



*As the country turns  
150, we're celebrating  
the greatest national  
pastime: going to the  
cottage, the place where  
we feel most Canadian*



## ON THE PLEASURES OF NOT CHANGING A THING

by J. B. MacKinnon



Where  
drinking  
coffee  
outside in  
your robe  
is perfectly  
acceptable

The first idea we gave up on was painting. After buying our cabin in northern B.C. (a shack, really, valued at zero dollars by tax assessors and more rustic than your average ice-fishing hut), my partner, Alisa, and I had gotten all peppy about painting it yellow. Oh, butter yellow would be lovely. With sage-green trim. Then we thought, Why bother? Everyone agreed the thing was a teardown, if it didn't fall down first. I'm not exaggerating here. Whenever we went to the cabin, we brought a tent in case we found it lying on the ground. It was not so much a cottage as a giant game of Jenga.

We turned our attention to what I grandly called "the grounds." The shack sat at the edge of a clearing, which had evolved into an enormous woven mat of tall grass and thorns and prehistoric-looking cow parsnips that filled the air with a scent like medicated foot powder. A team of us waded in with scythes, machetes, and axes. We had hardly liberated the cabin from its straightjacket of green when an angry bird rose up to let us know that we were about to destroy her hidden nest. But of course—the briar patch that threatened our home was itself a home to many a critter. The bird was serving notice that she had prior rights. We chose not to dispute her claim.

And so it has gone, all through the years. We have not, as planned and planned again, repaired the roof. Careful sketches exist of our new foundation, but the new foundation does not exist. We did not put in a well or make improvements to the perilous outhouse. We have not installed a charming gate or a deck or solar panels or a sauna or a smoker or a firepit or one of those great outdoor showers that I really love when I use them at other people's places. Even at the height of the pergola craze, we did not build a pergola. The inside of the cabin, meanwhile, looks as much like a rural crime scene as it did on the day that we bought it.

Over time, as with all things that are done year after year at a cabin, our inertia became a tradition. We are proud of the changelessness of the place—so much so that we feel competitive with other dormant cottage-keepers. Don't mistake what I'm describing for laziness. The result of our inaction is not some hillbilly life of barefooted ease, but the hard work of living in the rough. Sometimes, back home in the city, we talk about the kind of dream chalets you see in the pages of magazines like this one. Then we go back to our shack in the woods, and it whispers, Not here.

Change, we have realized, is high on the list of things we are trying to escape when we go to the cabin. The grind of so-called progress. The latest iPhone. The mania for constant renovation of our homes, our physiques, our personalities. Change has become a modern pollutant, like pulled pork, like emojis—change can be good, it can be useful, but as often as not it appears where it is not needed. Even the damned climate won't stop changing.

Every year now, we walk down the trail, chop a path to our cabin door through the season's growth of jungle, and go about doing what we always do: sinking down into the belly of timelessness. One day, we know, the shack will fall down. Maybe then we'll build something new. Or maybe we'll put up the tent.

*J.B. MacKinnon is an award-winning journalist and author living in Vancouver. His latest book is The Once and Future World: Nature As It Was, As It Is, As It Could Be.*

photo by  
**DANIEL  
EHRENWORTH**

This photo (of my cousin James, on Duncan Island, Ont.) encompasses the entire Canadian cottage experience. One of the best parts of the cottage is waking up at the cottage. It's a different kind of waking up.

# ON THE GIFTS OF NATURE

By Sasha Chapman

Nobody made maple syrup at Romany Wood when I was a child. It wasn't till I was an adult, tramping through the leafless hardwood forest one spring—perhaps to collect some of the daffodils that grow there in clumps, planted nearly a century ago by my grandmother—that I first noticed the remnants of a sugar bush operation. In among the poison ivy and the wintergreen and the half-decomposed maple leaves were two rusted-out evaporation pans and a large barrel for collecting sap. I could just make out the remains of a sugar shack.

I asked my father about it. Like any good wasp, he never shares more information than is absolutely necessary, but he'll tell you anything if you are clever enough to ask the right questions. He recalled helping out in the sugar bush as a child and the old horse that used to haul the sap barrels up the ramp to the sugar shack by sled. Predictably, there was some lingering resentment about the demise of the shack itself, which apparently had been pulled down by my father's eldest brother without the blessings of his siblings.

Some of the maples were now mossy and old, hollowed out by insects and hungry woodpeckers. Others were too slender and young to be productive. But a good number were Goldilocks-sized, just right for tapping. So we flagged 10 trees in September and drew a map to find our way back in leafless winter. That Christmas, my husband, Anton, and I tucked a sugaring-off kit beneath the tree for the kids.

Our neighbour, a chef who had offered to "patrol" the woods for hooligans when we were in the city (he is a gun enthusiast), shook his head when we surprised him in February, arriving to drill spiles into trees. "Forty to one, the odds are against you," he said. To boil a single litre of pancake topping, we would need about 40 litres of sap. And a great heaping of patience. We drilled the holes anyway and hung up our spiles and buckets with the giddy anticipation of children hanging Christmas stockings. Then we went back to the city and waited: for the snow-softening days of late winter, when the sun finally shines brighter again. For the creeks to gurgle and the sap to run.

Food for me has always been a way of knowing a landscape and connecting to it. Sugaring off would be another iteration on the same theme. Even a winter forest can reward those who know where to look for its fruits.

Nearly all the buckets were overflowing when we returned a few weeks later to collect the sap in repurposed bright blue canoe-tripping barrels. Some 80 litres on the first trip. We skied through the sunlit winter forest and took pictures of our rosy-cheeked children in their brightly coloured snowsuits as they posed winningly against a white-and-grey landscape that now seemed both familiar and strange. Familiar because I'd grown up here, spending 40 summers in the clearings by the lake. Strange because I'd spent so little time in these woods when they were blanketed in snow.

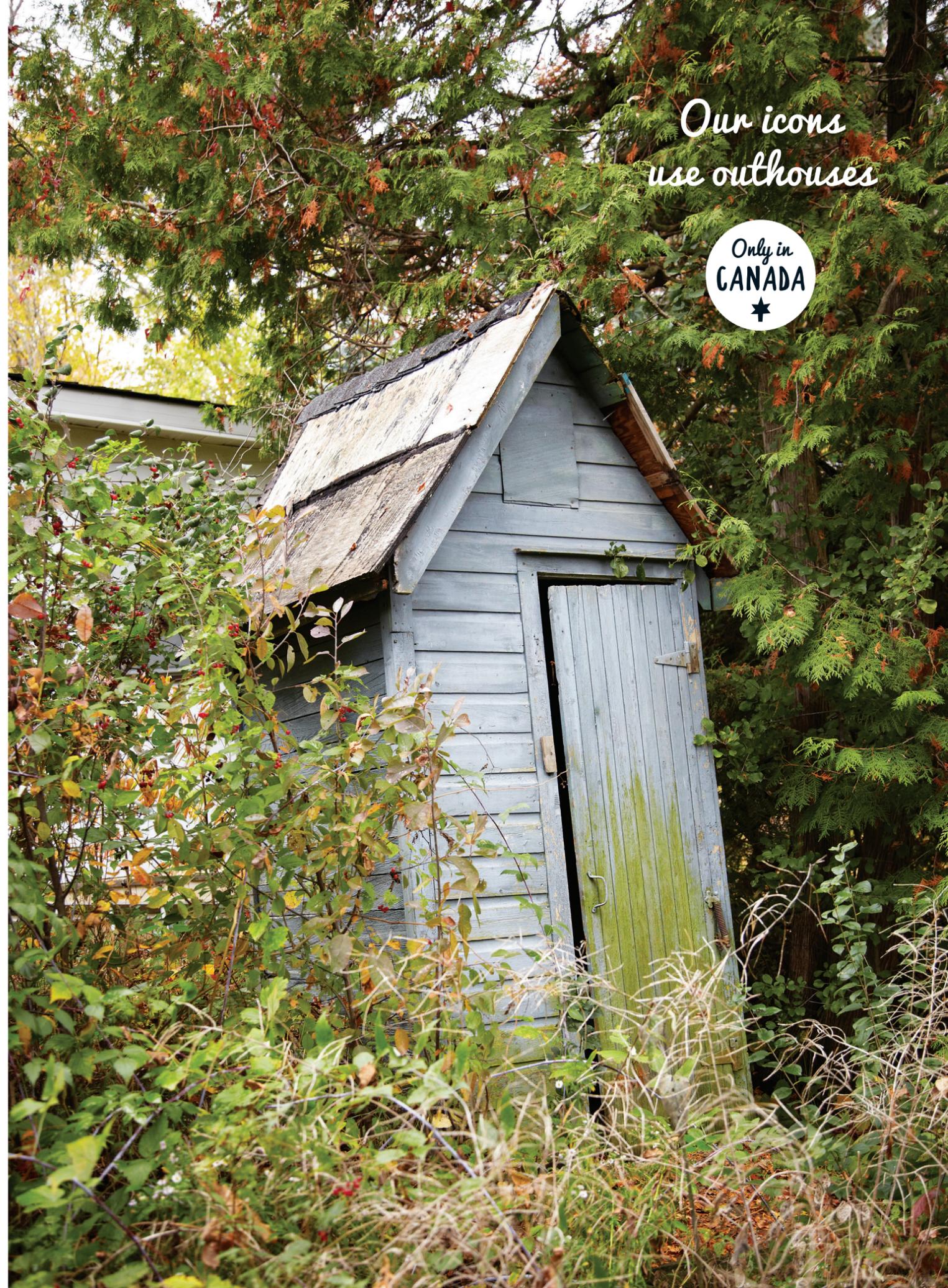
My English grandmother named the property Romany Wood because she fancied herself a gypsy and imagined one day running away with a caravan of Romanies. But her children and her children's children were anything but: we all grew up in the same Ontario landscape, on the south shore of Lake Simcoe. In a landscape that had shaped us as much as we had shaped it. A landscape that, 40 to one, could nourish us still.

*Toronto-based Sasha Chapman is a 2015-'16 Knight Science Journalism Fellow at MIT and former senior editor for The Walrus. She writes about food and environmental issues.*

photo by  
**DEREK  
SHAPTON**

Many of the distinctly Canadian cottage experiences that I've had are because of the eccentric and delightful individuals that I've met in cottage country. But shooting the Al Purdy A-frame, and the Al Purdy outhouse, on Roblin Lake, Ont., was probably the most special. He is something of a literary hero to me. And his outhouse might be the most famous outdoor toilet in Canada.

Our icons  
use outhouses





Pines grow  
from the rock

Only in  
CANADA  
★

photo by  
**PAUL  
ORENSTEIN**

I always think of Georgian Bay, Ont., as the Major League of cottaging. I don't think there are many places like it outside of Canada. This shot has a brooding quality that I like, with those clouds thickening on the horizon, and that tree presiding over everything, dark and powerful. Georgian Bay is not to be trifled with.

## ON THE EVER-PRESENT LURE OF THE LAKE

by Penny Caldwell

In the middle of the class you feel like you are going to die, or, at the least, throw up. There's a reason they call it hot yoga. It's hot, so hot. Shiny bodies drip sweat. Deep *ujjayi* breath, in and out, fills the room like an ocean roar—or a respirator. Your head is about to explode. My friend Monica says the only thing hotter than hot yoga is having a hot flash during hot yoga.

It doesn't surprise me one bit that the other name for *savasana*, the meditation at the end (thank God) of the yoga class, is corpse pose. We lie on our mats, hands at our sides, eyes closed. More surprising is that in corpse pose I think of the cottage.

Early on in my yoga practice, an instructor suggested that, during *savasana*, we think of a cool blue light entering our bodies through our feet. (At the time, this doesn't sound weird.) Blue is the colour of healing, but all I can think of is the blue glow of a science lab. Or blue light scattering through the atmosphere, leaving behind a spectacular explosion of yellow-orange in the western sky, the sun a bright ball fizzing into the Georgian Bay horizon. In *savasana*, the mind wanders, seeking peace. Seeking relaxation. Seeking relief from the heat.

Likewise, we go to the cottage to escape the crushing heat of the city. But I have also been too hot at the cottage—hauling out the heavy oak logs of a tree we felled in the mosquito-laden bush in August or stretched out in a chair on the brilliantly sunny back deck. You can hear the quiet. Or, at least, it's quiet enough that you can hear a sound long since forgotten in the city, as the trees become animated like toys in the nursery after the kids are asleep, leaves chattering in the breeze.

When you're in corpse pose, even whispering leaves are too loud. It's hot. Your head is going to explode. And in your imagination, you drop the heavy, scratchy logs and wander down the path to the water. You plunge into the dark, deep depths. Every cottager knows the feeling of cold water on hot skin, the blessed coolness as you descend, the sense of release.

Up above are brightness and the laughter of other swimmers, the sounds of a chainsaw or an outboard in the distance. Down here, you hold your breath and hear nothing except for the pulsing in your own ears. Down here, you feel your hot body cooling down. You open your eyes and float in a peaceful cocoon of green water pierced by shafts of sunlight.

"Bring your attention back to the room," the instructor says. Say what? You linger for a few seconds before kicking for the surface. "When you are ready, roll onto your side and sit up."

*Namaste.*

*Penny Caldwell is the former editor and current publisher of Cottage Life. She's a lifelong cottager and an aspiring yogi.*

# ON THE POWER OF TRADITION

by Stephen Marche

Once every summer, I climb Ha Ling Peak. The mountain looms over my mother's place in Canmore, Alta., and climbing it is a ritual. The Rocky Mountains are too harsh for anything that might be called a cabin or a cottage elsewhere in the country, and nature is not so soft there that you may bask in it. But the purifying truth of the wilderness is closer—more difficult and more intimate. You just have to walk up to it.

The path from the house to the mountain takes you past the turquoise Grassi Lakes, which are knotted against glorious limestone climbing-walls in the pass from town. I always pause at the pictograph in the pass, an icon left there by an unknown people unknown thousands of years ago: a man holding up an ochre circle. The real work of the nearly 8,000-foot climb starts soon after. The trail on the backside of the mountain is a well-maintained but steep and unforgiving series of switchbacks, followed by a few hundred metres of scramble. The air thins as the mountain rises, and with it the difficulty thickens.

For decades, Ha Ling Peak was known as Chinaman's Peak. In 1998, the name was changed, for the obvious reasons. Ha Ling Peak is a much better name, not just because it's less offensive but also because it is the name of a man with a story. In 1896, the friends of a 28-year-old Chinese-Canadian cook named Ha Ling bet him 50 bucks that he couldn't climb the mountain that now bears his name in the span of 10 hours. He did it in five and planted a flag at the top for proof. The guys who bet him didn't believe his story and couldn't see the flag, so the next day they all climbed the mountain together and found the flag right where Ha Ling had planted it. Soon, the editors of the *Medicine Hat News* heard about the feat and suggested Ha Ling Peak as the name. Nineteenth-century Canadians changed it, out of habit, to the slur. They didn't know or want to know who Ha Ling was. They knew what a Chinaman was.

Ten hours is about as long it takes me to climb the mountain. Five would be a stretch, for sure. But, the climb is worth it. The view from the top is glorious: on the north side, the town; to the south, Goat Range Provincial Park.

The scale of geologic time makes the preoccupations of daily business seem like what they are: mere busyness. The glory of the mountains is that, the more you stand in them, the less human differences in time or in culture matter. Canada is not without the crimes that have consumed the history of other nations, but the land is our redemption. They took Ha Ling's climb away from him twice, first because they couldn't believe it and second because they wouldn't call the mountain by his name. But the climb was his climb, still, and everybody knew it, and eventually they gave it back to him. The way to move forward is to do just like Ha Ling did: keep going up, and plant a flag when you get there. Anyone who can climb that mountain belongs to that mountain. I belong to Ha Ling, and he belongs to me. The name for our connection is "Canada," I suppose, but our real connection is the climb.

Nature is not there to comfort us. History is not there to fill us with pride. Both truths are obvious at Ha Ling's mountain, with the strenuousness of the hike and the tortured history of the name. But the climb gives the view from my mother's place meaning, which is why it's worth returning to again and again. Climbing the mountain changes the view from home. You know what you are looking at from down below only after you have been to the top.

*Stephen Marche writes for Esquire and The Guardian. He is the author of The Unmade Bed, about the modern dynamic between men and women, edited by his wife.*



That  
magic sparkle

Only in  
CANADA  
★

photo by  
KAMIL  
BIALOUS

This photo—from Powell Lake, B.C.—makes me remember why we go to the cottage. We go to be kids, to spend time outside and on the water, to get away—from the adult things that we have to do. The photos that to me define cottaging are those that represent visceral experiences—how does it feel to ride on a boat through the coastal ocean or to jump into a warm lake in the sun? How do you photograph the smell of a summer afternoon—really? This photo represents nostalgia. At least for me.

Bait in the fridge

Only in  
CANADA



photo by  
**EDWARD  
POND**

I'm an indoor kid, but this image reminds me that this is an outdoor nation. And if I embrace that, it's rewarding. Worms in the fridge? Sure. Odd in the city, but it totally fits the cottage. My host, on Whitestone Lake, Ont., told me to grab a beer. So I opened the door—camera in hand—to find this. It's a shot of my own surprise.

## ON THE PLACE THAT WILL ALWAYS BE HOME

by Marci McDonald

As a kid, I understood early: cottages were something other people had. Not just for a summer escape, but as a passport to belonging, firmly beyond the reach of a bookish girl from a fractured family growing up amid the orchards flanking Lake Ontario.

Later, at a girls' camp on Lake of Bays, the wilderness tattooed itself onto my psyche, but I did my best to ignore it. Even as a teenaged camper, then as a counsellor, I preferred to think of myself as a thwarted urbanite who was merely putting in time until I was allowed to hit the big city, where I would lead an impossibly romantic intellectual life. It wasn't until decades later, as a foreign correspondent in Paris, staring out the window of my first-arrondissement walk-up on a listless July afternoon, that I realized I was starved for something beyond that unrelenting cityscape.

"I think I'm homesick," I ventured to a friend.

She asked what I was missing, expecting a litany of family ties or old flames. "The rocks and trees," I found myself saying, to even my own astonishment.

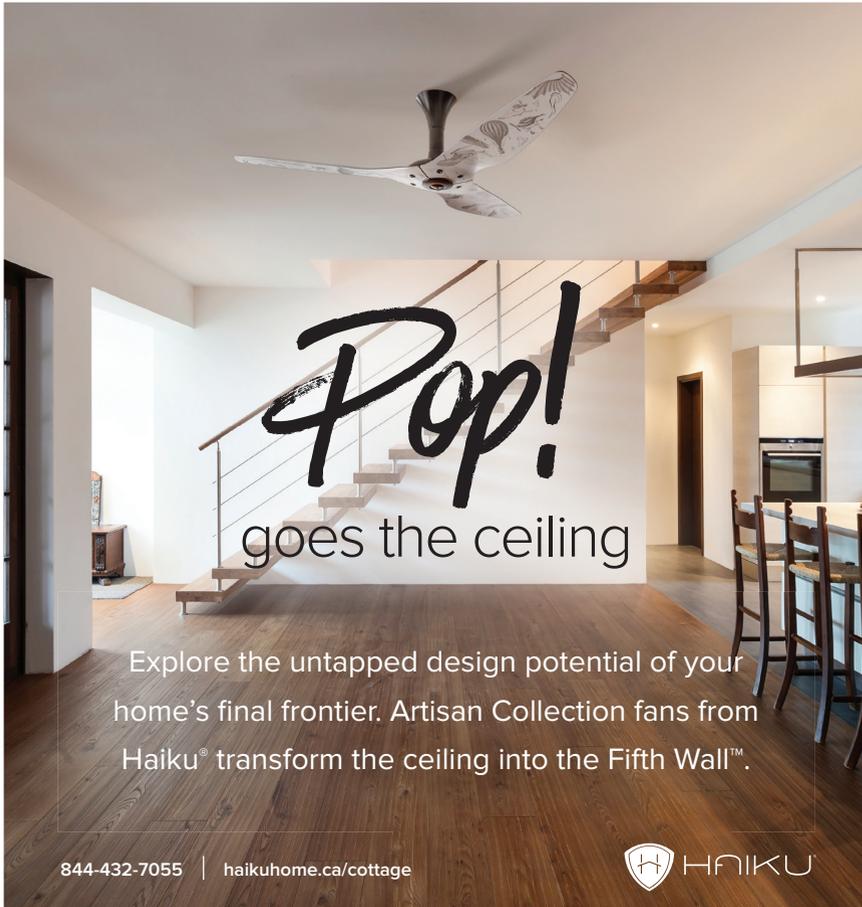
It would be years and a posting to Washington, D.C., before I got the chance to put that longing to the test. One of my closest friends asked if I wanted to co-rent a cottage with her for two weeks on Canoe Lake in Algonquin Provincial Park. I didn't hesitate. To me, it was a destination as exotic as any assignment in Jerusalem or Tehran.

The ancient green house with its swooping screened porch sat on Gilmour Island at the southern end of a lake rife with history. Barely a kilometre from our front dock, the body of the painter Tom Thomson had been found, inexplicably trussed in fishing twine. Dubbed Loon's Retreat, that cottage seemed to me the very essence of the country I'd left behind.

Its two storeys of chintz-decked bedrooms slept a dozen and, over those two weeks, became a hub for the network of family and friends I barely had time to see on visits back to Toronto. One weekend so many guests showed up that we converted the verandah's sagging Ping-Pong table into dining space for 20, the latest gossip served up with the stuffed salmon. For that and many summers to come, Loon's Retreat was one of the ties that bound me to Canada.

Years later, long after the cottage had been reclaimed by its owners, I was about to take a new job in Washington when a one-time boyfriend asked me to join him on a boat trip from the North Channel of Georgian Bay to his family's island on the southeastern shore. I said yes and instantly regretted it. I was running out of time to pack for the States, where I felt my career lay, and, besides, what was the point? Our romance had been over for years. But, as it turned out, I was wrong on both counts. Somewhere between the soaring fjords of Killarney and the veins of pink quartz swirling across his ancestral chunk of rock, I realized that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with this man.

That also meant being wedded to the place where he felt the deepest roots—an airy grey cottage that his maternal grandfather had erected in the 1930s just south of Go Home Bay—but this second capitulation was not quite as swift. Georgian Bay terrified me—its topography so stark and unforgiving, its fabled storms sweeping in on a dime, toppling lordly pines and whipping up ocean-worthy breakers that obliterated deadlines for the boat trip back to the marina. And then there were the snakes. My future husband swore nobody had seen a massasauga rattler on the island for years, a reassurance undercut by the two snakeskins that his late father had mounted by the living room door. Sometimes, strolling warily across the



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## THE PLACE THAT WILL ALWAYS BE HOME

{Continued from page 71}

mottled rock, I longed for the blithe greenery of Algonquin Park.

In the end, it was the beauty that won me over. The flare of purple from the tiny, brave wild irises that sprang from mossy puddles to greet us each May, and the sunsets, each more glorious than the last, all demanding a ritual evening toast. On the chilly fall night I looked up to see the aurora borealis performing a ghostly dance of green veils across the northern sky, I knew I was a goner.

For five years we negotiated a cross-border relationship, centred on that acreage of rock, some of the oldest on the planet. Then one September morning, on assignment in New York City, I watched as the second tower of the World Trade Center crumpled in a whoosh of breath-stopping dust and realized it was time to go back to that bedrock, my own personal Ground Zero.

On every trip up from the marina, a stone cairn reminds us that Samuel de Champlain paddled these waters four centuries ago, and a framed print on the dining room wall testifies to the fact that A.Y. Jackson once stopped by to paint the island. But beneath the pine rafters strung with the memorabilia of four generations, we are writing some new chapters of our own. My old Canoe Lake pals now count a visit to this island a mandatory annual ritual, and every summer my husband's accomplished niece, nephew, and far-flung cousins still fly back from across the continent to hurl themselves into the channel where their parents and grandparents once skinny-dipped. They finger old regatta ribbons, explaining the family lore to new mates, and I have come to understand that no renovation urges can ever trifle too much with that fiercely cherished thread of memory and belonging.

On July 1, we will get out the dime-store flags to deck the dining table on the old screened porch and light some candles to mark the country's 150th. We are not very good at patriotism, but for each of us, it seems clear: this cottage is what it means to be Canadian, to be home. 🐾

*Marci McDonald has written two books and won nine National Magazine Awards.*

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