

THE COTTAGE

“I see the lake!” I see the lake!” my cousins and I all shouted at once as the first glimpses of a cerulean blue window opened between the trees at the bottom of the long hill. Those shouts were the signal that summer had arrived. Nothing looms so large in the Johnston family's collective memory as that beloved building, that place, that interlude from the stresses of work and school, that place where we are always young, known simply as, "The Cottage." We owe these memories to my grandfather, Fred Johnston, who built the first summer cottage in Barrillia Park situated between the towns of Barrie and Orillia on the shores of Lake Simcoe, Ontario's fourth largest lake. At the turn of the last century, when Grandpa built the Cottage, the area was farmland. The earliest photos in Freda's album show a loan white clapboard cottage in the midst of open land, a few trees demarcating fields of shimmering wheat and oats. The section of shore on which the Cottage was built was originally intended for a park by developers when it was surveyed in 1912, but when their business failed, the lots were sold for taxes and those who had the inside track bought up much of the land. Grandpa was the lucky recipient of one of these lots. Some years after the Johnston cottage was built, others arrived, trees and bushes were planted, and the area soon became a thriving summer colony. It was at the Cottage that all of the Johnston children and grandchildren spent their summers and where I spent mine, until at seventeen my parents told me that the following year I would have to stay home and get a summer job.

At the beginning of every summer when I was young, Grandma would pack us into her 1930s-era maroon Chevy four-door sedan with its running board and spare wheel on the back and we would head north out of Toronto to Lake Simcoe. With boxes and suitcases strapped to every spare surface we must have resembled the Okie jalopies that headed West during the Dust Bowl. We kids—my brother Freddy, my cousins Judi and Susan, sometimes my cousin Graham or cousin Jamie--would have to sit wedged in the back seat between boxes full of food and suitcases whose contents were to last the entire summer. Immediately beyond the outskirts of the then much smaller Toronto we were in rural country and back in the nineteenth century passing platinum fields of waving oats and wheat dotted with old brick farmhouses and grey wooden barns that lay at the end of long dirt roads.

In those days, a trip that now takes an hour and a half on Route 400 could take up to six hours or more depending on the state of the roads and tires. Since Grandma's car was old and

always overloaded, it was continually breaking down and we would have to pull into some farmer's barn to have it repaired. Gas stations were few and besides, who needed a gas station when every farmer along the way was an expert mechanic? Soon, the entire car and all its baggage was unloaded, our boxes and suitcases strewn about in the farmer's barnyard. "When are we going to get to the cottage?!!" "How long is this going to take?!!" we kids steamed. Waiting another few hours in the hot sun with nothing to do was agony. Finally, the car repaired, we were on our way again. As we neared the lake, an obligatory stop would be made at Barrie, the nearest small city of any size, where we all trooped to the bathroom while Grandma went to pick up toilet paper and other necessities.

The road to Barrillia Park ran along the crest of a high escarpment. Lake Simcoe, formed from glacial ice melt, sat in a vast crater, some nineteen miles long and sixteen miles wide. We were near our destination when we passed Earn and Phyllis Crawford's farm on the left. "There's The Farm!" we all shouted. As with "The Cottage," this generic term, "The Farm," signaled a complex set of experiences particular to the Johnson clan. A few hundred yards past the farm was another guidepost, Graham's store, an old time general store presided over by an elderly Mr. Graham who sold everything from fresh farm milk and eggs, homemade jam and pickles to hardware goods. It was at Graham's store that we turned off the Ridge Road at Concession Seven, and headed down a steep three mile dirt road passing tiny Oro Station on the left where the Canadian Pacific steamed by once a day, its long, plaintive whistle signaling that the mail had arrived for the inhabitants of this tiny hamlet. There was something romantic about trains in the day of steam engines and for my mother's generation, a four-mile walk from the cottage to the railroad station to listen for the train whistle was the high point of every day. Heading down that steep incline, we kids, as our mothers had done before us, would crane our necks for the first sight of the water far below between the trees. At the end of the drive down to the lake, the road turned sharply left passing a dance hall, and in another mile we would have arrived at our destination.

By the time my cousins and I came along in the 1940s, Barrillia Park had sprouted large trees, the farmland around the lake having disappeared into lots of varying sizes which held modest frame cottages occupied by the families of school teachers and clergymen. The Johnston cottage was not right on the lake but across the road from the somewhat more prosperous cottagers—doctors and dentists who could pay for the more expensive lake front property. I say

“*somewhat* more prosperous” because in those days the material distinctions between teachers and doctors was not that large. Depression and war had leveled the playing field and everyone had had to make their sacrifice.

Our cottage was a large squat white frame building with red trim, surrounded on two sides by a wide veranda framed by sumac and fir. Around the perimeter Grandma had planted irises and roses and ornamental strawberry borders and in the early summer the air was scented with the smell of lilacs from the large bush in the front yard. By the time I came along the colony boasted tennis courts, a shuffleboard, and a small beach that lay at the end of the road that ran past our cottage, turned to the left and dipped down to the level of the lake. The beach on either side was framed by boathouses in whose dark interiors burnt umber water undulated between sparkling shafts of golden light. On the right a concrete dock extended out into deep water. Behind the boathouse on the left a large briny pool simmered with giant polliwogs the size of golf balls, some with legs just beginning to develop. One of my favorite pastimes as a small child was catching the polliwogs in a glass jar and bringing them back to the cottage to show Grandma, just as my mother and her sisters had done, depositing them later in the pond. Beyond the beach the road petered out into a thick forest. I always imagined that road as being at the edge of the known world, beyond which lay wilderness as deep and mysterious as the forests in Grimm’s fairy tales.

My earliest memories of the area and my only memory of my grandfather, who died when I was four, was of going for a walk with him through that dense forest. The path ran along the edge of the lake where light-spun shafts of water danced far below through a lattice of entwined branches and dark green leaves. I don’t remember Grandpa speaking, at least in words that reach the ear. His walking stick became the measure of rocks and roots, and his ears were tuned to the direction of muffled chirps and the rustle of scampering chipmunks. His hand in mine, I am sure he must have given me signals about where to walk and what to avoid as at points the path ran precariously near the cliff edge. He had always been a silent man but there was a communion between us that day that spoke louder than words. We must have walked for at least a mile or two until the forest ended. Beyond an old wooden stile lay a wide, sandy beach, Braden’s Bay. The water sparkled with a thousand diamonds. Behind the beach lay a field of seeding wheat, buttercups, wild lupine and frothy milkweed where hundreds of monarch butterflies and bumblebees flittered and buzzed in an ecstatic dance of praise.

Everything about Grandma's cottage spelled "old": the bulky Mission style furniture, the round tiger oak table with its claw feet, the pot-bellied wood stove that stood in the middle of the large central room, and the odor of must and mildew everywhere. Even the books were old. Three bedrooms opened off the central living room, their thin cardboard walls built only part way to the ceiling. My bedroom was up a narrow staircase that led to a two-bedroom garret where I slept on a saggy iron bed that had held the impressions of my mother and her sisters before me, covered in sheets and blankets that must have wrapped my parents' generation, for they too smelled of must. A large grate in the floor provided a conduit for the punctuated hisses and snorts from the sleeping cousins, aunts and uncles in the half-walled rooms below.

Behind the living and bedroom area was a kitchen that ran half the width of the house and a washroom that took up the other half. With no plumbing, we washed with water from ancient iron rain barrels that stood under the eaves just outside the washroom and were connected with faucets that emptied into a long sink. We washed our faces and brushed our teeth with the acrid taste of iron. As a child I would stare with fascination at the tiny water bugs that glided along the surface of the coffee-colored water in the rain barrels like miniature skaters on a dark pond. We had to wash our hair by taking a bottle of shampoo down to the lake when we went for a swim. In those days, ecological knowledge was not part of the zeitgeist. Grandma would send me down to the public pump near the lake for drinking water and a metal bucket that I would cart home, my arms aching from the weight and my shoes sloshing water. By the time I arrived at the cottage, half the water would have spilled out. Grandma's refrigerator was a red metal cabinet that held a large block of ice. We children would wait each week for the arrival of the ice man who would carry the huge block of ice in large iron tongs, begging him for shards of ice that we would lick like ice cream cones.

In back of Grandma's cottage was an old wooden barn that was now serving as both a garage and an outhouse. On one end of the barn Grandpa had constructed a three-seat latrine. Under the lids of each of the latrines teenage Freda had painted cartoons whose colors had now faded but whose bawdy messages were still visible. I had to hold my breath for as long as possible whenever I entered the latrine for the stench was unbearable. I don't think it had ever been cleaned out in all the decades the cottage had been in use.

How Grandma turned out her famous dinners in a kitchen with no running water, no electric refrigeration, and only a small electric hotplate is a marvel I never get over. In that

kitchen I helped Grandma chuck peas and corn, cut the ends off string beans and watched her roll out dough for the baking powder biscuits, pies or tarts that accompanied each meal. Meals were eaten around a large rectangular red wooden table covered with oil cloth in a screened-in porch off the kitchen. I can still taste those farm-ripe tomatoes, peas, and corn. They must be embedded in some gustatory memory buried deep in my cells. On summer nights in that dining porch the air was electric with spinning moths and the crackle of flies hitting the looped strands of flypaper that hung from the ceiling. I don't remember the stories my aunts and uncles told but I do remember the laughter that floated off into the cicada-syncopated night.

We grandchildren spent the summer months, much as our mothers had. On rainy days around the hissing wood stove I would cut out paper dolls, play tic-tac-toe, dominoes or Chinese checkers with my cousins Judi or Susan, fight with my brother, Freddy, or spend hours in the hammock on the veranda reading Victorian children's stories with their sinister hints of death and punishment. I still have the torn yellowed remnants of one of those books that lay in the living room and, in my memory, gave the cottage its odd, old-fashioned flavor. Ironically entitled, "The Wide-Awake Story Book: Jolly Stories for Boys and Girls," its none too subtle morality tales and dark engravings would fill me with an existential dread. There were tales about children who disobeyed their parents and nearly drowned and dogs and goats who served as lessons in what not to do, like the puppy, Tiger, who barked and barked when there was no danger, exemplifying the lesson that boasting is bad. When I was a little older I liked to leaf through magazines filled with my favorite movie idols--Victor Mature, Gregory Peck, June Allyson and especially Esther Williams, that incomparable mermaid who managed to smile with lips wide open while floating around underwater through a tank of giant sea shells and plastic flowers.

Across the road from Grandma's cottage stood a huge boulder that had been deposited there at the end of the last ice age. We called it simply, "The Big Rock." The Big Rock must have been about nine feet tall, but a ledge that ran across it about a third of the way up enabled us to scramble up to the top where my cousins and I would play "King of the Hill." The Big Rock was a favorite place to pose for photographs. I have pictures of my mother's and her sisters posing on that rock exactly as my cousins and I would do a generation later.

There is nothing like the bonding that comes from growing up together in a summer colony. One of my best friends was Cathy Paine, a handsome, large-boned girl with a hearty laugh and a gregarious personality who lived in a three-room cottage across from ours with her

single mother. Mrs. Paine seemed to live in her dressing gown and always had a half-smoked cigarette hanging from her mouth. For some reason, I always picture Cathy with her leg on a bicycle, about to take off. Pat Sinclair was another friend. I always thought of Pat, dark-skinned, raven-haired, as an Indian princess. She had inherited the best of her two sets of genes-- a half indigenous mother and her school teacher father who was the spitting image of the movie idol, Errol Flynn. Pat had two equally exotic younger twin siblings, a sister and brother, striking in their bronze skin like Pat, but honey haired with brilliantly blue eyes. The Sinclair's cottage was hidden from the road up behind the tennis courts and shuffleboard and approached by way of a series of dirt paths. If anything, their small, cluttered cottage was more ramshackle than ours, and, like ours, smelled of mildew. There were always wet clothes hanging in the kitchen where Mrs. Sinclair would be at the stove in a halter top and long baggy shorts. She was a very thin woman and her apparel would have looked better on someone with more flesh. I spent hours in the small, musty Sinclair cottage playing monopoly or cards with Pat or swinging on the tire that hung from their tree outside.

Geraldine Fitzgerald was one or two years older than I, about the only Catholic in a predominantly WASP community, and lived in a cottage on the lakefront. She had pale skin and dark, curly hair, and spoke with a clipped and "proper faux-British accent." I remember her having what I would call a "sweet" disposition. I was in awe of her as she was always reading and discussing books of a philosophical and scientific nature which I had never heard of. To me, she was the epitome of culture and sophistication, someone who was destined to be a famous doctor or philosopher. It was therefore a shock when, at the age of fifteen, she suddenly announced to us that she was leaving this life of pleasure to enter a cloistered convent. When had this been decided? Why would she do such a thing? I was crestfallen. She was never going to be the sophisticated academic whose life I had envisioned for her. It felt to me like a friend had suddenly died.

There were boys in our gang as well. Alan Tutty was a tanned, blue-eyed, freckle-faced, sandy blonde with a smile that lit up the world. I had never thought of Alan Tutty in any other way than as one of the crowd of teenagers who hung out together. Sex, when I was thirteen years old, was simply not a factor in my mental or emotional life, but I think it was Alan who gave me my first furtive kiss one night behind the Big Rock. It was dark and the peck was so sudden, quick and unexpected that it must have surprised him as well, as he immediately

disappeared into the night. I would later hear that Alan Tutty, who seemed so full of vitality, would die of cancer at the age of nineteen. And then there was George Bennett, a doctor's son, who occupied one of the more prosperous lakefront cottages. He and his older brother, Bill, often took us out for rides in their motor launch. The next year I developed an adolescent crush on George. The appeal, perhaps, was more for the motor launch than for any hint of attention from him.

We kids spent sunny days in the water. I must have been a toddler when I fell off the end of the dock nearly drowning. I can still see that silent green world into which I was sinking, a peaceful womb where bubbles drifted slowly upward -- until I was rudely hauled out by some adults who were calling my name and pushing my chest into the hard concrete. Later on, after I had learned how to swim, I would turn somersaults in the water, and with my hands on the sandy bottom, balance so that my legs stood straight up in the air. My friends and I would challenge each other to see how far we could swim underwater. Sometimes we would row out beyond the reach of the voices on the water's edge, taking a book with us to read on the raft beyond the sand bar, diving in when we got too hot, and coming up for another page or two. On that raft I cried through most of *David Copperfield*, especially the part where delicate Dora dies. Occasionally our gang would hold evening bonfires on the beach roasting corn in the charcoal and cooling it off to eat by dipping it into the water, then toasting marshmallows over the crackling flames.

At other times, Pat and Cathy and I would traipse over to Geraldine's house to go skinny dipping off the rocks in front of her cottage. Stepping out of our clothes we would leave them and our towels on the shore and then step gingerly onto the moss-slippery rocks, letting our bodies slide seamlessly into the clear, chilly water to glide silently beneath its surface. Stripped of my armor, I felt clean, slick and silver, at one with the baby trout that pirouetted among us in that primordial medium. Those days on the water are dappled memories: dappled with the undulating flashes of sunlight and shadow on amber water inside the boathouses; dappled with the flicker of fish tail and fin, of stippled rock and rippling sand bars. On cloudy days, we played tennis and shuffleboard at the community recreation area up behind our cottage.

On Sundays church services were held on the lawn of Cole's cottage, at the corner where the road turned to head down to the beach. There, on the lawn facing the lake the stout ladies of the colony in their floral print dresses would line up on folding chairs with their Anglican hymnals open and a portable tinny-sounding organ pumping out "The Old Rugged Cross" or "I

Come to the Garden Alone,” or “Nearer My God to Thee.” Then we would have to listen to an interminable sermon by Reverend Cole that seemed to drag on for hours, although it was probably just twenty minutes. We children found this regular ritual an incomprehensible bore but were obliged to attend. Grandma had said so, and Grandma’s word ruled.

Sometimes, there was a special pleasure--a trip to Earn and Jessie Crawford's farm up on the ridge road. The Crawfords, one of the oldest families to have settled in this part of Ontario had a large brood of children--twelve altogether, including two sets of twins. Phyllis had been a cottager when she married Earn whose homestead had neither electricity nor indoor plumbing, but she had taken to being a farmer’s wife as if she were a natural. I learned later that when the oldest left home they bought their parents plumbing, electricity, and their first color TV. With the hearty generosity of country people Phyllis would welcome us into her large kitchen, filling us with cookies, tarts and lemonade. That room, reeking of urine, was always festooned with flypaper and lines of drying diapers. A huge pan of water was continuously heating on the back of the big cast iron stove and snot-nosed children of all sizes ran in and out. It was in their barn, pungent with the smell of cow manure, that we had the most fun, jumping from the hayloft into piles of fresh hay, gathering eggs from the chicken coop, watching the men and older boys milk the Guernsey cows, and being invited occasionally to go on hay rides.

On starlit Saturday nights as teenagers we girls would walk a mile down the dirt road to the honkytonk dance hall—a hangout for local farm boys—to order ice cream cones and pop at the old fashioned soda fountain just as our parents had done. Sometimes we gathered our courage and entered the large, barney dance hall where some country and western music or perhaps the Everly Brothers was playing on the juke box. Mostly, we sat and watched. Farm boys were a different species from the middle-class boys we hung out with in the colony—coarser, somehow, their thatched hair, gnarly hands, muscled physiques and overalls bespeaking a life of hard work and raw sexuality.

It was here in the dance hall that I had my first awakening to sex. I must have been about fourteen when I was approached by an older boy who, I imagine, was around seventeen or eighteen. “Would you like to dance?” he asked. “All right,” I nervously agreed. As we glided onto the floor I felt myself being pulled closer than I had ever been to a boy, my body trembling with fear and a kind of excitement, and my nostrils overwhelmed with an unfamiliar odor. Pulled tighter and tighter, my eyes frantically searched for a place to land. I didn’t dare look at him but

couldn't figure out what to do with my head. Then I began to feel something hard pushing against my groin. As he whirled me around the dance floor whatever it was grew larger and harder. (This was a year before I found the book in my father's dresser drawer that explained what this thing was and how it behaved.) Bewildered and revolted, I search for a way to extricate myself from his iron embrace, only to be pinned even tighter. When the music finally stopped, I make a beeline for the door and fled out into the ink-black night, shaken. Above me, in the immense heavens, the Milky Way wheeled over Barrillia Park, a gigantic fireburst, lighting my way back to the cottage and to safety. Walking under its effervescent canopy I meditated on the mysterious wonders of the universe and the equally mysterious ways of farm boys.

At the Johnston Girls' reunion some fifty years later, all fifty-seven of us—Freda and her two remaining sisters, their children and grandchildren--boarded a bus for one last nostalgic trip to The Cottage. We had just visited the cemetery in Toronto where Grandma and Grandpa, the ones who started it all, are buried. As the bus neared Barrillia Park my eyes strained for the familiar sight of Earn and Jessie's farmhouse. There it stood, now a derelict ghost, at the end of its long dirt road. A little farther on, a Seven-Eleven convenience store had replaced Mr. Graham's cornucopia of shovels and barrels, screws and quart jars of homemade pickles and strawberry jam. The dirt road down to the lake was now asphalt, there was no sign of a dance hall, and the cottages had been replaced by rows of year-round houses.

Nothing was familiar.

As the bus rolled along the road that ran through Barrillia Park, I looked in vain for that iconic old cottage that had been the site of some of my happiest childhood memories, but could not locate even the corner on which it had stood until the bus stopped at an ugly little green house now occupying the lot that had once held the Johnston cottage. We all piled off the bus to look around and to take photos of the third generation on the Big Rock. But the Big Rock was no more. The ground around it had built up so much that it was now reduced to a pedestrian boulder, hardly one on which you could imagine playing King of the Hill. Across the road, only one building looked familiar. It was the cottage that had belonged to the Bennett brothers, the ones who could afford a motor launch. In those days, it had seemed like the height of luxury. Now it appeared small and commonplace.

Down the road and around the corner the beach looked pitifully sad and lonely. There was no sign of the polliwog pool and the road beyond the beach was now lined with more year-

round houses extending as far as one could see. What had once been a mysterious “wilderness” that had stirred a child’s imagination was now a suburban housing development. We followed that road as it wound around to Braden’s Bay, but that vision of heaven a three-year old had held onto all these years was now a provincial park filled with hundreds of bathers with their beach umbrellas and boom boxes.

As we put down our gear at the picnic pavilion a great sadness overwhelmed me as I realized that the third generation, looking at the same sites, saw only modernity, not its loss.