



## In Need Of A Ledge

by Mame Ekblom Cudd

[Home](#)

[Spring-Summer 2013](#)

[Winter-Spring 2013](#)

[Fall-Winter 2012-2013](#)

[Summer-Fall 2012](#)

[Spring-Summer 2012](#)

[Winter-Spring 2012](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

"No funerals this time," my mother says. "We're going to fish and laugh. Do you hear me, children? We must laugh." She shouts from the front seat of the car, unable to turn around—pinned in between my father and grandfather. It's the summer of 1966, our second summer driving up to the St. Lawrence River, to the Thousand Islands, into Canada, to my uncle Eddy's house. From Manhattan it takes all day and part of the evening, all of us stuffed into the station wagon. My parents, my grandparents, my two brothers, and I on a pilgrimage back to the yellow house. We finally escape the heat; the windows are open. My mother's fine, short hair gently floats around her head. It never settles.

From the highway I see the yellow farmhouse and look for the second-story door. The culprit, as my father calls it, a door on the outside of the house above the kitchen, with no outside stairway. But I can only make out the wide, screened-in porch and, across the highway in the distance, the St. Lawrence River. As we get closer, the tall pines on either side of the porch seem black instead of green. The house is set on a big, grassy slope that we children played and tumbled down last summer while the adults visited on the porch. Aunt Susan, Uncle Eddy's wife, had died. After the burial we took turns flopping onto that grass and rolling down the hill. Jack, my older brother, told me to be quiet. He said funerals demanded that we have fun in silence. I asked Jack, "Fun, in silence?" We laughed.

Before I was about to roll again, he clamped his palm over my mouth. "No shrieking, Maggie. You're the loudest," he hissed; the hair on his lip had some blondish fuzz. I could smell alcohol.

And now this summer, as we pull into the dirt driveway, I try to think of the fishing we did after the funeral and the luck I had catching the most fish, big pike and walleye, until the car stops and I see that strange, yellow door. It's the same color as the house. Even the doorknob is yellow, so it will blend in, as if it could. I've never seen anything like this on any other house. Aunt Susan fell from it, breaking every bone in her body. She died a week later. I didn't know her well. She visited us in the city, just for an afternoon. Bouncy and tall, she gave me a great hug; her long arms were soft and ample. Everyone adored her laugh, deep and hearty; infectious, my mother would say. Before the car stops I elbow Jack, now thirteen. I point to the door. He nods.

Uncle Eddy waves. We leave the car, untangling ourselves from each other, from the luggage. Small and large bags make a muffled thump on the pine needles. My grandmother gently forces Chris, just seven, to stand. He stretches and looks at the house. I think he's searching for the door. Uncle Eddy approaches, bouncing on his toes, small and wiry, and my mother, although taller, resembles him. They're French Canadian from my grandmother's side. Eddy is my grandmother's brother, really my great-uncle. They have dark, fine hair, small features, and wide smiles. My father's family is from Sweden, tall and fair and freckled, more Irish-looking than Swedish, I think. At twelve I'm eye level with Eddy's teeth and watching his Adam's apple bob. Eddy smiles, then makes an effort to close his lips over his protruding teeth. I nod back. My mother finally climbs out of the car, saying to all of us, "Such a good man now. He's trying to be such a good man." The women reach over and kiss him. My mother's arms

---

surround him. The men shake hands.

“Okay,” he says. He says okay a lot.

“We can see Susan’s new headstone, right, Eddy?” my grandmother coos and shrugs, standing, holding a few small knapsacks. My brother’s toys are in one. I reach for it. But she holds my hand as I try to take it. She’s telling me to wait, maybe, that I should wait and listen and hear what they’re saying.

Eddy doesn’t answer, but turns to my brothers and rubs their heads; they have thick, longish hair. “Look at this,” he says as he holds a strand of Chris’s hair, golden, babyish still. “You’ve got to get this cut soon, too girly, don’t you think?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer, but reaches for the luggage as we head for the house. He carries the portable liquor cabinet, as my mother calls it. It’s just a large beach bag, faded to a light orange. It used to hold our toys. It used to smell like the sea. Now it smells like alcohol.

The bottles clank as Eddy walks. I try to forget about the drinking or the not drinking, and suddenly the grassy scent from the big lawn is the best thing ever. It’s at the center of human things, while the dusty city smell isn’t. Maybe that’s why we visit here in summer, even though we run into pain. The nature here is soft and giving; you can turn to it, a comfort. I think of these things now. Last summer I didn’t.

The vegetable garden is on the other side of the driveway and I smell the manure. The large barn, down and to the left of the garden, has been painted a deep brown, and the trim a bright white. I walk under the clothesline that runs from the very top corner of that horrible second-story door, catty-corner across the driveway, all the way to the peak of the barn roof. I notice my brothers looking up at the clothesline—and the second-story door. It’s still there—without a ledge or a stairway, flush, as my father had said last summer, flush against the house. The adults don’t look up.

As we enter the house, Eddy says that all the rooms have been painted, even the new children’s bedroom he carved out of the old attic space. The second-story door, with the clothesline still attached, is in that room. He says we can sleep there now. He uses the word “carved” three times while describing the renovation. My mother lights a cigarette and wanders off into the rest of the house and I follow. She has thin arms and her many bracelets clatter because she keeps pointing and smoking.

There are two big rooms at the front, all with dark molding, light-blue walls, and wide, dark pine floors. We circle back to the kitchen, back to the chatter and the luggage. Eddie is placing the gin and tonic bottles into one of the corner cabinets. The kitchen is clean. Nothing rests on the shiny, wooden countertops: not a glass, not a cookie jar. The kitchen table is long and narrow, and is polished a dark walnut. It has no chairs, just two benches.

Again I follow my mother out into the parlor, and she whispers, “Nothing has changed. He even found the same blue paint, for God’s sake. All the family photos are in the same place too, exactly where Susan wanted them. How does he do it?”

She talks about how it all looked when she was a child, when they listened to FDR on the radio. “Eddy doesn’t like change. We know that. I’ll need a drink.”

---

---

She looks around for a second. I look where she looks. I've caught myself doing this before and I don't like it. She watches me for a moment, then says, "Go outside and run around with the boys."

We're not to sleep in the new attic room. We don't even open the door. Chris pleads and whines, but my mother's fury quiets him. The adults have many drinks. Eddy doesn't. He cleans the kitchen. My grandparents and parents are calm. "Dreamy craziness" I call it, when all the adults seem to take a break from concentrating on the children. I sleep on a cot in my parents' room. My brothers sleep with my grandparents.

In the morning, after a big breakfast, we sit in the parlor. Eddy says the parlor is for the grownups. We can only sit and talk with the adults, no running and no horseplay.

"Nothing more," he says as he sits on one of the hard-backed dining room chairs and sips coffee from a chipped, red mug. I sit between my grandfather and father on the soft, green couch. We all chit-chat as they offer me sips of coffee. They turn and blow cigarette smoke out the windows. My father's coffee is sweeter, more like coffee milk. He's dressed for a day of boating and fishing. We all are in shorts. But he's in long, tan pants, like Eddy. My father is too fair for all that sun. My brothers and I are not as fair. Chris is the darkest, the most like my mother, yet his hair is blond like my father's.

Then off we go to the St. Lawrence, to the pine-filled, gray rock islands and the bright, turquoise water surrounding them. Uncle Eddy became a fishing guide after retiring from the insurance business. He owns a Chris-Craft, a shiny, wooden motorboat that can seat all of us on a circle of cushions in the aft. I like the deep, rattling hum of the motor. He puts up a bright-blue awning.

Around noon we land on Eddy's favorite island, hidden right behind another one. It has a wide beach. My grandparents can navigate around the rocks in the water. My grandmother is always in a skirt or dress and low heels. I don't think she owns any other kind of shoe. We picnic and chase the perch in the shallows, and Chris, with his hands, almost catches them; he's relentless. My father pulls him back into the boat as we start to motor away, lifting him up by the back of his shorts. He giggles.

On the way home Eddy sets the fishing lines to troll for walleye. We start a card game. He listens to us, to everyone. Back and forth he goes between the adults and the children. He places his hand on my mother's shoulder whenever she's insistent about something; anything, really. He says words of warning, almost as if we're getting out of control, when we're not. When our voices rise, he softly corrects us—sort of pleading that we all get along. He says it laughingly. And we do quiet down each time. Eddy finally motions for me to come over to where he sits. My father continues steering the boat.

"You must let Chris win this time. Do you hear me?" Eddy says, holding my arm, pulling me close. His white teeth and shirt match. He smells like bleach. No adult has ever asked this of me. He insists, "You need to keep him happy, that's your job. Your parents want that from you. Be a good sport and let him win." Spinning me around, he gently pushes me back toward the little spot on the floor where Jack is starting to deal the cards. I look over at the adults to see if they've heard anything. But the motor is too loud.

Back at the house we play outside before dinner. While sitting on the porch, the

---

---

adults drink gin and tonics and still, Eddy doesn't drink. He's planned the evening too, in charge of the meal, in charge of us. We children stay outside. The mosquitoes, feeling as big as birds, flutter in our ears. We run to avoid them, racing around the house, thumping about the pine needles. Jack plays and screams with us. It's more fun to act like Chris, I think, and go where he goes, to be seven again and away from our friends, away from trying to be grown up. Maybe my older brother feels the same way. We tease each other. Chris yells that there are dinosaurs hidden in the pines, their tiny eyes watching. They stalk us. Occasionally the adults ask if we're all right. We scream in reply and take off in opposite directions, ending up outside the kitchen—under the second-story door.

The third time, we run into my grandmother. Stopping short, I fall near her legs. My brother spins and holds onto her skirt. She's smoking and, with the other hand, she pushes a pin back in her hair; so many pins to hold up her long, white hair. The sun is setting; the house is lit up. We're covered in dust; my older brother coughs.

"Look at that," my grandmother says, pointing. "I hate that insane door. What was Eddy thinking? You make one wrong step and down you go. Nothing for her to hold onto, not even a ledge. What, and for laundry?" She speaks more into the air than to us. "She broke every bone in her body." Again that sentence. I imagine Aunt Susan lying on her back, every single bone casted, every finger wrapped in plaster. My grandmother continues, "She didn't live long after that. Good thinking about laundry, bad thinking about women."

Then Chris, maybe to start up the fun, leaps on my back. I yelp and beg him to get off because he's pulling my hair. Quickly my grandmother tugs at him.

"Off of her," she says. "Do you hear me? Off!" She holds onto his arm. He winces.

She looks at Jack and says, "No doors like this in your house, Jack—you too, Chris. Do you hear me? Not in your house. Ridiculous."

We're crying now. She clears her throat and sounds like she's going to cry. Instead she says, "Stop, all of you. Hush; you'll upset your parents. Go play and calm down. Go on. I was just making a point. You don't have to get so upset."

She leaves us to our hiccups and tears. We walk around in the dirt until we can go inside. Jack runs off into the pines. After a little while Chris picks up a stick and draws an outline of a body. I give him a shove; he pushes back and then runs inside. Before anybody can see, I kick the lines away.

There are discussions at dinner. Eddy says he feels insulted that we kids haven't used the attic room. No one answers; my father changes the subject. All the adults eat and look at their plates. No one mentions visiting Susan's new headstone either. My mother eats a lot of the creamed spinach.

We finally go up to get ready for bed, and charging in front, up the stairs, my mother opens the door to the new attic room. She turns and commands loudly that we are not touch the door to the outside, "or heads will roll." Jack and I decide to wait until she comes back; we need to sort our clothes from the adult suitcases.

It's a great room—again, light-blue walls and three twin beds, white sheets and

---

---

comforters, no pictures on the walls, none, and of course, the shiny wooden floors. The windows are so clean they look open—the door to the outside stands between two of the beds. No one asks if we want to sleep near the door. But I choose the bed next to it, and for a crazy split second, I admire this laundry door. It's stained and polished and two wide, pine boards, across the upper and lower part, fit neatly into wooden latches. Jack chooses the bed on the other side of the door. Chris is across the room. Then he runs over and, not even able to wait for a second, quickly lifts the top pine board out of its latch.

"Look," he says. "It's okay. It's not too heavy." I fly over and leap onto the bed.

Jack gets to Chris first. "Put it back now!" He grabs it out of his hand and shouts, "What are they, nuts? Does Eddy think this is good?" But, for some reason, Jack actually lifts off the other board and turns the knob; there's a click and the door is ajar. I tell him to stop. I can hardly breathe.

Chris says, "Open it. Yeah. Let's see."

A little night air rolls in. I hear my mother on the stairs. Jack pulls the door shut and replaces the pine boards as fast as he can. I gasp. Chris laughs.

"Shut up, all of you," says Jack.

"You shut up." Chris is defiant.

My mother is a little dreamy. Jack calls it a little bit drunk. She's still dressed from dinner in a blue, silky skirt and heels. She pushes up the sleeves of her white blouse and then stands with her hands on her hips and, like my grandmother, talks to the air. "Susan was the fun part of all this. Eddy, not so much. Look at that crazy door, and he wants you to sleep here. All the time living with Susan he just kept drinking, saying he was sorry each time, and then she would forgive him and it would start all over again. They didn't have any kids. How much God damn laundry did they have?" She points at Chris. "Don't lift those latches, you hear me?"

"Yes, but how far does it look?" Chris says. He turns and hops onto the bed. "I mean how far down? I wouldn't break my bones at all."

"Hush, all of you. Go to bed," she says. I don't speak, nor does Jack. In my parents' dreamy state, we are lumped together as if we're one big, annoying kid. Jack and I should stay up later. Chris is only seven.

The next day is better. I don't think about the door when we're fishing. I catch two, one-pound pike, and we use a lot of worms to catch the perch. Jack catches a big, ugly walleye. We go to the island, and I swim in the cold water and shrug when the adults keep asking me how I can stand it. But I can stand it because you can forget things when you can feel the cold on your face or sit on the hot rocks in the sun. I place some really hot ones on my arm. I want them to leave a mark.

It's early in the evening and we're back from fishing. My father is cleaning the fish for dinner. It's good we have a lot of perch, because the pike and walleye aren't good eating. My grandparents and Jack shuck the corn on the porch. I have been sent to work with Eddy in the vegetable garden. We're cutting some cabbages. He suddenly stands. His shirt remains bright against all the green. I'm in my bathing suit, still wet and covered with dust and pine needles. He looks at

---

---

me. "You should go," he says. "Go upstairs and clean up. Use the shower now. Your dad will need it soon. Wipe it all down when you're done. You don't want him angry or upset before dinner." He hesitates. "You're good at fishing; you caught the most fish, right?" He smiles. But I can't smile back.

The breeze picks up. The pines make so much noise in the wind, so different than the city. We haven't had any rain, so a little dust blows across the driveway. The sun is still hot; just the wind is a little bit cool. I look around and I don't see Chris. In love with knives, I bet he's watching my father clean the fish.

I want to go upstairs anyway. Not to please Eddy, just to change out of my suit. I go up to our attic room and there's Chris, standing between the beds.

He yells as soon as I enter, "I just want to open it once, just once. I want to see how far it was for Aunt Susan." His face is red from the heat. He's wearing his bathing suit and sandals. The pine boards lie across the bed. His little hand is on the knob. I feel heavy and lightheaded all at the same time.

"Listen, back away, don't touch it," I hiss at him. I move in close. He turns the knob; too big for one hand, he uses two. He pushes the door out. He tilts. His fingers grab for the molding. Sliding, he almost balances and I lunge for him. On my knees, then my stomach, my fingers slip down his leg and hook his sandal. He dangles. Reaching out, I wrap my other arm around the bed post; it slides a little. I want it to stop sliding and scratch into that shiny floor. But all I hear is screaming, my own and from others. Then I hear my mother's bracelets as she runs up the stairs. Eddy yells from below, "Drop him! I'll catch him, for God's sake."

My father yells something. I can feel Chris's sandal in my hand—and then it's gone. I hear a thump. I put my hands over my ears. I look to my left, and there's my mother leaning over the edge, looking down, screaming. No words, just screaming. I move over, on my knees still, close to her. I look down. My father is holding Chris. And there's Eddy, right below us, lying in all the dirt and pine needles.

"Eddy caught him. It's okay. He landed on Eddy," my father yells up to my mother as she covers her face.

My father slowly lowers Chris to the ground. He sits and stares at the dirt and looks guilty. Jack is crying and my grandfather paces as my grandmother covers her face and sobs. Then she runs over and sweeps Chris into her arms. He hugs her. My father grabs Eddy's shoulder and shoves him.

But Eddy looks up at me and shouts, "You should have been more careful, Maggie. You weren't being careful enough." He points. I feel my eyebrows go up, and at that very second I make sure that's all I will ever show him.

"What the hell, Eddy?" my father yells back. "It's not Maggie's fault. For heaven's sake, that damn door, what the hell were you thinking?" And then, "What the hell were we thinking letting the kids in there, anyway?" My father leans over and holds onto his knees. "We were trying not to hurt your feelings by having the kids stay in there? Shit!"

"I thought the boards would be enough," Eddy says. "I should have nailed it shut. I couldn't do that." One of his sleeves, unrolled, flaps in the wind. "I have to keep

---



---

the door the way it was when Susan died.”

My grandmother lets Chris down gently and walks over to Eddy. I look quickly at my mother, the two of us on our knees.

“Why?” my grandmother yells into Eddy’s face. “Why did you build that door and why did you keep it? And you know what? Why didn’t I scream all this at the funeral?”

My mother reaches over and hugs me like she’s afraid that I, too, will fly over the edge. I think it’s like a play down below where maybe, finally, people get to say what they want. Chris’s falling out of the door got people to do that. I wonder, too, why a woman falling from the same door didn’t.

Eddy doesn’t say anything for a second. Again I hear the noise of the pines moving in the wind. The men have their arms folded, even Jack. Chris sits and runs the dirt through his fingers.

Then Eddy says, “I killed her.”

The men unfold their arms and take a step closer. Eddy holds his arms up to them and says, “I was adjusting the clothesline. Over there,” he points. “By the barn. I was drinking all that day. I didn’t see she was back at the house, that the door was open, that she was hanging out a big sheet. I didn’t see. Until she screamed and there she was, holding onto the clothesline, kicking, throwing off a shoe. That sheet floated down and she landed on it. I watched. It went slowly then, but it couldn’t have been that slow.” He shakes his head. “She wanted that clothesline, she did. She asked for that door. I was going to build a ledge. Didn’t get to it soon enough. I was drinking a lot.” My grandmother is crying. Eddy goes on, “So I stopped drinking and started working hard around here, all the time working, wanting you all to visit, waiting for you. We didn’t have kids. She wanted the room in the attic to be for the kids. I wanted a sweet room. I wanted sweetness to surround that door now, like she would have wanted.”

My father yells, “Christ! Why didn’t you at least nail it shut?”

Eddy shouts back. “Because it keeps me from drinking, that’s why. I need to go up and look down. I need to see. Every day I need to see how far she fell. Every single day, do you hear me?” He yells so loudly that he coughs.

No one talks. My grandmother slowly walks over to Eddy and, reaching for his arm, rolls up his sleeve. My father finally says, “We need to finish fixing the fish for dinner.”

Because of the heat, Uncle Eddy and my father take off their dusty shirts. The kitchen is very hot with all of us jammed in there. We’re really thirsty. The pitchers of ice water are emptied, then filled again. My mother takes her icy glass and touches it to her cheek.

My brothers and I go to bed. I can hear crying below and, as I shut my eyes, maybe some laughing.

---

Valley Community of Writers in 2009 and 2011. Two of her poems will appear in the summer issue of *The Puritan*. She lives in Pennsylvania with her husband, Jim. He remains her great support as do her children, Robert, Erin and William.

---

**Copyright 2013, © Mame Ekblom Cudd.** This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.

---