

# WELKIN LAKE

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In the last week of August, Sara drove the logging road to Welkin Lake in northeastern Ontario, where she planned to stay at a friend's cottage for a week. She had left Toronto the previous day, driving slowly through the countryside, evaluating her present situation.

She was a commercial artist working for an advertising agency. A crazy job which pays well, she always described it to close friends. She was also a painter but did not tell this to anyone since she had discovered long ago that the average person feels uncomfortable in the presence of an artist, particularly a painter. And she had lived with Len for the past fifteen months, but that was definitely over.

On this drive she had realized several things, mostly items from the past which in times of crisis surfaced like a warning reminder. It was close to three years since she had moved away from her husband, from their house. But they had never talked about divorce, they just required a rest from each other, as they had said to their friends. It had been a long rest.

She was forty-one now, still slim, but staying slim had become harder with every additional year. Some days she was astonished to realize how simple it had been to forget almost everything that once had been important to her, even home and husband, yet not the children. But over the last few weeks she could not wrestle herself free from thoughts of Len.

She stopped at Grouse Lodge at the end of the road, a lodge boarded up for most of the year since mercury pollution had made the fish in the lake unfit to eat. The caretaker, a man in his

seventies, talked to her, while Sara stored her equipment in the boat and he told her that out on Rose Island Mrs. Rodrick and her son had been staying since the middle of July.

"They seldom come to the lodge or drive to the village," he remarked rather sadly.

There was no particular reason for it, but Sara parked her car close to Mrs. Rodrick's. A short-stem pipe lay below the passenger door. She put the pipe in her pocket.

The cottage had no road access, though it was situated on the mainland, and Sara had to cross a bay to get there. She enjoyed the ride, forcing the boat through the oncoming waves while the wind played in her hair.

The cottage, built on a long narrow peninsula, overlooked yet another bay dotted with many rocky outcrops. Everything was as her friend had described: the grasscovered walkway, the lonely cottage surrounded by rocks and a few wind-bent pines, the sunlight with its tranquil colours reflecting on the lake. As she carried her bags up to the house, she wondered what it would be like to live here for a long period, if electric power would ever reach this lake, when the fish would be edible again and if she would have enough money to winter here. She did not think she could make a living from her paintings, even though she knew they were good.

In the afternoon she sat in the warm breeze on a rock at the water's edge to escape the insects. Observing the bay with her painter's eye, she saw the red canoe as it moved between the islets, still far away but coming closer with every stroke.

Sara's solitude ended when the paddler stopped a short distance away from the rock. She was a middle-aged woman, fifty perhaps. She had short gray hair and a weatherbeaten face.

Sara invited her to come ashore. The woman was Mrs. Rodrick. Both expressed surprise at meeting another human being on the shores of hidden Welkin Lake. Mrs. Rodrick even apologized for the intrusion, although it seemed to Sara the woman was pleased to have met someone. They talked about many things, probing each other, searching for qualities which could be shared. Sara soon knew that her first impression of Mrs. Rodrick's age had been wrong. She was seventy-two.

"Have you ever heard of Nelly Noster?" Mrs. Rodrick asked.

"The painter?" Sara thought for a moment if she had said anything about her own occupation, which she had not, she was sure about that.

"Did you know that Noster had painted along these shores?"

"You mean..."

"Yes. She was a frequent guest at the lodge. She rented a cabin from them on one of the small islands and painted many pictures which hang now in various galleries. Have you ever seen 'Sunrise on Flagstone Island'?"

Sara tried to remember.

"It is an expressive painting and I have seen the actual view over and over."

Mrs. Rodrick was an active admirer of Noster's particular Canadian style of painting. Sara became aware that her week of solitude would change into hours of endless artistic discussion if Mrs. Rodrick learned she was a painter. In spite of her pretended ignorance, Sara remembered

more and more about Noster, who had lived at the time the Group of Seven had become famous. Even though she had painted in the same style, she had never met a member of the Group. Nor had she been a loner. Rich enough to live comfortably, she had never sold any of her paintings which only came to be known after her death.

"Are you a painter?" Sara asked Mrs. Rodrick.

"No. Not that I haven't tried, but I haven't got what it takes. I could have been a good copyist, but that wasn't to my taste. So I raised four children and when my husband was killed in an airplane crash, I worked as an accountant for a mining company until my retirement."

Sara thought that copying and accounting had some relationship. But what the artistic occupation would have offered in freedom it could not have given in security as the office job had done. Sara understood this compromise in Mrs. Rodrick's past. It has some relationship to her own life: her job, her husband, her two children who were now forming their own families.

"And when I see Noster's paintings," Mrs. Rodrick continued, "I'm happy I didn't try to compete with her or any other of her kind. She was a great artist who is still not properly recognized."

"Maybe she should be honoured by renaming this lake," suggested Sara.

"God, no, that would diminish her reputation. Too many lakes are named for the fish that were once in there, or the accident that happened there, or after a rich lawyer. No, no. It would dishonour Noster."

Sara understood. Mrs. Rodrick was happy on this lake and did not want to share Noster with anybody else. Still, Mrs. Rodrick invited Sara to visit her and her son on their island.

Sara had called all of Len's friends, all the friends she had known, and when she still had not been able to establish his whereabouts, she knew that he was through with her. It had come unexpectedly, though they had fought those fierce, obscene verbal battles more and more during the last few months. Battles which had aimed for an end.

For days after his secret departure, the smell of his aftershave lotion hung like a cynical farewell salute in the apartment. She had thrown the half-empty bottle down the garbage chute. She had changed the bedding but his personal scent had awakened her several times, thinking he had returned. But Len was definitely gone with all his clothes, his personal belongings, his record collection and her stereo set.

The day she realized the end of their relationship was irreversible, she thought of buying a bottle of cognac but rejected it as too expensive. It would not have changed anything. Besides, alcohol made her hands shake and she needed a steady hand. Later she walked through the busy streets, bumping into people in a daydream. Finally she bought two frozen trout, a small bottle of wine, some cookies and a dessert with whipped cream, then went to her apartment to have a good meal, to celebrate his departure. She did not eat a bite.

The next afternoon, before visiting Rose Island, Sara returned to Grouse Lodge. She had a few magazines in her car which she thought might be of interest to Mrs. Rodrick or her son.

The caretaker of the lodge was pleased to see her again.

"Gosh, fifteen years ago," he said, "there was life around this place. I always came up from Hamilton for my vacation, always paid good money for my stay at the lodge. Now, I've fulfilled my dream. I stay here from early spring until late fall and get paid. It's not much, but I

don't complain. Only the fish are polluted now. Sometimes I go fishing. Catch real whoppers and then let them go. Real nice fish, I tell you."

Sara was not an active angler and said so. She told the caretaker about Mrs. Rodrick's invitation.

"So you've met Mrs. Rodrick. Did she ask you about Elly Noster?"

"Yes."

"And were you able to talk about her?"

"Yes."

"Oh, that must have made Mrs. Rodrick happy, I can tell you. Last year I had to search through the entire lodge to see if there was anything left with Noster's signature. But there was nothing there and, strangely enough, Mrs. Rodrick seemed satisfied."

"Have you known her long?"

"Gosh, that's hard to answer. I can remember that she was on Rose Island every summer I was here. The mining company originally owned the property but sometime, I don't know when, I heard that Mrs. Rodrick had bought it."

The caretaker was a good talker, Sara was a patient listener.

"Mrs. Rodrick was something high up in her company, probably a manager or even a director. Anyway, she's rich but she has her problems like everyone else. Take the son who is staying with her now. He left his first wife to marry a younger woman, who then left him, sued for divorce and took most of his money. That shook him up, but he seems to be getting over it. You'll see." He smiled.

"Funny," said Sara, "my boyfriend left me a few weeks ago. Ran out on me. Took my stereo

set with him and I don't even know where he went."

"He hasn't shown up here, lady," laughed the caretaker, "but if I see him, I'll tell him you aren't here." And he laughed even more.

When Sara had left her husband, she was bored and frustrated. She had reached a point in her life where she did not care for a proper home, a secure place, a warm meal at an exact time, a husband who had become more interested in good bowel movements than in good sex. All their relatives and friends were shocked when she moved out, but she replied to their accusing questions: "I've given half my life to my family, the rest of my years belong to me."

A year later she met Len at an advertising conference. He was a reporter for one of those flashy fashion magazines which are filled with advertisements and which print articles to enhance the advertised products. She did not like these magazines but did not say that to Len. That first evening he appeared to her like one of the well dressed models in his magazine. He was thirty-two and proud of his job, which, in his opinion, exposed him to the public eye.

Something in him reminded Sara of her own twenty-one year old son but she could not pinpoint the similarity. Perhaps it was the youthful carelessness towards life which Len showed and which she had lost early in her marriage, or perhaps it was his confidence that he could solve any given problem or, she shuddered, was it that particular look a man has when he knows a woman cares for him.

Len showed a juvenile disconcert toward the quality of his work which was one reason why he had not advanced to a more important position in the editorial staff of his magazine. Sara offered her help, particularly in the artistic set-up of his articles, gave him tips when she had some insider's knowledge, she even wrote some articles for

him. He accepted everything as a matter of course, though sometimes he seemed to be indifferent towards the advantages she offered him and at other times he seemed to be impatiently waiting for something indefinable.

Sara soon recognized his intellectual emptiness but she knew that her lust for him would feed on this emptiness as his lust would feed on her intellect. He became a necessity in her life, though she sensed in his enigmatic behaviour a broadening superficiality. Still, she suggested that they live together.

Sara and Mrs. Rodrick sat on the screened-in porch. Andrew, Mrs. Rodrick's son, had stayed inside to prepare sandwiches for afternoon tea. When he stepped onto the porch he said: "It was nice of you to bring these magazines. And thanks again for finding my pipe. I had missed it, but then - you understand, I promised Mother to stop smoking and - I didn't have any tobacco anyway."

When Sara had first seen him she immediately got the impression that he was bored, though she knew he was on that island not only to please his mother but also to view his last two years from a different perspective. But, after having observed him somewhat longer, she believed that he could forget faster, forgive easier any wrongs done to him than others.

He was trim for his forty-six years, yet he moved slowly and though he had an intellectual appearance, he had a slightly muscular body. This Sara noticed time and again during the conversation, and she wondered why, after all these years, she was again comparing and rating. But she realized that at this moment she could not do anything else.

Andrew's body appeared naturally attractive to her and she compared it to Len's, but all she could remember was Len's burgeoning waistline.

Mrs. Rodrick showed Sara the many prints of Noster's paintings. For each print she had a recent glossy colour photograph of the scene. She also had several older black-and-white photos for comparison and everything of importance written about the particular painting. All of this information was filed neatly in folders like the numbers in a ledger. Mrs. Rodrick had never retired, she only had shifted her passion.

Andrew made witty though critical remarks about the ever-changing light and the slow changing landscape which sometimes pleased, sometimes irritated his mother. This, Sara thought, he did not only to prevent the old woman's complete absorption in her reverie but also to give an insight into his thoughts and Sara understood their meanings.

When Mrs. Rodrick left for a moment, he said: "You don't seem too enthusiastic about Noster's paintings."

"No, but I am observant," she replied, smiling at him. She would have liked to say something personal to him but she felt she had made certain remarks too often in the past.

He reflected for a moment, moving his fingers around the half empty cup. Then, offering the last sandwich to Sara, he said: "You're the first sane person I've seen in five weeks and I'm not the solitary type. Twice we were at the post office in the village where we met the postmaster, a fat man of sixty. Sometimes the caretaker of the lodge comes here but he talks as much about fishing as Mother talks about Noster's paintings. Both the fish and the landscape are still here but how they have changed."

Sara had difficulty replying with an acceptable phrase, of forming a sentence without those repetitious words with their empty meanings, which only Sara seemed to sense and here in her own and other people's talk. Repetitions which she detested since they dragged with them memor-

ies of sentences, gestures, feelings and bodies, which always promised and never fulfilled. Still, she asked: "Has coming here helped you see things in a different light?"

She saw in his tanned face only a slight rise of his dark eyebrows. Then, with a shrug he said: "The caretaker talks too much."

"I didn't mean to pry," Sara said, "but I know it hurts. The man I lived with ran off three weeks ago. Didn't say good-bye or leave a note, just left. He even took my stereo set with him."

She was glad that she had not yet eaten the last sandwich since she suddenly had found her normal appetite. But she also realized that a tide of her past was rising within her.

"Six years ago," Andrew said, "I left my wife and two children." His voice became sarcastic. "I suppose I was searching for my lost youth. The divorce was civil and afterward I was truly free - independent - young again. Or so I thought." He smiled at her and she nodded understandingly. "A great philosopher once said: 'A freed slave longs only for a new master'."

"So you got married again?" asked Sara.

"Yes." He got up from his chair and began to clear the dishes. "I always believed a young body has a young mind but I learned otherwise."

Sara found herself thinking of her own recent past.

When Mrs. Rodrick returned, Sara and Andrew had established an unspoken alliance. Sara understood once again the saying: age is blessing and pain. With surprise she realized that Len the person was becoming Len the memory. Then she thought about the fish and the paintings, the constant reproduction of the one and the staleness of the other, the presence of life and the paint-covered record of bygone times. There was

Mrs. Rodrick, enjoying her existence, her findings, her light comparisons, her thoughts of becoming one with Noster through her intimacy with Noster's paintings. And the caretaker? He not only looked after the forgotten lodge but also looked after the fish, after Welkin Lake.

Sara knew she was an intruder in this world. She has come here to solve her problems, to forget Len, to reflect on her marriage but she had only met more imperfection.

When Andrew walked with her to the dock he said wistfully: "We're staying until the middle of September. I promised Mother. I think that's why she's so content."

"And you?"

He answered with an invitation.

Sara often wondered about the sequence in the deterioration of her relationship with Len. But as far as she was able to remember the actual order of the events, their quarrels, skirmishes and battles, was of no importance to the final outcome.

A few months after Len had moved into her apartment, Sara became disturbed by his presence. She had hoped for soothing conversation, entertainment and relaxation but Len could not even differentiate between working hours and leisure time. He related to her in an uninterrupted flow of words the present trends of high fashion, the latest from the world of seasonal spectator sports and the technical data of new cars.

"Can we talk about something else?" she would say when she was unable to listen any longer.

"Sure, Puss.," he would answer with a laugh and change the topic of his monologues to one of the other two established orders of his world.

It annoyed her when they lay in bed, and he looked through the fashion magazines, smacking the pages from side to side, commenting about the products, the style, the colours. She might have learned to live with this irritating habit of his, but he wanted more. He wanted to hear Sara's opinion and then argue with her.

"Can't you turn the pages quietly?" she snapped one evening but he only looked at her, momentarily astonished, and then continued.

That's when she questioned the sanity of her life. That's when she remembered other times, when her son was in her bed and she had read stories to him, talking like a bear or a butterfly, explaining why the sky is blue, commenting for the umpteenth time about the three sheep on the meadow and arguing about the colour of certain flowers. She smiled at these memories, then looked at Len with his picture magazine and could not understand herself until he switched off the light.

"Good night, Puss." he would whisper, snuggling his head against her shoulder, and she knew then why she still feigned interest in his work.

One day when they were having one of their daily quarrels, Sara asked him harshly: "Has it ever occurred to you that there are other things than sport scores, overpriced clothes and fast cars?"

That was the start of a battle that continued all night.

"You have no feeling for a man's world. You are a tart." he said in the morning. "Sara, you are a tart." He emphasized the word. "Yes, a tart."

She was astonished that he had formed a truly personal opinion on his own, practically overnight. He shouted obscenities at her when she told him this.

When they discussed their differences during quieter times, he talked about his love for her and she wondered what love meant to him. But whenever she asked Len to explain it, he said: "I love you. Isn't that enough?"

She knew that the love she was seeking was too elusive to be imprisoned by her for more than a fleeting moment. She once had believed that a marriage, a long endured togetherness was a sign of love. But she knew better now.

"Yes," she said to Len, "I love you too."

In time she understood his shallowness completely and from then on she took what he offered without listening to him anymore. Still, she was surprised when he left.

For two days the rain storm had lashed Welkin Lake. The first day Sara had been thankful for the weather which had hindered her from crossing over to Rose Island where, she knew, the repetitious feelings of her past would resurface although with nuances, maybe even with a new variation. On the second day she had become restless and she understood Andrew's boredom. She realized that the only challenge in prolonged seclusion was to see how long it could be endured.

In the afternoon of the third day, when the sun's reflections again silvered the lake, Sara

returned to Rose Island. Standing at the dock and seeing Andrew walking down the path from the cottage, she heard but ignored the laughter of her memories and called to him: "Hello."

"Hi, Sara."

She thought she detected real joy in his clear voice. But when he came closer she saw his expression was not as cheerful, and she believed then that he had experienced more loneliness in these last days than in the previous weeks. Still, she saw that his eyes radiated something familiar.

"Don't look so inquisitive, Sara. Everything will be fine."

The statement was ambiguous, but Sara understood. For a moment she longed to live in a world free of disturbing influences, longed to huddle in a cocoon, longed for the sheltered world of Mrs. Rodrick. But Sara immediately realized that each previous step in her life had had its value and that she, too, would eventually be absorbed by her own dreams and memories; until then she had to live, wait.

When they walked up to the cottage she told him that she planned to stay another week.

"Only a week?" he said, and laughed.