



barefoot  
at the lake

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FOREWORD BY ben fogle

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## the heron



One day when Grace and I were crayfish hunting on the shore of the lake, we found a dead heron under a mighty elm tree.

‘How do you think it died?’ I asked.

‘Of a broken heart,’ Grace replied.

‘That’s not true. Shall we bury it?’

Grace had short hair that looked like it had been cut any old how, not cut like her sister Glory’s. Glory’s hair always looked like the coloured pictures in my mother’s *Chatelaine* magazine. More girly. Grace had shiny brown hair and legs as straight as poplars. Her knees were chapped like a boy’s. Grace’s nose was neat and her face flat, and although she wasn’t exquisitely beautiful like I thought her mother was, I thought she was quite pretty. Everyone has his or her own smell and Grace had hers. Like summer by the lake, she smelled of grass and gasoline.

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'I want some feathers,' Grace answered.

She straightened out the dead bird's wings and they were wider than her father was tall. She grabbed several long grey wing feathers and pulled on them. They came away easily, all attached to bits of skin and flesh.

'Wash them off in the water,' I said.

'Stupid!' she replied and with her fingers she separated the feathers and left them in a row on a rock, each one with sinew and skin hanging from it.

'How should we bury her?' she asked.

'How do you know it's a girl?' I replied.

'You're so dumb! Boy birds can't be that beautiful. She's a girl.'

We walked back through the shallows to my cottage to get a trowel and spade to dig a grave for the bird, and returned the easier way, by rowboat. Now that we were both ten years old, if we wore our life jackets Grace and I were allowed to go out alone in it. Canoes tip easy but it's hard to tip a flat-bottomed rowboat. The first week at the lake we went out together almost every day.

You never keep anything in boats but there were always two life jackets, a flashlight and a bailing can in the rowboat. I untied it from the dock. Other girls at the lake always held onto both gunwales when they got in. Grace just stepped right into it. Grace was strong and rowed like a boy, not a girl. One pull of her arms and the rowboat glided fast over the lake, the bow making a little splash each time she took another pull on the oars. Whenever I was in the rowboat with Grace, she always rowed. She just did, without asking.

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When I was in the rowboat with my uncle, he always asked me to row.

Sometimes when we were out together Grace would stop rowing. We liked to see how and where the wind took us. Once she said, 'Let's lie down so no one can see us.' We did, with our feet touching each other under the rowing seat.

'Do you think they'll think we've fallen overboard and drowned?' I asked.

'It doesn't matter what they think,' Grace answered.

Grace continued rowing, then stopped.

'I need to see where I'm going,' Grace said, talking to herself, not to me, and pulling on one oar and pushing on the other. The rowboat smoothly spun around. Now pushing on the oars instead of pulling on them, we continued along the shoreline, stern first, Grace looking for where we had left the dead heron. I didn't mind. It was languid and peaceful rowing that way. I turned around too and we both watched as some cattle grazing in the long steep pasture leading down to the water's edge found their way through the maze of cedar trees that lined the shore and drank the clear water.

When we returned to the dead bird, I tied the rowboat's bowline around the trunk of a cedar. By the time I had finished Grace had already picked up the heron, as heavy as one of Mrs Nichols' big old egg-laying hens, and carried its body onto the meadow grass.

'You dig and I'll prepare her body,' she instructed me.

I usually did what Grace told me to do. I couldn't dig in my bare feet with the spade, so with the trowel I'd got from the tool house I cut into the grass making a square, then I used the spade to lift the grass all the way around the square. I'd seen my father do that with a spade when he was making

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the vegetable patch on the cottage lawn up by the gravel road.

Grace prepared the heron. After taking some more feathers, she squeezed the wings against the bird's body and rolled it in the grass to make a neat bundle. She tried to bend the legs but she couldn't.

'Dig deeper,' she told me, after she inspected the grave and silently, without complaining, I did. Digging was easy. The black earth was as soft as cashmere. It was easier than digging through sand on the beach to find clay.

When the grave was deep enough to satisfy Grace, she placed the dead heron in it, but no matter how she tried she couldn't get its feet in. I tried to bend them but I couldn't either.

'We'll have to break them,' Grace said.

'No!' I answered. 'If you break them she won't be able to fly in heaven.'

'That doesn't matter. She won't be good at flying anyways 'cause I've taken her feathers,' Grace replied.

'You shouldn't have,' I answered. 'You give them back. They're not yours. They're the bird's.'

'No. I'm going to make an Indian headdress from them, to wear in my hair. How do you think the Indians get the feathers they wear at the powwow?'

'That's different. Give it back its feathers!' I thundered.

Grace was surprised by my sternness, so she did, laying the feathers she had just plucked, and all the other feathers that were lying on a rock on the shore, on top of the heron's body in its grave.

'Good,' I said and with the trowel I cut the grass in a long thin line around the heron's extended legs, lifted the grass and set it aside then dug out the earth below so that its legs would fit in.

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When the heron was completely in its grave, using her hand, Grace pushed the black earth over it. Then she placed the turfs of grass back and stomped on them with her bare feet to make them smooth. While she did that I found an old dead cedar branch, broke it so that it made a cross and planted it on the bird's grave.

'The good Lord made you then he took you away. Ahem,' I said.

'Ahem,' Grace said, then added, 'I want to go for a swim.'

We rowed back to my cottage. Young children like us couldn't go swimming unless there were older children or an adult swimming or watching. Uncle Reub couldn't swim but he was sitting on a deck chair looking out at the lake and my mum said that it was only important that he was an adult. She said if we got in trouble he could yell for help louder than we could. The water was still cold and I didn't want to get my shoulders wet. I floated on my inner tube and my back felt as warm as an oven.

## opening up the cottage



There were no locks on the cottage doors. When my father built our summer home, he made three small bedrooms, an indoor toilet and bath, and everything else big – the kitchen, the combined living and dining room. Picture windows overlooked the lake, twenty feet away. It hadn't entered his mind he'd ever need locks. This was in 1949, when I was five years old, and it wasn't Toronto, it was the Kawartha Lakes a hundred miles northeast of the city, where the last strip of cultivatable farmland collided with unending primordial forest. The few farmers who tried to work this boulder-strewn land went to church on Sundays, grew their own food and, from the way the wife of the nearest farmer Mrs Nichols dressed, made their own clothing. You don't need locks when these are your neighbours.

Each year, when school finished in June, the summer people – my parents, their friends and their children – invaded Long Point on Lake Chemong. Just as abruptly they left the lake, and the locals, at the end of August and returned to where

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they lived the rest of the year. Some to Toronto, others to Peterborough, the local market town seven miles away.

My father, a man with a natural majesty and a deficiency of words, made his first serious spring visit to the cottage in early April, to see what damage winter had brought. In April 1954, when my mother was in Montreal with my brother, Robert, and there was no one to look after me, Dad took me and Uncle Reub with him. Angus too. Angus was a small black dog. He had bad breath but I didn't mind that. Dogs are totally honest with you and you can be completely honest with them. More than you can with people. Bad breath didn't matter.

Except along the shoreline where we collected water for cooking, ice still covered the lake. It was too early to risk refilling the drained plumbing, there might be another frost, so we carried our drinking water in thermos bottles and used a plot amongst the trees for our toilet. Angus drank from the lake and peed where he wanted. At night it was so cold the only way I could get out of bed in the morning was by wrapping a comforter around me.

That first morning, in the living room, I found Uncle Reub by the south-facing window, already up and dressed. I watched unnoticed as my small uncle gently lifted a fly, stunned into a stupor by the night-time freeze, and moved it into the warm rays of the morning sun bursting through the window. I joined him and we both watched in silence as the warm heat revived its soul and brought it to life again.

The cottage was properly opened when we moved to the lake at the end of June. That year Uncle Reub came with us. Angus and I ran from the car straight to the front of the cottage. Angus wanted to see if there were dead fish to roll on. I wanted

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to see what the lake was doing and to count how many different birds I could see on the land and on the water. There was always at least one dark, long-necked cormorant by the shore and sometimes further out on the lake a compact flock of green-winged teals. Robins busied themselves in the grass searching for earthworms, or in the trees calling to me to cheerily cheerily cheer-up cheer-up. Robins were city birds. I was more interested in the eye-catching country birds, bright orange and black Baltimore orioles, egg-yolk yellow goldfinches that I called wild canaries, belted kingfishers on willow branches overhanging the lake, red-headed woodpeckers battering their beaks in the white pines and especially my favourite but most elusive bird, the fiery red cardinal. All of those birds might live in Toronto but I never saw them there. I knew I'd see them at the cottage. Everything at the lake – the bugs, the birds, the animals, the smells, the weather, the waves, even the people – was more exciting. Angus disappeared. He'd come back when he was hungry or wanted me to rub his belly. I knew that, as old as he was, he was off hunting. He loved the lake.

Rob and I used the wheelbarrow to clear the shoreline. Dad told us to. He never said much to either of us, to anyone for that matter, but on that first day at the cottage when so much had to be done he gave us short, simple instructions. Although Dad wasn't much of a talker, Mum's extrovert nature made up for his lack of gregariousness. Dad was a doer and my older brother and I, as young as we were, both knew that physically he could do anything.

Fifty years later, at my father's funeral, after his casket had been lowered into the rich, dark soil below the hard frost line and we'd all taken turns, using his own cottage spade, shovelling frozen clods of earth onto it, Steve, my brother's best

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friend at the lake, asked us what it was like to have had a father who didn't say much.

'When we lived at the lake I wished my father looked like yours,' Steve said. 'Whatever he was doing, sawing wood, repairing the raft, just fishing, he was always so dignified, so handsome, so strong. I thought he was Clark Gable. But I never knew who he was. I never managed to get more than a few syllables out of him. Did he ever talk to you two?'

'No,' my brother and I answered in unison.

'He wasn't someone to talk about your feelings with,' I added. 'I had my mother or my Uncle Reub for that. Talking with my dad wasn't important. What was important was I knew that if he had to, he could kick the living shit out of anybody else's dad.'

'That's right,' my brother nodded.

On the shoreline there was driftwood, whitening in the sun, a tangled mess of early seaweed, and even though the fishing season didn't open until the first of July there was a painted, wooden fishing lure nestled in the weeds, its rusty hooks the same colour as decomposing vegetation. We watched shoals of minnows dart this way and that in the shallows then it was our job to remove the oiled tarpaulin from the canoe, raised off the ground over winter on two sawhorses, and clean the spiders' webs, leaves, larvae and pupae from inside it. I saved the pupae to unwrap and inspect later. I was good at saving the best for the last. To my ten-year-old mind the pupae were miniature Egyptian mummies, prepared by hosts of never-seen slave insects.

Rob and I did the same with the rowboat and while we were allowed to carry the canoe into the lake, our father had Mum help him turn the heavier rowboat over and put it in the water. Rob and I both stared. Kids did things in the lake

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together. Not grown-ups. Uncle Reub sat on a lawn chair, a heavy book on his lap, looking out at the lake. He was one of many uncles my brother and I had, sixteen of them, almost all in Toronto. The others frequently visited but it was my mother's big brother who stayed, sometimes just for a few days, sometimes for months. It was only with us, not with his other brothers or sisters. Back then I didn't think much about why. I knew he'd been married. Twice. My father never seemed to mind, he treated his brother-in-law like a shadow. My mother would sometimes be quite stern with her older brother. She used the same tone of voice she used when she reprimanded Rob and me.

After the rowboat was in the lake, water leaked into it – at least an inch of water.

'You should caulk and paint that rowboat,' Mum said. She was always giving instructions, not just to my father. To everyone. She did so with an affable look and an alluring smile, and everyone seemed content to do as they were told to do.

'Everyone thinks your mother is sexy,' I'd heard Steve telling Rob. At that time I didn't know exactly what that meant.

'The wood will expand,' Dad replied and it did. It took only days for the leaking to stop. In mid-July my mother repainted the rowboat herself. All summer she was busy. Not complaining busy although sometimes, when I said something that pleased her, she'd say, 'I wish your father was more like you.' She was happy busy, taking us by boat to swimming lessons each Tuesday, laughing with the other mothers as they lay together on their lounge chairs each afternoon, talking about I don't know what, collecting potatoes from kind Mrs Nichols at the farmhouse at the top of the hill. On rainy days she read stories to all the children on the point and taught us how to play poker. In my mind my father was the colour of the land,

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brown and green. My mother was the colour she painted the rowboat, fiery red.

After the canoe and rowboat were in the lake, Dad went into the boathouse and using chain winches thrown over the ceiling beams he lowered the motorboat back into the water. Dad got the motor out of the tool house, took its casing off, blew in it, cleaned the carburettor, put in a new spark plug, then, without putting the casing back on, carried the motor close to his broad chest to the boathouse, stepped into the boat, hung the motor from the transom, tightened the wing nuts, then pulled the starter cord. More fiddling with the carburettor and another pull and he was surrounded by blue smoke and unmuffled noise. He replaced the casing, then put the motor in reverse and backed the boat out of the boathouse. Once he was clear he throttled forward, slowly at first, and then, after the spluttering stopped, full throttle. With a boyish grin on his face he made tight turns, so tight that water came over the gunwales and he had to throttle back fast or he'd capsize. My father didn't swim and he never wore one of the Kapok-filled life jackets he always had us wear.

Dad built the cottage himself. Until the previous summer it was the last one in a row of twenty other cottages on the point, with a field next to it where Mrs Nichols' three black-and-white dairy cows had grazed.

Dad used two-by-four-inch pine for its frame and six-inch-wide cedar planks for its clapboard siding. He sanded and shellacked the cedar sidings each spring for the first three years then last year gave up and painted it all brilliant white, like the other cottages at our end of the point. Uncle Reub was with us when Dad did that and while watching my dad prepare the cedar sidings, he walked over to where my father was and

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ran his hand gently over the knots and veins of the rich wood. Uncle Reub's hands were small and soft, like a fat girl's.

'Your cottage was once alive and your father is showing his deep respect for it. It lived in the woods, over there by the lake,' he said.

He turned towards the ancient cedars that shaded the spearmint and raspberries that had seeded themselves in the new hedge my family had planted.

'They gave up their lives so that your father had wood to build your home, so you could be safe here in your own cottage during the summer. And when you come back here each June it comes alive again.'

Sometimes I didn't understand what my uncle was telling me but I always knew that even if I didn't understand, it was – somehow – interesting.

Our next-door neighbour's cottage had green windows and doors and the one next to that, Grace and Glory's, had red ones, so to be different my father painted his windows and doors a deep, dark cobalt blue. Under the relentless summer sun, the cobalt had now turned to a soft powder blue.

At the end of June the water in the lake was still too cold for me to swim in, but once we finished our chores Rob went for a dip. He was a better swimmer than I was. Mum had promised him that he could try for his Royal Life Saving Society Bronze Medallion this summer. All I had was my Red Cross Junior badge.

Using a pump from the tool house – my dad's storage cabin – I inflated a car tyre inner tube and floated on it. I didn't mind the cold on my legs when the sun melted my back.

'Chicken!' Rob spat as he surfaced near me and splashed me with cold water.

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'I'm going over to Grace's,' I shouted to my mother.

'Not in the water, you're not, unless Robert goes with you,' she called back from the front of the cottage where she was pushing the rotating-blade lawn mower across the long grass. Uncle Reub had moved his chair onto the dock to get out of her way. Like Angus, Dad had now disappeared.

'I'm not going with Robert,' I replied.

'Then get out of the water and walk over,' she said.

I did. Grace was more fun than Rob.