

Audrey Thomas /

GRAVEN IMAGES: A Memoir

I am probably the only person in Canada who can look at a package of Knox gelatine and think of Romance. Perhaps the housewife who ponders the glossy illustrations of the desserts she can make if she will only send for her free Knox "Make It Happen Recipe Book" — strawberry swirl, chocolate mousse, orange-vegetable mould and so on — is just as much a Romantic as I am but I doubt if the word "Knox," all by itself, can conjure up her entire childhood the way it can for me. I will tell you how it came about and how *I* came to be thinking about all this now, two days before Christmas, on a small island off the B.C. coast.

I had decided to make a batch of yoghurt, and while I was checking directions on the new package of culture I had bought at the health food store in Victoria, I noticed for the first time the suggestion that if one added a tablespoon of gelatine, softened in a little water, to each litre of milk before it was heated, one would end up with a thicker product. My yoghurt has never been very thick and so this seemed like a good idea. I went down to the store by the Government Wharf and asked if they had any gelatine. Indeed they did, and I was handed an orange package with the word KNOX in large black letters printed across the top and underneath, in very small black letters, "Thomas J. Lipton Limited, Toronto, Ontario." As I walked back up the path to the cabin the ocean dropped away, the sea gulls, the barge hauling a load of sawdust towards Porlier Pass, the arbutus trees with their bright red winter berries, the pines, everything connected with Here, and Now, this place and this time, and I was in a small green rowing boat with my older sister, leaning dangerously over the side and staring down into deep water about fifty yards from shore.

"Do you see them?" she is saying. "Do you see the bones?"

The year was, I suppose, 1945 or '46, and we were on our annual visit to my grandfather's summer place, or "camp" as he called it, in the Adirondack Mountains of New York State. We were old enough now to take out the rowboat, our very own boat called "The Pin Up Girl," along the lake, provided we stayed reasonably close to shore and remembered not to stand up if we wanted to change places. We were not yet allowed the freedom and responsibility of a motor. That came later, when, in our daring two-piece Jantzens, we zoomed across the lake to the Public Campsite and in imitation of the Bright Girls of the *Saturday Evening Post* stories, tried out a bit of snappy dialogue on the college boy lifeguard. For now we were content with simpler pleasures: picking endless saucepans full of blueberries, hiding from each other in the burnt-out tree stumps of the forest just beyond the cottage, solemnly raising the flag each morning, taking it down at sunset, folding it according to the prescribed manner, following our beloved grandpa around as he stuck lighted cigars in wasps' nests under the eaves (allowing us each one lung-searing puff before he stuck them in), walking barefoot along the sandy road, bordered in milkweed and Black-eyed Susans, out to the highway for the mail. If we had been gone too long, or what seemed like too long (our mother was an awful worrier) on the lake or along the beach or in the woods we would hear the faint but commanding clang of an old brass bell which hung on the front porch. This bell also called everyone to lunch and dinner and could be heard at a great distance.

It was an idyllic existence in many ways, and when I was seventeen and away at University and heard that my grandfather, then about eighty-five, had decided to sell the place, I could not believe it. It was like selling a part of my soul. My parents had no money; my uncle in Massachusetts wasn't interested; my grandfather's place, "My" place, would go to strangers: "Lock, stock and barrel" said my mother's bitter voice over the telephone. I cried secretly for days. I think I cried the way I have never cried since. I was right to mourn: my childhood had just come to a sudden and arbitrary end. My grandfather never really recovered from this sale. He lived on until 1964 but his heart wasn't in it. We went to see him, in town (we lived in the same town then) but he seemed dazed, almost shell-shocked, and began to "fail" very quickly. After he died I received a share in his house and when that was sold I took the money and

bought this place on Galiano Island. He would have liked that. He had seen the Pacific once, and wrote me a letter about it, from the famous Empress Hotel in Victoria. "A dandy hotel," he thought, and sent us both his love. (I have the letter still, in his wonderful copper-plate handwriting. "I hope you are behaving yourselves and not giving your ma and pa too much trouble.")

I think those summers in the mountains, at "Grandpa's Woods," as we used to call it, were some of the happiest days of my life. We led a rather sad existence in the wintertime, for my parents did not get on (the problem seemed to be divided equally between relatives and money) and we were confused and often frightened by the constant quarrels and threats, and also by the fact that we were always in debt. I shall never forget the voice of my mother on the phone to my grandfather, or my father on the phone to his sister who taught up-state, asking for a small loan to "tide us over" (my mother) or "bail us out" (my dad). Because of this imagery I often felt that we lived in a leaky houseboat — not a proper house — which was in imminent danger of sinking. Then we would be bailed out or tided over, the bill collectors would have a little "on account" and the milk van would appear again, the telephone would be reconnected. But at my grandfather's place there was always plenty — or so it seemed to me. Things went along smoothly and looking back it would appear that there wasn't a day which didn't bring a new adventure or a happy time. It was a very isolated existence, just the cottage, on a rise, the beach below and ten acres of forest around, but we didn't see that for a long time; it didn't bother us for years. There was a large sign on the beach at the edge of my grandfather's property: TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED. This confused me when I was very small, as we had learned in church that we were supposed to forgive our trespassers. None came; the sign meant business. I wanted some trespassers to forgive. But my grandfather was closer to me than God. I never really doubted that he knew what he was doing.

At first there was no running water, only a red pump with a long handle half-way down the path to the lake, a pump which had to be primed with a tin mug of water, sometimes two or three, dipped out of a tin bucket. But that didn't matter; that, at my grandfather's, was fun. And at first there was no electricity, only beautiful old lamps which were filled each day by my mother or the housekeeper and whose tall, delicate chimneys could be washed and polished by a small hand if that hand was very very careful. And there was a green-painted outhouse with a crescent moon window. Because there was a War on and my grandfather was a practical joker, a sign was nailed to it that we usually saw at the Esso or Texaco station: "Is this trip necessary?" And at one point toilet paper stamped with the faces of Hitler, Hirohito and Mussolini and the legend: "Wipe Out the Axis."

"Really, Dad," said my mother, who didn't like anything crude.

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What has all this to do with Knox gelatine?

Down the lake, on the east side, past an iron deer which had been placed at the edge of the woods by some unknown eccentric and at which hunters took pot shots in autumn, past two or three cottages nestled in the trees, was the cottage owned by the Knox brothers. There must have been Knox wives and Knox children as well but I remember nothing about those lesser beings. The only people we ever heard or talked about were the brothers and they were indeed the brothers who owned Knox gelatine. They were the only famous people we knew, people who actually had their name in advertisements in such magazines as the *Ladies Home Journal* or *Women's Home Companion*. They were a "household word." I can't remember what we used Knox gelatine for in those days. Nobody in our family

liked tomato aspic and studiously avoided it at church suppers or Masonic picnics and I seem to recall that Jello, with its jewelled possibilities, had come in by then but maybe not. And nobody, winter or summer, went in for fancy desserts. In summer there was usually blueberry pie or applie pie or watermelon (apple pie with cheese, that is. My grandfather would wink at me and say, "An apple pie without the cheese is like a kiss without the squeeze" and I would run and get the block of cheddar from the old ice-box on the back porch.). In winter we had prune whip or floating island, rice pudding or a cake my father brought from the Home Dairy. Perhaps my mother drank Knox gelatine; I seem to remember that drinking it — as a means to health — was part of the promotion. A packet of Knox gelatine, in a glass of your favorite juice, would encourage health of hair and fingernails. I even seem to remember an ad with a small girl in Shirley Temple ringlets holding up a glass. Anyway, it was always there, that orange package on the kitchen shelf and the Knox's, who seemed to have a monopoly on the gelatine market in the U.S., lived **JUST DOWN THE LAKE!**

The fact that they were a Household Word would in itself have been enough to fire my imagination for I was a terrible daydreamer and thought fame must be the most wonderful thing there was. The fact that gelatine was made from dead horses (my sister provided me with this bit of reasonably accurate information, she had also told me once that marmalade was made from goldfish) didn't deter me for long. Because the Knox brothers, as well as being famous throughout the land for their gelatine, were locally famous — or infamous — for their airplane. They had an airplane of their own! (I wonder now why they were flying it during the war — perhaps the war was over when they began to fly). On Friday evenings all of us were seated around the long oilcloth-covered table, my grandfather at the head, next to him on one side the current housekeeper, then the hired man, then next to him my father who had usually just come in from fishing for brook trout at a nearby mountain; on the other side my mother,

my sister, myself. Sometimes, but rarely, an occasional visitor to my grandfather's left. On Friday evening, the air beginning to cool, finally, after the heat of another glorious day, we would be eating fried chicken or chewing away at corn on the cob when we heard a faint sound, almost like distant thunder way away in the sky. Faint at first, then louder and louder and louder — the Knox brothers flying in from Johnstown for the weekend. When I was very small I think I got them confused in my infant mind with the Wright brothers and thought that the men who were now directly above our heads, now skimming the blue waters of the lake, now landing in a fine show of spray, had actually invented the thing they flew, not just the more mundane substance that no good housewife, for whatever obscure reason, would ever be without. Their plane was a bright crayon yellow, a modern chariot of the sun. There were bold black letters along one wing. How could a plane land on water I demanded the first time. How *could* it? It had pontoons, said my grandfather, and that became one of my first magical words, not knowing why, not looking it up until years later, just liking the sound, "pontoon."

"One of these days they're going to come through the god-damned roof," said my father, flinching, a corn cob half-way to his mouth. Although my grandfather frowned, because he himself never swore, at least not publicly, and my mother glared at my father for incurring my grandfather's displeasure, it was a well-known fact that my grandfather had indeed "spoken" to the Knox brothers about the dangerous manner of their descent to the lake. He had spoken to them and they had apologized, apparently, and yet there they were again, practically on top of us, barely missing the flagpole and upsetting the calm of a Friday evening! That my grandfather should "speak" to someone and they not immediately submit seemed both thrilling and awful. One felt the tension of an impending showdown.

They would not get their mouths washed out with tar soap, my punishment for having said I knew what “fuck” meant — I didn’t know — at the dinner table one evening when everyone was ignoring me. Not tar soap but the equivalent of tar soap. The Knox brothers would be stopped in some way and maybe even have their plane taken away from them. I imagined my sister and myself playing at the controls. I wanted to touch its yellow surfaces, to touch especially its wings and the wonderful pontoons.

In fact, nothing happened or nothing I can recall. They and their plane remained throughout my childhood as a symbol of wealth, fame and, maybe *because* nothing happened, the power that these things could bring. When we were older we sometimes used to go skinny-dipping off a float that my grandfather and the hired man had fixed to two concrete-filled drums out where the water was deep. Our end of the lake, ideal for very young children because of its shallowness, was not so thrilling for older kids. We would imagine the Knox brothers coming up from Johnstown early some Friday afternoon.

They said that you could see EVERYTHING from a plane, that you could see straight down into the water, as clear as through a window pane. Hanging onto the float, our new slim legs stretched out behind us tadpole-like, we indulged in yet another fantasy, what if one of us was floating on her back!

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My yoghurt set beautifully and I clipped out the form which I was to send to Toronto for my free Kitchen Magic booklet. I wanted only the address; I wanted to find out from Thomas J. Lipton, a very grand Household Word himself, whatever happened to the Knox brothers. Where did they go? I wanted to say, what have you done with them?

Meanwhile we drift forever in our green boat, my sister and I. My beloved grandfather is not dead, nor my much-maligned father: I can feel the sun on the back of my neck as I lean dangerously over the side.

"Do you see them?" she says. "Do you see any horses?"

I have to admit, perhaps with a certain relief, that I do not. It is a bit scary to be so far down the lake, so near to the mythical home of those mythical creatures. I am relieved when I hear, from the front porch of the cottage, my mother ringing the bell. Clang Clang Clang. Far away but very clear on the still summer air. I have not yet read John Donne; to me it is the sound of safety and wisdom, the sound, at this moment, of security.

With one impressive swing my sister turns the boat around and we head home.