

THE SUMMERHOUSE perched on the side of the hill on the little island in the lake. It was an old log barn and it had stood there since 1913 when it was moved over from the mainland. Local carpenters worked all summer converting it into a summerhouse for the family of a wealthy attorney. They added a second floor and a glazed porch and built four bedrooms. A couple of carefree summers, a civil war, a world war and a twenty-year stretch of peace later, it had settled into its surroundings so perfectly it was hard to see from the lake.

Every spring, servants came to set up the summerhouse for the season, and every fall servants were the last to leave after preparing it for the winter. By then the owners had already returned to the city with their memories of summer. The house huddled up, shutters on windows, everything locked and secured for the rule of snow. Only the crows kept it company during the fleeting winter days when the sun appeared over the southern horizon for a few pale hours.

Fortunes rose and fell, summer months turned into years and decades and the attorney's family sold the island. The new owners enjoyed it for forty years, spending every free moment there, raising four children into adulthood and then sitting out on the cliffs at the western end to see the sun kiss the forest in the northwest and fade for a few hours.

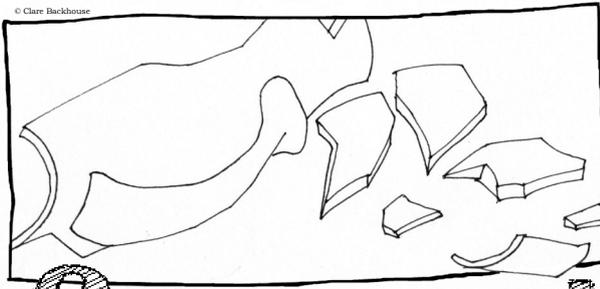
But now it was November; the lake had a crystal clear frozen cover and the ground sparkled with tiny diamonds of ice. It had been two months since the last family members visited the island, bolting up the place, stowing away garden chairs and hammocks and turning boats over. The house knew well the routine by now and it even looked patient as it bided its time.

On one particular evening, the local crows had gathered in one of the large pines by the summerhouse. Twenty strong, the assembly of birds settled its internal pecking order issues, cawed and fluttered about, acted as crows do.

An old man appeared at the foot of the porch stairs. The crows ceased their cawing and cocked their heads to see better. Then one of them lost its nerve and the whole flock took off any which way in stark fear, a ball of black wings dissolving into single fleeing birds.

The old man was the owner of the island. Only two weeks ago he'd been doing his daily tottering and pottering as was his custom. An aneurysm fell on his life like a butcher's cleaver and nothing remained the same.

Seeing his grieving widow at the crematorium nearly drove him mad. He'd watched his ashes being interred in the holy church ground of his native



The Summerhouse

town, and seen his name written in golden letters on a solemn granite slab. He'd tried to tell his family that he wasn't in that hole in the ground, but every time he stood close to one of them, they'd shudder and say, "Mom, you really need to get that radiator fixed."

He had to admit the Bible was right in one thing at least, when it referred to man's days as grass: *when the wind passeth over it, it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.* A cold wind had blown by him, and he was that wind now.

He walked to the top of the stairs and through the snow screen that kept the winter out from the porch. Inside it was dark, what with the shuttered windows and all electricity switched off, but it made no difference. He provided his own light, like that of a storm lantern, but with a wick without heat.

When he reached the living room, he noted everything was exactly where he'd instructed his oldest son to leave it. His wartime binoculars, their lenses out of whack and useful for one eye at a time only, hung in the reindeer horn as they had done for the past forty-four years. The Agatha Christies and Maigrets, read a thousand times, were neatly stacked on the corner table. His rainy day pastimes, the three-thousand-piece puzzles of classic paintings, were side by side on the top of the bookshelf, ready for easy access. He approved of all he saw; it would be nice to return in May and blow the dust of winter off the house, and turn the boats right side up, and take firewood to the sauna.

Only he was not coming back.

The thought stabbed him and killed him a second time. No, a third. The second was when he saw his wife shattered at the thought of widowhood at 87. Wait! What about seeing his two old friends at the funeral, when they realized they were the only ones left of a class of 34 vigorous young men? Or seeing all was not going to be well at the settling of the estate, among children who'd become estranged from one another?

One dies many times, he thought, settling in his wicker rocking chair in the corner of the room, facing the northwest and the summer sunset. Now there'd be no sunset; the sun had done its day and

wouldn't be near that direction until June. But as he sat there, he let his thoughts wander and recreate past days.

A hollow image of a hearty fire appeared in the fireplace, emitting the ghost of light and heat. The long rustic dinner table was set all at once for eight people, and as the old man watched seven of his family friends appeared out of nowhere and sat down, a transparent parade of lifeless visions. It was Midsummer 1969, and as the shutters melted away the remembrance of the sunlight of that evening flooded the room with its faint red hue. Sounds he remembered, the banter, the laughter, the jokes and the impromptu speeches, seemed to fill the air.

As quickly as the cavalcade had entered, it faded away and was transformed into the memory of the first grandchild's appearance on the island. The old man, as the proud grandfather, wore a phantom of a smile on his lips as memories flowed freely and became second-hand reality for a fleeting moment. The scenes followed in rapid succession, but with every new memory replayed the old man grew more restless. Was there nothing he could touch here? Was there nothing for him to take with him as he left?

His thoughts turned to a German beer stein that had a tin lid and was engraved with images of voluptuous maidens serving Löwenbräu. This had been his favorite souvenir of all; he had brought it from Munich in 1958, and for many years it held a place of honour on a little shelf of its own, high on the wall facing the setting sun. The old man yearned to hold the stein, to feel its heavy weight and the intricate figurines on it, as if to have his life back for just a moment.

Then there was nothing but the summerhouse, the dark pines, and a flock of wary crows in one of them.

The house huddled back into its long and lonely winter, and in due course, spring arrived, bringing part-time immigrants.

"Oh no! Look what the mice have done!" shouted one of the family.

"They've broken Dad's stein!"

"Dropped it from the shelf?" another answered. "I'll go set up the mousetraps. I knew I forgot something, I should have set them before the winter."

BROADSHEET STORIES

Tales to last a coffee or two



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BROADSHEET STORIES are intended to give writers the kind of audience artists can reach by hanging their work in coffee houses and local galleries.

We publish a story a month, printed on newspaper-sized sheets (hence the name) and distributed free at venues in the west of England.

If you are a writer, we are looking for contributions. Stories should be between 1,200 and 1,900 words in length. We pay a token fee of £25.00 for each one published. For more details email submissions@stiltjack.co.uk or phone Martin Cooper on 07894 340970.

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