine that these tubs were once for feeding or watering the livestock. The stove has many of the characteristics of an old-time, pioneer, cooking stove. It's mostly black iron and fueled by the wood burning fire. The main difference is that the top of the stove is open like a box, with lots of potato-sized rocks in the left compartment, and a rectangular holding tank for the hot water on the right side. My mother takes one of the larger pots off the top bench and scoops several buckets of hot water from the holding tank into both rubberized tubs. Next, she adds cold water to those same tubs from the garden hose. Like a chef putting the final touches on his signature dish, my mom sticks her forearm in both tubs and gives it a good swirl, testing that the temperature is just right.

During this time, my sister and I have been amusing ourselves. We climb like monkeys from top to bottom bench, noticing that the temperature is much hotter on the top bench. We sample the various brushes and loofahs. It is beginning to get unbearably hot, and I'm sweating like a roasting pig. When we aren't paying attention, my mother sneakily pours some of the water from the special recipe buckets over our heads. The distinct, witch-like cackle of my mom is stuck in the air, and it reminds me of a fly caught in a spider web. The water feels like icicles, but after the initial shock of cold, it feels so refreshing. My mother helps us wash our hair and we wash our bodies. When this chore is completed, my mom grabs the smallest pan she sees and throws some water onto the sauna rocks of the wood burning stove. Steam instantly rises like a phoenix, and the collision of hot and cold water kissing make popping and hissing sounds. We giggle in delight and beg her to do it again. Once we're finished, we go into the changing room to dry off. My mom opens the back door of the changing room and we stand naked, eyes

closed, relishing the feeling of the breeze against our warm bodies. In our immediate view, there is nothing but the lonely tree stump and the acres of wildflowers. We are at an exclusive, ultra-private meeting with nature. It is a feeling almost too hard to describe. There is an overwhelming sense of calm, and the tranquility is palatable. My mother breaks the reverie and tells us that the sauna (pronounced sow-na, not saw-na) is a Finnish custom. "Did you know that your great-grandfather, Jalmer, came to the U.P. from Finland when was just twenty one years old? Hilja, your great-grandmother, was a cook at a mining camp. That's how they met." My sister and I shake our heads no.

I breathe a heavy sigh, and look back down at the picture of my grandfather outside his sauna. It's been over three years since he passed away. My grandfather, Matt, meant the world to me because he was happy, easy going, always smiling, and I never heard him raise his voice. He was extremely proud to be Finnish, and he taught us Finnish words, and led by his gentle example. Most of all, I could tell he just adored his family and the sauna.

Over the years, I have come to regard and cherish other things about the sauna. Preparing the sauna is not a quick and easy process. It involves chopping the wood that will burn best in the fire, cleaning the ashes out of the stove, and sweeping the changing room. Getting the fire up to the right temperature and maintaining it takes patience and a lot of practice. Saunas are an event. It's like cooking a gourmet meal because there is a lot of preparation involved. When someone prepares a sauna for you, it is an act of love. For me, the sauna experience is like taking communion--I am cleansed physically and spiritually, but most importantly, I can feel an invisible thread in my being that connects me from Finland to here.

I only get to take saunas about once a year because I have to travel to Upper Michigan to get a true Finnish sauna. Because of their rarity, being able to take one means everything to me. When I'm sitting on the top bench at 150 degrees, and I throw some cold water onto the rocks and watch the steam rise, I think about the family that is no longer with us. I'm humbled and grateful to be a part of amazing family tradition. I beam with pride.