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Summer Cottage

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I first saw the house that was to become our summer home several years ago when I was conducting an architectural survey in Dublin, New Hampshire. It was a bitterly cold February afternoon. The thermometer read only five degrees above zero and the sun seemed to have set shortly after lunch. Isabel Pratt, a member of the local conservation commission, drove me around to look at various historic properties in her end of the village. I had to scale icy banks of snow piled high along the roadsides, take a photograph with gloves on, and attempt to observe enough to write some hasty notes when I regained the warmth of the car. One of these houses was Pinehurst, the summer residence of Isabel's family for three generations. Her husband, Bert, had covered the windows with large sheets of plywood and its many gables supported thick blankets of snow. My impression was of dark-brown shingled planes glazed with a coat of frosting—rather like a gingerbread house painted by Cézanne.

Pinehurst's true character, that of a Victorian watering-place cottage, was revealed when we rented it last summer. It sits at the end of a dirt lane in a grove of towering pine trees which frame the north slope of Mount Monadnock. One might assume that the trees had given the house its name. But when it was built in 1886 by Miss Anita

Wheelwright of Boston it was known as Weecote and it stood several hundred yards up the hill in a pasture overlooking Dublin Lake. In 1897, Mrs. Emma Chapman of St. Louis bought the house and moved it to its present location, making way for a Tudor-style mansion called Homewood designed by her son-in-law, John Lawrence Mauran. Mauran, who later became President of the American Institute of Architects, summered in the older cottage and his daughter, Isabel's mother, was born in our bedroom in 1898.

The interior of the house appears not to have been much altered since the Maurans moved to Homewood in 1913. Its atmosphere is one of casualness and comfort. The faded wallpaper and the shelves crammed with turn-of-the-century novels gave me the feeling that I was visiting my grandparents in their Cape Ann house before World War I. Because the house had been moved and now rests on a makeshift foundation of boulders, the floors slant in every direction and the children promptly discovered that the living room floor was ideal for rolling marbles and pushing toy cars. This once grand parlor became the children's play area, the formal dining room became my office, while the kitchen became our family gathering place.

The kitchen and the attached laundry room are the plainest rooms in the house, having been intended for the domestic tasks of servants. But the simple pine table, worn by decades of scrubbing, suited our vacation mood, as did the wood stove, its birch fire warming the chilly New Hampshire mornings. The sink is a six-foot-long trough of soapstone deep enough to conceal a day's unwashed dishes.

Pinehurst's six bedrooms provided the children the luxury of having their own rooms, but as darkness descended on our first night, they gravitated towards each other and finally settled in two adjacent rooms. All of the beds, including the two majestic brass ones my wife and I slept in, were as uncomfortable as those in a rural English hotel. Almost as compensation for the lumpy beds, a sleeping porch opened off our bedroom and provided a glimpse of the lake in the morning sunshine. Our bathroom had a marble sink and a proper size tub complete with ball and claw feet; the shower down the hall, a vertical pine box lined with tin, had the velocity of a gentle rain.

There was a note on the attic door which read "Please keep closed," for as we soon learned, Pinehurst is famous for its colony of bats and the third floor is their exclusive domain. Occasionally, one found its way to our quarters, and despite Isabel's humane suggestion of capturing them in coffee cans and liberating them outdoors, we dispatched them with tennis racquets. However, the nightly ritual of hunting these eery flying rodents became somewhat exhausting and, as the bats had occupied the house long before us, we philosophically decided to accept their presence.

Most of my mornings were spent at the mahogany dining table writing, while my wife baked bread and the children wandered down to the lake or climbed along the stone walls that run through the woods and which a hundred years ago defined open pastures. In the afternoon, we would drive over to Peterborough to shop for groceries or plunder about in Dublin, looking at houses seen previously under mantles of snow, strolling in the town cemetery, or dropping by the general store. The evenings were reserved for drinks on the largest of our several porches, followed by supper in the kitchen and an hour or so of reading.

Tradition holds that Mount Monadnock, which the Indians worshipped and which attracted painters and poets to Dublin, casts a spell over summer visitors and compels them to return. We shared an unspoken agreement not to mention our winter home in Kentucky, and as the time neared to pack the car for the return journey, we realized that the sorcery of the mountain was not imaginary. During our stay at Pinehurst a neighbor's son was killed in a freak bicycle accident. We stood on the shore one evening at twilight and watched as his ashes were scattered on the lake. A few days after we got back to Louisville and were already enmeshed in the frantic pace of school and work, our twelve-year-old boy casually remarked that when he died he wished to be buried on Monadnock.