

COTTAGE CONFIDENTIAL

Canadian House and Home

August 2007

I am looking at a black and white photograph of my mother that was taken in the '50s. She is sitting in a deck chair wearing short shorts, a halter top and mules, and her Betty Grable legs are crossed at the ankles. One hand is resting on the arm of the chair, and in the other she holds a cigarette, which is how I always remember her in those days. At her feet there's an abandoned doll and an inner tube for swimming, and in the background you can see a towering weeping willow and the cottage where I spent my childhood summers, with clothes billowing on the line beside it.

The cottage was in Belle Ewart on Ontario's Lake Simcoe and it stood on a lot with three others that my aunts and uncles and a gaggle of their friends used to rent when we were kids. The cottages were modest box-like structures, but years later when I revisited them as an adult, their smallness astonished me, since at the time I thought we were living in the Kennedy compound.

Weekdays, ours was a world of women and children, but on Friday nights the men would drive up, and the cottage would fill with an aura of anticipation and the redolent aroma of my mother's baking. I always knew that my father's arrival was imminent

because my mother would fix her hair and makeup and don a crisply belted shirtwaist, and soon the cocktails would appear, and it always felt a little more dangerous then.

I remember the fragrant mornings and the hours spent catching tadpoles in the creek and carrying them home in Mason jars and the barefoot after-dinner sprint to the general store for packets of powdered icing sugar imbibed through black licorice straws, and the blackballs, three for a penny. I remember the abandoned house that we used to pass on the road, the one everybody called the haunted house, and how for a joke one summer my Uncle Jack pulled up in front in his convertible with the guests he was entertaining for the weekend and honked his horn and yelled “Syl!”, as if he’d arrived at their cottage and was calling my aunt to come outside and say hello.

I remember the pow-wows, too, and someone dressing up as Princess Summerfallwinterspring, and the plays that we used to stage on the back lawn and how the adults came and sat on deck chairs to watch us perform, and what a big deal it was. Most of all, though, I remember the feeling that the days — and that time itself — were endless.

They say that cottaging gets into your soul and once you’re under the spell you’re pretty much of a goner, and I think that must be true, because even though I’ve never owned a place of my own,

it's safe to say that scarcely a summer has gone by when I haven't begged, borrowed or rented one. There were my friends' cottages, and the strategically booked weekends of hilarity and extreme overeating from Lake Simcoe to the Kawarthas to Georgian Bay. There were the cottages where I retreated to do some writing over the years, like the monastic Caledon cabin with the idiosyncratic toilet or the place on Jack Lake with the embarrassment of mallards and a view from central casting. There was the Drag Lake cottage, straight out of Stephen King, to which my cabin-mates and I, at 11, were spirited away by motorboat one dark and stormy night, when lightning threatened to electrocute us in our tent. There was Fawna's cottage (the über-cottage, as my daughter so fondly remembers it), nestled in elegant simplicity at the end of a quiet bay, where we'd sit up all night by the fire and smoke and drink and laugh and talk and endlessly ponder our lives. Finally, there was (and still is, and hopefully always will be) the guest cottage in Muskoka that I discovered by serendipity through an ad in the *Globe and Mail* a few years ago, the one so impossibly enchanting that I may drive up one summer and never leave.

And you can never really leave, can you? Because even if you do stay away for a while, you'll find your way back to a cottage eventually. The cottage narrative has a way of coming full circle, I've found. I am thinking in particular of two of my cousins,

whose formative years were spent, like mine, in time-stopped bliss, and who, some years ago, bought cottages within throwing distance of each other in Muskoka, and then took it upon themselves to organize an annual family reunion. And so, each August long weekend, my relatives and I converge with our kids and our cameras and our cole slaws to laugh and reminisce and irritate the hell out of each other. Every summer, my cousin and his family fly in from San Francisco. It's a very big deal.

Almost all my parents' generation is gone now, but some things you just don't mess with, so my cousin Joyce bakes my Auntie Ida's blueberry pie, and I bake my mother's mandel bread, and my cousin Marc tells stories by the campfire (the cottages are teeming with kids again), and we sing songs and roast marshmallows and, all in all, get totally verklempt. And although there is hardly anything on which the members of my family agree, on this one matter there is total unanimity: the cottage was the best thing that our parents ever gave us.

