

Chapter ~ Twenty-Six

I lived in that small valley for some days, and a profusion of life played around me. Until one day, wandering far into the south, seeking the source of the tiny creek, I found myself growing restless. As I walked I questioned if I had left a settled, if destructive, life just to come here and then finally drop, my bones quietly mouldering into the soft moss. I remember being suddenly still in the middle of the pool with a hard-won root in my hand, and the water dripped from the muddy root onto the water's surface. The drips made tiny ripples that were quickly lost in the immensity of the small lake. I watched the ants who lived in the large mound near my house, and pondered on their industry. Surely they must know—by rumour if not by experience—that winter was coming and with it blowing snow and ice from which no hole can protect.

I looked out my door one sunny morning at frigid grass sparkling like diamonds with the frost. That afternoon a lingering vee of geese flew over as I wandered far from my hut. I looked into the sky for a long time and then mounted a hill far from my daily jaunts. Upon that hill were the remains of several houses. A plough stood as if it were still hooked up to chain-ganged horses. Although the handles and traces were rotted away, it was buried in the forest debris as if ready to rip the soil again. The first house appeared as a pit, its vague outline framing a one-foot spruce. It must have been gone some eighty years. All of the houses were blank holes and when I peered into the dusty depths of a stone-ringed well, it was shallow, empty, and choked with weeds.

A people had come here, their wagons heavy with hope, and had made this small village in the wilderness. Like the giant ruins, their imprint was scarcely to be discerned or understood now the years had spun past, and the weed and trees had returned. When I knew the location of the houses, or, more accurately, their plant-softened outlines, I saw the

walk down the main street, where each settler would have nodded to each as they went to house or field. I had access to the memory of the hoary oak trees lining this ancient walk, so I could see the petty jealousies, towering rages, resolute handshakes, stolen kisses, and promises that still whispered behind the bushes and slammed doors in that forlorn glade. I sat on the low stone wall that at one time housed the well and watched the ancient village come to life: that lifting branch a beckoning, that bush a stolid parishioner, the towering pine the neighbour's stout son who, in one heave, lifted the log off his brother, the waving maple the daughter who stood in her window and called alive the evening air, and the playful leaves children running with a stick after a barrel hoop. I heard the children's high laughter in the late afternoon sun and was surprised when with the breeze it ceased and was replaced by a solemn procession that gathered strength as it passed the houses. When I followed it to the graveyard under the curve of the hill, I saw how the mirth had stopped and how when they arrived, by mute assent they had turned to their separate homes and packed their trunks again. I saw new wedding dresses, shining axes, clanging pots and pans, children's wooden toys, rough flannel, barrels of meal, sacks of potatoes, and then finally the children too, their laughing faces poignant with sudden surprise. The wagons bumped on the rough road to the river and they had seen their parents' set faces drawn in the gloom of early evening.

The ancient slate stones told the tale well enough. Carved with lambs and angels, these leaning stones marked where children and their parents were buried, when some dread disease had washed them from the world. How terrible and pathetic, how we try to parley with death and signify by the use of stone our remembrance. Egyptian kings and queens had built their tombs and temples and pickled their organs and now their desiccated corpses frighten children in museums. The mammoth piles of hammered stone Thoreau so lamented are still there, and like Ozymandias, call out in

the dry desert waste, the kings and queens are gone. For a moment I stood in Shelley's desert and saw the futility of piled stone.

Walking along the road they had taken, whose outline was traced in younger trees that grew in a straight line down the hill, I thought upon what a human may leave behind. I saw again the world I left, the man on the corner with his tattered cardboard sign asking for food or work, my neighbour who had taken a child from the park, the howl of teenage boys out of windows. This was all pavement trash washed into the gutter and through tortured serpentine tunnels to the sea. The broad ocean rose daily and the tide crept ever closer to old coral and lime houses on far-flung islands whose voices of protest were faint by distance, and a duck struggled in water soaked in oil on a northern beach. A murky wind blew out to sea from a city on the coast; The last bear, moose, deer, salmon, dolphin, were trapped, their multitudinous bodies tangled in the deep sea nets left to drift or torn by the coiled wire and chain link fence that wraps our world. When I glanced around me again there was rippling water between the trees; I was near the wide river, and along it would be human habitation.

My quiet valley was as if I had never left, but my neighbour came close by that night and cropped the grass around my hut as I gathered my possessions in the light of my fire. I crushed the tins in order to carry them out to where they could be melted into more tins to house the plastic food and packed them with my blackened cooking pot and axe in the bottom of my pack. I was up late and when I slept it was not soundly, for there was a murmuring in the trees and from downstream I heard the steady pace of patient walking, while a hand that fed the fire waited on the cliff.

I woke early, packed in the grey predawn, and the stiff grass and yellowing leaves were still in the soundless glade. My pack was much lighter than when I arrived, for I carried little food now that I could find it in the wild. My twine,

rescued from the hut's frame, was in pieces, and some of it was useless. I left those pieces to compost in a pile of peelings and dirt, the sole sign—other than the gathered sticks of my dwelling and the blackened rock of my hearth—that I had lived there for days I could not count. I left the fossil fern in front of my hearth, for I had traced its cryptic sign so many nights that my body would remember. Even years later, I would stand, deep in memory, watching my hand map out that evocative shape. Walking slowly around the shallow pond, I bid the glade farewell. I tried to tell myself I would one day return, but the only way here was the path upon which I had come, and I now think that the serendipitous happenstance which led me there closed behind me like a forest trail.

The long hike to the lost village, as I had come to call it, was punctuated by the traces of my wandering mind. I had been living for many weeks, how many I could not count, deep in the woods until forest enveloped me and I had spent my small day as a frog in the stream. Like Glooscap's frog, I knew of the passing current, but nothing of the debris on the creek that signified the coming storm. With my eyes barely above the surface of the water, I saw only its murky depths. Like Vonnegut's canary in a coalmine, the frog in the stream is the most sensitive to the toxins its skin absorbs, and they limp along the shore offering this visceral warning. Could the frog be the first to call the alarm, or merely the first to fade away, missed only by the darting crane's appetite and the raccoon's germ-conscious hands?

When in the gloom of late evening I arrived at the lost village, I barely recognized its sunken basements for the ancient foundations of houses. I stumbled around until I sank down with my back against the low, stone wall marking the well. The village was alive with the murmuring of wind in the trees. A breeze blew southward to the river. Small animals scurried in the dusk, where they hid from basement to basement until they achieved their miniature goals. I ate the green sweet clover I had picked on the way

and sat there in the dark, the last member of that remote community, having come to the dry well for a final drink. The clattering shutters and flapping blankets on the line, the pails of water and barrows of dung, the laughter and the curses, were hopelessly distant. I watched them as I might the procession of characters across my mind when reading forgotten records in dusty archives. From miles away I saw cows in a field, and sheep crop the grass amidst the stones. I heard a tiny figure shout and the answer, but could not make out the words, and even as I looked at this miniature scene, the dusty page was turned and the ancient binding cracked as the book was closed and placed upon an unmarked shelf. I wrapped my head in my blanket and sank into the night.

The next morning it took me a moment to orient myself to the trail leading to the river. From the stone wall that indicated the well I went south through the graveyard, where I found an apple to eat on my way down the long hill. The trees grew taller, and the pines and spruce were replaced by the beech and basswood. I picked chickweed and clover as I passed and startled those attentive animals who only watch the shore of the river. They didn't think a human could also come from behind them, for that country is empty and inhospitable.

When I arrived at its side in the late evening, the river was broader than I remembered, and even as I cast my pack on its wide sandy bank, I saw the trash that signified my kind. There were bottles like mine, which I had rescued from the creek long ago, as well as plastic toys and shoes. They were tangled in the driftwood, which I used to build a wall to shelter my fire. My fire lit a tiny hole in the flowing black of the river and its tremulous flicker reached out over the water seeking reflection in that immensity and finding only pieces of itself. In the coals I roasted cattail root, found by the water's edge, and then ate the pulpy mass, while the river streamed past carrying sticks and once, even an entire tree.

When I woke in the cool valley bottom, the sun was just above the horizon and my view extended for many miles. I first looked back at the trail to the lost village, but even as I fancied I saw signs of a path between the trees, it disappeared. Standing on a broad bend in the river, I looked across its rippled current at a road that curved over the hills and across swamps and backwaters in its blatant disregard for logic, attending only to its own internal need to stay near the river. Even as I watched, a minuscule vehicle crawled up one hill and down another as it went downstream. The hills shut in the view upstream, but I had already decided, by watching the current the night before, to follow the river to the sea. I felt a sudden desire to see gulls hanging in the air and to hear, upon the grating stones, the sweep of the deep ocean swell.

I had once built a raft in order to cross a lake, and although that experiment had gone somewhat awry—for a light breeze had an unexpected result of continually pushing me back to the shore from which I came—I planned to do the same again. The current would take me where it wished. I spent the entire morning finding and then floating together two large logs, some thirty feet in length. I chopped away their brush tips but left the roots, for the roots porous nature, combined with the amount of work needed to sever them, was not worth the buoyancy I would lose. I saw other logs I could use as crosspieces when I sought out the two main logs of my catamaran—as I took to calling it—so I pulled them together. I gathered food and cooked while I awaited the night. My meals were getting monotonous, for my anticipation of the river voyage had ruined my ability to concentrate on food gathering. I supplemented cattail roots with the ubiquitous wild onion that grew in the gravel bank.

While my dinner boiled, I watched the effect of the current upon sticks that came to a low headland. They would thrash onto its upstream side to be turned and drift again or stick there until a spring freshet should loosen them. As I ate I thought of this next stage of my journey. I guessed that I

was going back, but I didn't know what I was going back to, or in what incarnation. I was not dressed as others might expect, but that scarcely mattered. My mind was suddenly peopled with a great crowd of dissenting multitudes who waved their banknotes and cheques in the air, and punctuated their exclamations with gestures towards their sleeping children and the large house upon the hill. I saw anxious fights as they contrived to pay their bills, saw the conniving at the office as they manipulated themselves an extra week of vacation, saw how they cursed the hours driving to the office, their coffee spilling in traffic and that red light under which they barely slid. The more I understood the path their choices had led them to, the fainter their images got, until finally I dismissed them with a sudden sweep of my hand. When I looked again a few were left and I shouted, but they came closer and I realized they were friends I thought were far away. They stood on the darkening shore and prompted me with their cautious voices, and I listened to their arguments until I fell asleep.

The river had risen slightly in the night. I was unaccustomed to fluctuation on this scale, but luckily had tied my logs to a root on the eroding bank, beside which their ends bobbed lightly in the water. The water had risen about my encampment, but my fire was high on the sand and my blankets had escaped the slow creep of dampness through the bank. Even before I ate, I pulled the two logs around in front of my shoal. Tying them to the largest piece in my stacked windscreen, I positioned the crosspieces that would make up the major part of my catamaran's frame. Floating gently in the back of my mind was the raft of Huckleberry Finn, and although I could not emulate Twain's sawn planks, I could make a platform upon which to travel and sleep. It must be low enough to not attract unwanted attention, for at times the river was aprowl with suspicious eyes. When I had the pieces in place and ready to tie, I was suddenly weak. I had eaten little the last few days and knew

the speed of my travel mattered not at all if I arrived at my arbitrary destination a sack of bones.

I wrested some food from the bank, and even found some small sour apples on a tree that must have grown from a discarded core, it was so isolated. I packed the apples and ate more gruel made from cattail root. I finished my meal with the inner stem of fireweed, which grew abundantly here in the open sun and which I had forgotten until I saw its distinctive pink blossoms waving above the other streamside plants. After I rested, I strapped the crosspieces onto my raft using more twine than I thought it would take. To make up the remainder, I untied my pack and let its sticks wash downstream with the current. Hopefully, this amount of twine was sufficient, for I had provided for emergencies by wrapping more cord than I needed onto my pack frame. Between the pack frame twine and the rest of my fishing line, I was able to supplement my meagre supply without cutting into my emergency fund, for as a last resort I could unknot my macramé belt and hold up my pants with a single piece of rope. The cord sufficed and gave me a solid frame upon which I piled the flooring of my raft.

The logs that made up the buoyant portion of my raft were for the most part submerged, and so it did not matter that they were thirty or so feet long. The visible portion of the raft was a mere twelve by six foot platform, made from poles and short logs placed beside each other in a lattice work over the main supporting logs, and from the distance it would look like a bundle of drifting trash to prying eyes. I placed a large flat stone on dirt I'd piled on the platform for building a fire, and banked the eager blaze with more earth. A fire could not get away from me on the river, but I didn't want it to eat up my raft while I slept, if I ever slept with the fire burning.

Night was fast coming upon me when I finished the raft, and I went up the bank to find a stout branch that had broken while still green. I was looking for a piece about six feet long and forked at one end, so I could extend fabric between

the forks in order to make a paddle. What I found was much better. An old barn door lay in the eddy near a cove and I ran to it—as if a sudden current would arise and take it from me—and brought it onto shore. It was a feed door, which is to say it was some twelve feet long and about two feet wide. One side had hinges, and on the boards I could see writing. I leaned in close in the fading light and saw words, suddenly realizing while I read them that this was the first text I had read in weeks, for my drinking bottle had lost its flimsy paper cover and my tins were likewise without labels. Scrawled in a loose wandering script were names, and as the light dwindled into obscurity I read Blackie, May and Fred. What will archaeologists wonder, having come upon such a message? If this door were all that was left of our culture—though, considering the ubiquitous nature of riverside trash, I found this doubtful—what would an interpreting mind think?

As I carried the find back to my raft, I thought the names were undoubtedly the names of cows a gentle farmer had applied to the boards above their heads to celebrate their presence rather than supplement his memory. His respect for the other animals with whom he shared the earth made him rise early and feed the cows before he ate. He could not tolerate the thought of enjoying a meal while another was both hungry and dependent on him for food. His fat cattle would slowly wind their way to the rich pasture, led and followed by a fat passive dog who would sleep with them if it was cold or lie panting in the shade under the barn in the heat. The farmer would pump their water by hand, and when the last cow had drunk, lift the pail to his lips to drink the rest, unworried about germs and feeling an unusual kinship.

When I returned to the raft, I used my axe to pry the crosspieces from the two boards that were the door. I laid one where the platform was weakest, with its names upward, and then took my axe to the other until I made a passable paddle. When I finished, I lay back upon its unsteady platform to look at the first stars. I pondered whether to take

to the river and sleep upon my raft or stay another night. I trusted my knots wouldn't loosen and pitch me overboard while I slept. I listened to the distant whine of cars as they geared to make the hill. I was fairly confident my raft was sound, but my first test should not be while I slept, and that fear, combined with my uncertainty about what lay downstream, kept me on the shore. For the first time since I had matches, I built a high fire that reflected far over the water and brought large fish up from the depths. Moths threw themselves into the blaze as they confused that wavering light with the moon they used for migratory navigation, and for the first time in weeks, mosquitoes buzzed around me.

I couldn't sleep at first and sat there in the dusk until it occurred to me my paddle could be fashioned with more grace. I whittled a long handle and blade from the roughly hewn wood with my knife until both were reasonably smooth. Then I searched in the dark until a familiar clinking sound by my foot indicated a bottle amongst the litter. I positioned the bottle in a groove in the sand, and as my hand lifted the rock to strike, it remembered a similar motion. I saw before me that first night on the edge of the road, where I triumphantly broke a Sprite bottle into a crude knife. How far away that night seemed. My road was at this moment a river, and I was clothed and equipped with good tools. In the gloom before the fire, I methodically scraped the bottle glass down the paddle's length, until it felt smooth to the skin and I was tired. I lay in front of the fire on the sand and watched the leopard frogs jumping around me, their bulbous eyes having spied the fire. Upon their approach, they found out its scorching nature, and jumped away. They hopped about in the bush and as I drifted off they watched me, anxiously wishing me well on this next leg of the journey.

I was in a house. Although it looked strangely askew it was a house I knew. Even as I searched through its rooms frantically for something important, the scene changed and I was near my hut on the beaver pond, pawing aside the brush

in my anxiety, then my abandoned farmhouse, constantly looking, until I ended along a small, stream-fed lake and in my hut of stacked poplars. While I dug in the earthen floor of my tiny hut—which was packed so hard and brown when I left, it would never have occurred to me to disturb the hardened soil—I was getting near the source. I woke, and felt sweat on my body under the blanket even though it was cold and damp in the river bottom. It was late morning, and I lay until the sun warmed my nest. I didn't know what I had been looking for in my dream. In the early days of my occupation, I had pulled up grass from my dirt floor and placed it on the fire, since the grass had died from lack of light and water. Later still, I started small fires in my hut, perhaps unwisely, in order to burn the grass away so the floor would be clear. I was concerned because I had almost lost my needle in the thick weeds near the fire. With that memory, I got to my feet to start my first day on the river.

The sky was opening up to a brilliant blue once the mists of morning burned away, and although I could hear the faint thrum of cars and see their lights, they seemed remote, like satellites or shooting stars. I placed my pillowcases full of belongings in the middle of the platform and pushed off from shore with a long pole I had grabbed at the last minute. When I was out in the middle, the raft slowly swung sideways and a deep current pulled me downstream to where the breeze played upon the rippled surface.