AUGUST DERLETH

CAMOMILE

August Derleth (1909-1971) grew up in Sauk City, Wisconsin. He earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1930 and briefly worked as an editor at Fawcett Publications in Minneapolis, Minnesota, before returning to Sauk City in 1931. While he made his living as a writer of horror and detective fiction, he considered his most serious work to be the *Sac Prairie Saga*—a series of books that told the story of Sauk City and its twin village, Prairie du Sac, from the 19th century to the present. Parts of this series appeared in *The Midland*, *This Quarter,* and *Prairie Schooner*, as well as the collection *Place of Hawks* (1935) and the novel *Still Is the Summer Night* (1937). He received a Guggenheim Fellowship for this series in 1938 and worked as a lecturer at the University of Wisconsin from 1939 to 1943. The following story was published in the winter 1959 issue and included in the collection *Wisconsin in Their Bones* (1961).

SUDDENLY, OUT OF THE HOT SUMMER NIGHT, came the scent of camomile, a cool, cloying pungence, and at once, in that curious way things often happen, I was in my childhood once more, back in that last summer spent in the house on the marsh. In that moment, in that cloud of herbal fragrance, everything of that summer came to life again, renewed itself, as it were, and all the years between then and now fell away. I remembered, as for the first time, that last summer in the house of yellow stone behind the pines on the edge of the marsh that stretched east and south from the hills west of Sac Prairie. And I remembered again, with all the freshness of morning, my cousin Lucy . . .

There were three of us who came that mid-summer day—my mother, my sister Amy, and I. I was ten then, and thought myself much older. Amy was younger. That was the first summer my cousin John was gone from the farm. Cousin Albert was only five, and infinitely younger. I had not wanted

to come. Indeed, my mother had not wanted to come, either, not very much, because my Aunt Emma, her sister, had seemed a little withdrawn, as if she were not anxious for us to come. But Amy had plagued, and grandmother had said it was a good thing for sisters to be together part of the time every year; so we had gone, after all.

The farm lay twenty miles west of Sac Prairie, and to reach it, we had to go around to the nearest railroad station, which was at Spring Green. From there we could be brought by horse and buggy. That summer my Uncle Peter came to get us. He was usually a happy-go-lucky fellow, and even today I remember him best as he was in earlier summers—how he led the dancers at the schoolhouse dances, how he out-worked all the other men at harvest time and at barn-raisings. But this summer he was taciturn, not much given to talk. A dark man, bushy-browed, with black eyes and a sullen mouth. A handsome man. He was my Aunt Emma's second husband, and was somewhat younger than she. All my cousins except Lucy were his children; Lucy was my dead Uncle Henry's daughter. All of them lived in the house on the marsh, with a hired man who, with my uncle, worked the hundred-odd acres that were under cultivation.

All the way to the farm, my Uncle Peter said very little. He spoke only when Mother spoke to him, and then as briefly as possible. He made us feel unwelcome, but you could tell he was trying not to. I did not notice too much, because I was still in rebellion, and still feeling sorry for myself because I knew John would not be at the farm.

Perhaps it was because of this that it was not until we were at the supper table two hours after we had come, that I missed cousin Lucy.

"Where's Lucy?" I asked in surprise.

At once everyone was still. Albert and cousin Anne looked uneasily at Uncle Peter. My aunt's face went wooden. Mother glanced up. There was silence until my sister echoed my question.

"Lucy isn't here," Uncle Peter said then.

I understood that I should not have asked. The hired man gave me a puzzled stare and then went on eating noisily. He was a young fellow—close to thirty, I guessed—and he had worked out for farmers most of his life. He was strong and hard with muscle. He was accustomed to being told what to do. I realized later that perhaps my uncle had forbidden anyone to speak of Lucy, and the hired man had been puzzled because, being so inured to obedience himself, he could not understand how anyone would disobey Uncle

Peter.

"Where has she gone?" Mother asked.

"We don't talk about Lucy," said Uncle Peter in a quiet but firm voice.

Mother looked over at Aunt Emma in amazement she made no effort to conceal. Aunt Emma looked away.

But nothing more was said. Mother went on eating; the look she gave us meant that we were to do the same. Uncle Peter had never stopped eating. Soon all of us were talking about something else, but Lucy was not out of our thoughts, and the lack of her infectious gaiety soon became almost unbearable.

I suppose in a way I had a kind of childhood crush on my cousin, for she was so light-hearted and had such an easy, friendly disposition that she was a delight to be with, and, although I was at that age when I would have preferred my cousin John as a companion, Lucy would have been my second choice. To discover now that she, too, was gone away from the farm, made me wish unreasonably to be back in Sac Prairie.

Yet I was fond of the farm. I had spent many blissful hours there, fishing for chubs and small carp in the brook that flowed through it not far from the house and the barn, in the shadow of the range of hills that towered up in the west across the highway from the yard. I had ridden the horses with John and Lucy; we had fought and played in the haymow; we had wandered out into the marsh on nights when the fog had begun to rise, hiding in the fog, catching fireflies, and taking pleasure in the strange pungence that filled that damp night air. But now that they were gone, the farm seemed less inviting than ever, and I began to long for my companions of the village, whom I would not see for two weeks.

I left the supper table and sat at the edge of the marsh, under the pines, watching the moon show up in the southern sky, and the fog come in over the lowland. The smell was in the air, as always, the pungence of the herb with the little yellow-eyed white flowers that grew so profusely everywhere around the farm. "What is that flower, Lucy?" I had asked my cousin a long time ago. "Camomile," she had said. That was when Lucy was only fourteen, and she was eighteen now.

That night I went to bed early. I was lost. I had brought along some books to read, but these palled on me soon. I dutifully wrote a letter to my father, as I had been told to do. I idled about the room, wondering how John fared in Chicago, but I wondered most about Lucy.

Something had happened. Lucy must have done something to bring about her banishment. For it was that, I felt sure. Perhaps her vivacity had offended her stepfather. Perhaps her sturdy independence had proved too much for him, who expected all living things on his farm to obey him. Perhaps her very beauty had irritated him. I had seen him sometimes watching in disapproval when she rode out into the marsh.

But I could not sleep. Everything conspired to remind me of those happier days when John and Lucy were here, and each time I looked out upon the moonlit night or caught the aroma from the camomile flowers and leaves, I thought of them all the more intensely.

I lay sleepless while the moon sank westward, and the fog outside rose higher. The farm grew hourly more quiet—the cries of my cousins ceased as one by one they went to bed, the conversation of the adults murmured to an end, the tinkling cowbell ceased to sound when the cows lay down to rest in night pasture—and finally the house was still.

I tossed from side to side, restless and lonely.

And then, in the dark, I heard a sound from the room adjoining mine, the gable room, where no one was supposed to be. For this was Lucy's room. Instantly a wild hope rose in me. Perhaps Lucy had come home!

I slipped out of bed, put on my trousers, and went quietly out of my room and down the hall in the dark.

I tried the door of Lucy's room, careful to make no noise. It was locked.

I listened.

All was silence once more. No sound stirred the night. I put my lips to the keyhole and whispered, "Lucy!"

Someone moved inside, and I called again. Then I heard someone just inside the door, kneeling down against the door.

"Who's there?"

"Lucy!" I answered. "It's me."

"Oh, Steve!"

"Lucy, Lucy . . ."

"Sh! Don't let them hear you. Don't let him . . ."

"Lucy, what's the matter?"

"I'm locked in."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you."

I was bewildered. Silence came again, while both of us listened for any

untoward sound. Then I brought my lips close to the keyhole again.

"I missed you. We came this afternoon." I could not help promising, in an access of anger against my uncle, "Lucy, I'll get you out. I don't care what he does to me."

"Sh! Be still."

I could feel her listening, listening. I listened, too.

My uncle and aunt slept at the head of the stairs, which was not far away. My cousins were across the hall from Lucy's room. Between the two rooms there was only a small store-room. My mother and my sister slept downstairs in makeshift beds in the living-room.

Nothing stirred.

Lucy spoke again. "Steve, will you do something for me?"

"Sure I will."

"You're not scared?"

"I'll do anything you want, Lucy."

She began to speak rapidly. "Remember that oak tree on the hill?" She spoke so low that I could hardly hear. "The one with the hollow in it back from the hill-top? On Randall's land?" How anxious she sounded! "You go up the hill straight west from the barn."

"I know, I know," I said.

"Will you take something there if I can get it ready?"

"Sure I will." Then I asked, "Lucy, how long have you been locked up?"

"A month."

Lucy, lovely Lucy—a month in that room! Anger rose up in me. I wanted to kick and pound Uncle Peter; I wanted to defile him; I wanted to kill him. But this upsurge of rage passed. Why had they done this to Lucy?

"I'll get it ready, Steve," she went on. "You take it and put it into the hollow oak. But you'd better go back to bed. It will take a long time. They didn't leave me a pencil. I can use a pin and an old newspaper."

"I'll get a pencil," I said, feeling at the bottom of the door. I was suddenly glad my mother had made me write home. "It's wide enough for a pencil down here."

"And paper, Steve."

I crept back to my room, got pencil and paper, and slipped into the hall once more. I stood listening. I could hear my uncle snore. I slid along the wall to Lucy's door and pushed the pencil and paper under.

"Thanks, Steve."

I heard her writing.

After a while the folded paper came out from under the door.

"Hide it now. Tomorrow, when you can get away, take it there. Don't let anyone see you go."

"I won't."

"And please don't let on you know I'm here."

"I promise."

"Thanks, Steve."

I went back to my room and sat there undecided. I was wide awake now. If my uncle were watching tomorrow, it would be better to go now. It would be dark in the woods. The moonlight would be wan at this hour. Yet I was sure I knew the way, and the stars were bright. I was excited at the thought of sharing a conspiracy with Lucy.

I put on my stockings, my heart pounding with the challenge of discovery. Carrying my shoes, I crept quietly out of my room again, down the hall, and down the stairs. The night was warm enough so that the door, which was never locked down there, stood open.

The dog's cold nose pushing up into my face when I sat to put on my shoes startled me a little. But he did not bark, knowing me. Better still, he came along when I started out across the yard for the road and the dark hill beyond.

I kept to the shadows as much as possible, for the moonlight where it fell was still bright enough to reveal me to anyone who might be looking from the windows of the house. But soon I was in the shadow of the hill, which rose between the westering moon and me. I crossed the road and climbed under the barbed-wire fence. I was on the hill. Behind me lay the pungence of the marsh; here all smelled with the musk of the leaves.

I turned to get my bearings from the barn. The marsh lay outspread like a mysterious lake, for trees rose into the moonlight there out of a low fog, which was like water under the moon. Beyond the marsh were the eastern hills, and a house where a yellow light still burned. Below, the house I had left was a dark place with moonlight glinting from its windows.

I set out in a straight line up the steep slope. The tree lay just over the crest, out of sight of the house. It was at least a mile away. Now and then I blundered into bushes and small trees, but I made my way steadily up toward the crest of the hill.

There I walked in moonlight, and the house and the marsh were soon

out of sight. Here I no longer had to peer to avoid bushes, and I missed running into the line fence which divided the denser woods from those less dense on the other side. I could make my way faster there.

I knew my way now. We had hiked to this place in summers gone by.

I came to the hollow oak and felt inside the opening. It was not far down to bottom. I put the paper where Lucy had told me.

Stepping back, I stumbled. The ground was uneven. I felt it with my hands. There were many indentations. I measured them as well as I could and decided they were hoof prints. Someone had ridden a horse to this place many times.

So, then, someone waited for what I brought to the tree. Whoever it was must have come often, perhaps every day.

I had been too excited to think of this before. I sank down to the ground and sat there. Who could it be?

By the time I got back to my room, I had made up my mind to find out. I lay sleepless for most of the rest of that night, devising a means to be gone all day, one that would not excite my uncle's suspicions.

Next morning I begged a lunch. I said I meant to fish all day in the upper reaches of the brook. This stream wound down through the marshes from the northwest; about a half mile above the farm, it came around a hill which shut off the view from the farm, so that anyone who might watch where I went would not see me beyond that place. Cousin Albert wanted to go along, but I protested that he was too small, he might grow tired, and promised to take him on another day when I did not go so far. With that he was content, and I was free.

I went early in the morning, and followed the meandering brook until I was out of sight of the house. Then I cached my fishing-pole and bait, and, taking only my lunch, hiked up into the hills.

By day it was easy, even from this strange starting place, to find the hollow oak. Once there, it was clear from the direction of the hoof prints that whoever it was rode a horse to the oak tree, he came from above and to the west. The tree itself was on a slope facing north.

I hid down from the tree, in a thicket of black haw, making myself as comfortable as I could. I was off to one side from the oak tree, sitting where I could have a clear view, and away from the path the rider took.

How long I sat there! The morning dragged past. In my impatience, I

ate my lunch long before the noon hour, so that I was soon hungry again. One hour, two hours, three hours of the afternoon went by. How hot it was in that thicket, and how the insects bothered me!

But at last, in mid-afternoon, I heard hoofbeats.

I saw him ride down to the tree. A stranger. He rode his horse well. He was a tall, thin young man, not more than twenty-five, with a shock of golden brown hair. His face was gaunt, as if he had been ill. He was well dressed, with a flowing open shirt. He was not a farmer. There were a dozen ways to tell that, not just the way he dressed.

He reined in at the tree. Even before he got down from the horse, he had caught sight of the white paper in the hollow. I could see his face quicken, his eyes widen. He was all eagerness to take hold of it, to open it. He tore the paper a little in his excitement.

His eyes passed over what Lucy had written. His hand trembled, and his free hand clenched. His face grew angry and dark. He read Lucy's note twice, then put it into his pocket.

He mounted and rode away, back the way he had come.

As quickly as I could, I ran up the slope after him, not caring now whether he saw me or not. He was a friend of Lucy's. Perhaps it was to prevent her from seeing him that Uncle Peter had locked her in her room. I felt a pang of jealousy at this thought, but now nothing really mattered except to get Lucy out somehow, if it could be done. Perhaps the rider could help.

But he was gone, and I did not see him again until I reached the crest of the next hill west, from which, looking down, I saw him cantering into the yard of the farm in that valley. Randall's place. I remembered it from having visited there on previous summers. I knew all the Randalls, or thought I did, and the stranger was not one of them. He got off the horse and went into the house.

He did not come out again.

I could not stay longer to watch. I had to get back to where I had cached my pole and catch some fish, or they would wonder, if the fish had not been biting, why I had stayed away the entire day.

When I got back, it was supper time. I found my Aunt Emma alone in the kitchen, and told her I had seen a strange rider on the hill. I described him a little and asked who it might be.

"He's a young man from Detroit come to the country for his health," she said quietly, with no trace of emotion. "Staying at Randall's. Some distant

cousin, they say. He's been here all summer, but he's going back in a week or so. He's better now."

I wanted to know more, but there was something in her manner that forbade further questions. She had spoken in so low a voice that I knew she was fearful someone else might hear. She, too, must be afraid of Uncle Peter, who had not always been so dour, so sullen, so moody, but just opposite the man he now was. She seemed to be aware, too, that he was as if a strange malady had stricken him.

That night I crept once more to Lucy's door.

"Did you put it there?" she asked.

"Yes." But I did not tell her I had watched to see who came for it. I thought she would tell me if she wanted me to know. But she did not.

"He didn't see you?"

"No, Lucy."

"Go back to bed now, Steve."

Lucy sounded different, somehow. She sounded like someone who no longer laughed very much, someone who had grown serious, as if something had happened to sober her. She sounded grown up.

I went back to my room and stayed there.

After that, I began to watch Uncle Peter whenever I could.

In the morning hours of one hot night, when my door stood a little ajar so that the air might circulate through the house, I heard him come stealthily up the stairs from the kitchen with Lucy's food. I got out of bed and watched him take the key to the door from his pants pocket, where he carried it, loose, and unlock the door to go in.

I never heard any word spoken between them.

He came out carrying dishes from yesterday, and a slop jar, and went down stairs. In a little while he was back, with fresh water and other things she might need.

Each time he locked the door and when he took the key from the lock he made an habitual motion to put it on the top of the door jamb. That was where the key had once been kept, I reasoned, and he was still used to reaching up to put it there. Perhaps he had taken to carrying it only because we had come out to visit.

I hoped for a while, wildly, that he might forget and leave the key, but he never did. He waited on Lucy hand and foot. He always took her food there in the early morning, before anyone but Aunt Emma was up. He never took

any longer than necessary to do it, lest someone see him.

During the day, everyone seemed to conspire to keep Lucy's presence in the house a secret, as if they were all ashamed that my mother might know of it. Lucy, too, never made a sound during the day, so that my mother, who knew something was wrong, did not guess.

I thought only about getting Lucy out of her prison.

I spent long hours in the barn, trying to manufacture some kind of wire key that would open the lock. But I was never very good at mechanical contrivances of any kind, and this soon seemed hopeless to me. Besides, Mother was aware of my preoccupation, and was beginning to wonder why I was not as active about the farm as in other summers. So I had to stop this attempt, which was bound to be futile anyway.

On the sixth evening of our visit, we rode across the marsh to visit the Alfords, cousins of my mother and my aunt. It was the hired man's night to go to town; he had already gone when we set out. I wanted to stay, but there was no alternative to going, even though I knew that the evening would be spent in playing cards or talk among the adults, after an hour or two of which they would find something to eat and then come back home.

"Everyone goes," said Uncle Peter, and everyone went.

I looked back at the house on the marsh as we drove away; there was no light on in the house. Perhaps Lucy had not been given a light, or perhaps it had been taken away from her while we were in the house.

As I rode, I began to think, at first hesitantly, then with growing excitement, that I would never have a better chance to get Lucy out. Now, with no one in the house, I could break down the door, if I could not find a key that would open it. My only problem was how to get away from Alfords without arousing suspicion.

But this was the easiest part of my plan, for, after the older folks were settled into talk, I said simply that I was going outside for a while. No one thought this strange, for the August night was warm, and the air was filled with the camomile pungence rising from the marsh.

Once outside, I walked with studied aimlessness from the house until I was out of hearing. Then I ran as fast as I could to the marsh road. I ran through the fog, which in places was already so thick that I could see neither the house I had left nor the yellow stone house which was my goal.

My heart pounded painfully when I reached the house on the marsh.

I fled upstairs and came to my knees before my cousin Lucy's door.

"Lucy! Lucy!" I called out.

"Yes, Steve."

"Lucy, I'm going to get you out. I'll break the lock. They're all over at Alfords."

"Wait."

"We *can't* wait," I said urgently.

"Was he dressed up?" she asked then.

"He wasn't in his work clothes."

"Look in his pants pocket, Steve. He won't be used to changing the key."

I ran down to his room. I was afraid to put on a light, because I thought someone might see from Alfords across the marsh. I forgot that his room was on the other side of the house.

I felt my way to Uncle Peter's clothes, which lay on the floor in the middle of the room.

The key was in his pocket.

With feverish haste, I ran back to Lucy's door, put the key into the lock, and turned it.

Lucy was at the threshold, all dressed in white, like a beautiful ghost in the moonlit dusk of the house.

"Oh, Steve, oh, Steve!" she sobbed.

"Quick now, Lucy," I said. "I've got to get back before they miss me. I said I was just going outside the house."

She closed the door, but did not lock it. She gave me the key.

"He'll think he forgot to lock the door. Take it back now."

Lucy was downstairs and out of the house before I caught up with her.

"The horses," she cried.

"Two are hitched to the buggy."

"And Bess? Where's Bess? Oh, I know—in pasture."

"In the marsh," I added.

She fled ahead of me, the moonlight making her to blend with the fog pushing up out of the marsh. I followed, running into the long fingers of vapour, into the mushrooming fog, into the cloying coolness and the ever-present smell, the pungent perfume of camomile, which was all around us, heavy in the fog, fresh and spirited.

"Bess! Bess!" Lucy called softly.

She pushed steadily forward into the pasture until at last the horse

loomed up ahead.

She gave a cry of relief and was just about to mount the mare when she thought of me. She turned. How beautiful she seemed with the moonlight like dawn in her face! She bent and hugged me. She kissed me. Tears were streaming down her face.

"I'll never forget you, Steve. Never."

"When you come back . . ." I began irrationally.

She mounted the horse and leaned down. She was still crying.

"I'm never coming back, Steve—never. Hurry now—don't let him catch you. Good-bye."

Horse and girl vanished into fog, fleeing westward. Toward Randall's farm. I stood transfixed, watching. Now and then I saw them fleetingly in the fog. I heard the sound of the hooves and knew they had reached firmer ground. I heard them cross the highway and plunge into the hills.

Then I turned, too, and walked over the spongy ground to the road across the marsh.

Lucy had a good hour's start before we got back to the house and Uncle Peter found out that she was gone. In her haste in the darkness, Lucy had not made sure that the door of her room had closed tight. It stood open only about an inch, but in the light of the lamp my uncle carried up the stairs, he saw it.

He cried out and ran to throw open the door.

He hunted through her room like a madman. We could hear him throwing things about, looking into her closet, lifting up her bed.

Then he came clattering down the stairs, a rifle in his hands.

"She's gone!" he cried and ran out of the house.

Aunt Emma covered her lips with her hand.

In a moment we could hear the hoofbeats of the horse he rode into the west. He knew where she had gone. So it was to keep her away from the young man at Randall's that he had kept her prisoner in her room.

My mother looked accusingly at her sister. Aunt Emma lowered her head and began to cry.

About two hours after he had gone, two shots rang out in the marshes. I lay quaking with terror in my bed, fearful lest Uncle Peter had found Lucy and her young man and shot them both. He had come upon Bess. In his rage, he had shot the horse that had taken Lucy away.

He came back, but he did not come into the house.

He stayed in the barn, where the animal sounds he made drifted clearly to the house through the fog which had now come up into the yard, permeating the house with the pungence of camomile. He raged and sobbed, half-crazed.

I got out of bed and crept to the head of the stairs. Looking down, I saw Aunt Emma standing up grim and almost defiant, facing my mother. Both of them had heard the sounds from the barn.

"So now you know, Rose," said Aunt Emma.

No one ever saw cousin Lucy again.

I liked to think I knew what had happened—that she had fled to her young man, and that together the two of them had left Randall's before Uncle Peter could reach them.

Years later, I had an unsigned picture post-card from Detroit. But it needed no signature to tell me who had sent it. Its picture was a spray of camomile.