

Kathy Duncan / THE LAKE

That summer I spent most of my time on the verandah looking at the lake. The lights off the water were bright and clean, and it was so beautiful just to sit there watching it change. I could spend hours looking at it, all the lovely patterns of lights and shadows. There was always something different to see, it was never the same.

I guess we were lucky we found that cottage to rent. We'd just come to Quebec and it was hard to get a place, there weren't many. It was such a quiet, isolated spot. Driving along the main road you'd never guess there was a lake and cottages there, they were all hidden away in the trees. Dave only came for weekends, but I stayed all the time with the children. They loved it, they really did. Debbie was in the water all day, just like a fish. Greg was more interested in catching frogs and minnows. He paddled around the beach with his pail, happy as could be. I didn't worry about them in the lake, and they left me alone.

It was lonely, but I had my books and some knitting to do. And there was the lake to look at. We had it all to ourselves during the week. You could see a few cottages from the water but there weren't many. People just seemed to come for weekends. Our only neighbors were some nuns from Paris. I'd seen them walking in the woods sometimes. Once in awhile they'd say a few words to me but my French isn't very good. They worked at a school in Montreal or something, and had this place as a retreat for the summer. They were very quiet, I hardly knew they were there.

The lake was three miles long, and there was a little island in the middle. We'd take a picnic most days and row over there for lunch. It had good sandy beaches and I went swimming sometimes. The water was like ice-cubes but it made you feel good, tingly all over. It was so pure it was pumped right out of the lake up to the cabin, and we could drink it. It tasted good, it really did.

That's why I was so upset about the fish. It was the end of the summer, and this dead fish was in the water not far from where our beach was. Just past where we kept the boat. The smell came right up to the cabin, a horrible, disgusting stink. It was just floating in the water, belly-up with its insides starting to melt away. A stringy mess of jelly with eyes sticking out. I had to get in the boat and scoop it up out of the water, I couldn't leave it there. I put it in a plastic bag, brought it back and buried it in the woods. It was just awful, like cleaning up vomit. And I was worried about the lake. Why did it have that dead thing in it?

I didn't want to go in the boat again after that. The children whined at me about a picnic so I packed some sandwiches and took them for a walk. There was a kind of spongy dirt path along the side of the lake. We had to climb the wire fence that was around the nuns' place, and Debbie cut herself. I don't know why they had that fence but it didn't look right. We passed their house, their retreat, it was grey and dirty looking. One sister was walking up and down their beach, saying prayers I guess. She didn't even notice us.

We walked quite far. There were a lot of soggy dead trees in the woods, and slimy logs sunk in the water. There are always a lot of dead things in a forest, you can smell it. Dead birds with broken wings, dead animals rotting into the earth. I saw a snake all squished up in the ground. Its middle part was coming out, white and sticky. I don't know how it got that way, somebody must have whacked it with a stick or something. We had to go back. How could I eat my lunch after that? I felt sick.

I watched the lake all afternoon. The water seemed to turn dark and murky looking. The telephone kept ringing and ringing, three long and one short. It was a party line and our number was one long and one short. But it kept ringing and I didn't know if I should answer it or not. Why did it keep ringing that way? I couldn't think with all that noise. That evening I made the children go to bed early, I was tired. They didn't seem to mind, they're good sleepers.

I washed up the supper dishes and was standing at the sink, looking out the window. The light was gray against the black trees. The sky was heavy and it was muggy and hot, you could feel a storm coming. I was in my shorts trying to keep cool. I was just standing there looking out the window and I don't know how to explain it. It was this thing coming out of the trees, looking at me. It was a death head, I'm sure that's what it was, a death head. This mask coming out of the dark, looking in at me. It caught me in its eyes and I couldn't move, I was too scared. It disappeared and then there was a knocking at the door, and it opened. I saw it open, and this grinning dead thing stood there, looking at me. Its black gown dragging it into the ground. The face so old and grotesque with that cloth wrapped around it. It just talked gibberish, standing there, waving its arms and claw hands. I told it to go away, very quietly. I looked at it, waiting and waiting. It was trying to tell me something, that horrible thing was trying to talk. Screams knived at my throat trying to get out but I couldn't scream. I couldn't move, I just told it to go away, go away. Finally it did, but how could I know where it went? Maybe it was going to come back, how did I know?

Sweat oozed out of my skin, crawling over me like a wet sickness. The dogs were howling and the storm started, with those black sheets of rain. I just stood there in the beating thunder and lightning. The electricity went off, and it was the darkest dark it could be, I was blind in that black. My heart was pounding at me to move, to get out of there, but I couldn't. The lake came to me through the flashes of lightning, coming and going. I couldn't do anything, I was afraid to shatter that darkness. I couldn't break through, my mind was holding me tense, I couldn't move. What could I do, how could I sleep? Finally my legs took me into the bedroom and I lay down, burning. There was a window in there too, and I knew that dead thing would peer in at me. I wouldn't even see it, it might just stand there, watching me. I knew I'd never sleep, and I just tossed and turned on that lumpy, hot bed.

I don't know what happened, maybe it was the storm or my own heat that did it. This electricity just seemed to come in all around me. It surrounded me, but it was coming out of me too. This electrical field giving me power, energy. I couldn't understand it at

first, not for a long time. But then I knew why it came, what I had to do. It just came to me.

I raised up and left the squirming body. Kept the eyes closed. I left it behind and went outside. My bare feet crushed the rocks and made a path. I knew where to go. My legs and arms pushed through the bushes and thorns and the wire fence. No scratches, no pain could hold me back. I had power to use, such power, I walked with it. The electricity cut the cobwebs, nothing could stop me. I found the window and climbed into the darkness. I smelled the fear, I heard the silent screams in that cell. My fingertips sizzled as they clenched the throat with that power. I brought it back, clean, electricity is clean. I could carry it easily with the power. I did what was necessary, I knew what to do, I found what I needed. Then I went back to the tossing body, and calmed it. I slept. The next morning I got up early. I took the sheets down to the lake and washed off the blood stains. I had a swim, all by myself. The water was numbing, freezing clean. I floated free and looked down into the lake. I could see very far. It was beautiful again, pure and sparkling clean. I could dance in that water. The children called and called to me from the verandah. I knew I had to come out, I waited as long as I could.

I covered up in my old jeans and a soft polo-neck sweater, warm and cozy. We had some breakfast and the children went down to the beach. They noticed the downstairs window and told me. I told them to go play, never mind about the window. Walk down the other side of the house and don't look at it, I said.

I knew I had to go downstairs, into the basement. The pump for the water was there, and I knew I had to check the water, make sure it was clean. I lifted up the door in the floor and climbed down the stairs with a flashlight. I needed a flashlight because I knew the window was dark. The black cloth was hanging in front of the window. I stabbed the light into it and watched the face, that dead face under the rope. It was better dead. Anything that old had no right to live. It would only show what it's like to be so old, and who wants to see that? The rope held the head down. I turned it so the fish eyes could look out and down at the lake. The water was clean, pure again.

The children came back with two of the nuns. They must have told them about the window. They were very scared. They went down on their knees and started praying right away. They tried to touch me but I kept away from them. They left and came back later with the police. One of them spoke some English and kept saying, I'm so sorry, madam, how terrible for you. He wanted to comfort me. They took me upstairs and made me drink hot milk with honey in it, can you imagine?

Then Dave came, and there was another big commotion. He spoke French to the sisters and held me. He said it was alright, this nun had been very depressed. She was senile, she even wet her bed she was so old. And they couldn't understand why she did such a thing, killing herself that way. Her mind must have gone. They all felt very bad about it. One nun asked if I'd seen the dead sister the night before, early in the evening. She said she was coming over to use the telephone. Theirs was out of order and they were expecting a call. I told her it had been ringing all afternoon, why didn't she answer it?

The policeman said maybe she came over and hung herself in our basement because she knew what a shame it would be if she did it in her cell. Suicide was a terrible thing, a sin. The other sisters said they hadn't seen her, they thought she was in her cell praying. They didn't like to interrupt her, maybe she left then, who knows? I said perhaps she wanted to see the lake when she died, maybe that's why she came to our place.

After all the fuss was over, Dave took me and the children to a hotel. He didn't want us to stay there another night, not after that. I didn't care. I missed the lake but I knew it was alright. I had to leave sometime, but it was sad. It was too bad we had to go then, just when it was beautiful again. After the storm the water was quiet and peaceful, at its best.

That night in bed I told him it was okay, the cuts didn't hurt. They were clean. I'd washed them in the lake.