

PARADISE LOST

Canadian House and Home

July 2008

When I was a child, my family rented a cottage on Lake Simcoe, but my first real experience of the Canadian wilderness came at eight years old, when I went off to summer camp. The camp was carved out of a pristine stretch of forest in the Haliburton Highlands, about three hours north of Toronto, and although it is where I learned to ski and sail and canoe, I think of it mostly as the place where I learned to be still.

It was a Jewish camp, so on Friday nights we trekked about a mile from the end of girls' camp to the outdoor chapel for services. The chapel was a clearing in the woods with tree trunks for seating and a dais made of stone; at dusk, it offered a Monet-lit view of the lake.

I am not a religious person. And yet, something about that place was transcendent for me. I liked the way we had to hike through the woods to arrive and the way we wore whites and the way the camp director sometimes paddled over in a canoe to give his benediction. I liked the feeling of sitting in silence on a log and watching the sun go down and hearing my own thoughts. I liked it even better when I could steal away from my cabin-mates to sit there alone and stare at the lake and watch the swoop of a gull and the curve of a sail.

And then I started going on canoe trips. I'd paddle and portage and spread out my sleeping bag and lie on my back on a jutting shelf of the Canadian Shield and vanish into the mysterious, echoing silence.

The first time I saw Muskoka, I thought it was the most magical place I'd ever seen. That feeling has never quite left me, even though it's harder and harder to think of it that way anymore. They're calling it the Malibu of the North now. Toronto's Hamptons. Movie stars and moguls are tearing down classic structures that have stood on hallowed ground for years, and putting up McCottages.

“You don’t see sailboats or canoes around much anymore,” Bob Topp, 71, a fourth-generation Muskokan who lives in Toronto, told the *New York Times* a few years ago. “The new people are anxious to show off their wealth.”

I am not one to rail against change ordinarily — it’s a futile exercise — but I can’t tell you how sad this development makes me. I think it is oafish to be blessed with a front row seat in paradise, and not even know it.

All long-time Muskokans have a story to tell about the hellish Sea-Doos and the garish, overbuilt monstrosities that now blight the landscape. I’m just an occasional visitor, but I, too, have a story.

For the past few summers, I’ve rented a cottage on a silvery Muskoka lake a stone’s throw from Huntsville, Ontario. By sheer luck, I suppose, the bay on which it sits is sheltered from the onslaught. Most of the time you hardly see a soul, and that suits me just fine.

One summer I did see a man on the neighboring dock, and I struck up a conversation with him. It turned out that he and his young family were renting the cottage next door.

“Do you like your cottage?” I asked.

“It’s fantastic,” he said. “It has this unbelievably massive media room downstairs.”

I looked at him for a moment, the way you might look at a blind date who had just said something particularly moronic.

“Mine too,” I said, pointing to the limitless expanse of lake and sky surrounding us. “And the best thing about it is the show never ends.”

What I’m on about here is the idea of cottageness, because it’s that idea that has been so perilously threatened. I realize that the cottage experience is about different things for different people, but for me, anyway, it has always been the place you go when you want to remember who you are.

I’m not suggesting everybody should live in a cabin in the woods — although I’ve done that, too, and there’s much to be said for it. I have

nothing against creature comforts. What I'm talking about has more to do with the sense that you are in a place where attention must be paid. To lock yourself in with thrumming faxes all day, or sit glued until you're pie-eyed to a massive LCD, strikes me, at the very least, as ungrateful. There are northern lights out there, for God's sake. Or at least there used to be, until the light pollution killed them.

The way I feel about this reminds me of the way I felt when people first started talking in movie theatres. I wanted them to suffer for defiling such a sacred place. But trying to silence the offenders was pointless. The best you can hope for when you go to the movie theatre today is that you'll manage to dodge the goons.

So I doubt there's much to be done about Muskoka. Progress, so-called, has a way of having its way. I guess I just wanted to say that there are those of us who care about the defiling of that enchanted place. Some of us might even call it a crime against nature.

