

In the Summertime



M.J. Sherman

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing March 2017

ISBN 978-1-64007-923-6 Paperback

ISBN 978-1-64007-922-9 Hardcover

Published by: Book Services
www.BookServices.us



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☐ = Illustrations

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Dedication

To my mom and dad, my grandparents, and my aunts and uncles, who gave me a childhood made magical by summers at the little red cottage on Lake Winnebago. Thank you for giving me the freedom to go anywhere my imagination would take me, the freedom to explore, to invent crazy pastimes with my siblings and cousins, and to enjoy hours of solitude when I needed it.

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Chapter 1

The Red Cottage

The red cottage sat silent and empty, anticipating our return. The sun glistened on the water. A fish jumped, water droplets cascading from its fins, and the sudden splash broke the silence. The ripples spread slowly across the surface of the lake and lapped quietly against the dock. A flock of gulls screamed as they dove at the fish. A soft breeze kissed the water near shore and carried the scent of the lake to us as we neared it.

We had arrived for our summer at the lake.



Grandpa B built our first cottage in stages from the late 1930s to the early 1940s. It was on Lake Winnebago 15 miles from town. But our first cottage met its sad demise before I was born.

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Shortly after my father graduated from high school, the family was spending the weekend at the cottage. Dad was out sailing with some friends. Grandpa and Grandma and Aunt Emmy Lou were relaxing outside, watching the comings and goings on the lake and enjoying the peace and quiet of a warm summer day.

Grandpa suddenly became aware of dark clouds piling up across the lake.

The coming of a storm at the lake meant everyone had to hustle. Lawn chairs must be put up against the cottage; the hammock needed to be taken in; and anything loose had to be tied down or sheltered near the cottage.

A storm over the lake almost always boded *sturm und drang*: thunder, lightning, high winds, and even a rare tornado, like the one that hit the north end of the lake in 1965. Grandma asked Grandpa if he thought that Dad would be okay. After all, a bunch of young boys having fun on the lake might not be paying attention to the weather. Grandpa just said, "He's smart enough to pay attention. He'll come in before it gets bad."

So the three of them sat indoors to wait it out. They had done it before; they could do it again.

All at once Grandpa's attention was drawn to something moving on the floor. He put his newspaper aside and stared, awestruck. Dancing around on the floor were little globes of ball lightning. He watched

Chapter 1 - The Red Cottage

them for a moment, stood up, and told Grandma and my aunt to gather up their things and get into the car.

They drove back to town through the rain and thought nothing more about the storm. Later in the week Grandpa was at the hardware store. Earl, the owner, walked over to him and asked if he had been at the lake since the storm. That must have worried Grandpa, for he went home, picked up Grandma and drove to the lake.

The cottage was gone. The only thing left was the chimney and a small glob of gold. Dad had left his watch on the mantel before he went sailing, and it had melted when the cottage burned.

Grandpa B rebuilt the cottage and painted it red. I don't know if that was as a reminder of the fire, or if it was just the cheapest paint Grandpa could find.



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Chapter 2

Cousins, Cousins, Everywhere

From the time I was two weeks old until I got married at nineteen, I spent my summers at our family cottage on Lake Winnebago, at 30 miles long and 10 miles wide, the largest lake in Wisconsin. As I look back on those interesting and idyllic summers, I realize how fortunate I was.

We had a close-knit community on “our” beach. Two cottages were occupied by my extended family and the rest were occupied by close friends. We didn’t start out as friends, and several of the cottages changed hands over the years, but we were lucky enough to be surrounded by mostly wonderful, pleasant, interesting people.

I grew up thinking that it was too bad that everyone wasn’t lucky enough to have a cottage and a wonderful group of people around them like we were. I wondered what those poor kids in New Holstein did

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all summer long. They couldn't possibly be as happy as I was.

We moved out to the cottage as soon as school was out in June. Except for occasional trips back to town to do laundry and shopping and to go to church on Sundays, we lived at the lake. Dad got up every morning, had breakfast with the family, and then drove into town to his job, returning by suppertime.

Most summers our cousins came from California. My aunt and cousins stayed for a month or two, but my uncle went back to California after his vacation time was up. That meant that most of the time, during the day, it was my mother, my aunt, Emmy Lou, and the seven of us cousins at the cottage. Emmy Lou felt like she was coming home because she was Dad's sister, and they grew up in New Holstein. My grandfather's brother owned the cottage next door, and his children and, eventually, his grandchildren, spent summers on the lake, too. I was a member of a family that came with ready-made summer playmates.

As young children we were allowed to run free, as long as we adhered to three rules. Everyone looked out for all of the kids on the beach without being "in their faces," because we learned those rules, both spoken and tacitly understood, at an early age.

Rule #1 — the rule you *never* broke — you could *not* go swimming unless you found an adult who agreed to watch while you were in the water.

Chapter 2 - Cousins, Cousins, Everywhere

Rule #2 — You must never, ever run on the pier. You could slip, lose your balance, or just not slow down in time.

These two rules prevented us from drowning. No child was ever lost to a serious accident. If an activity had anything whatsoever to do with the lake itself, an adult had to give their approval and either watch us or find someone who could.

Rule #3: If we wanted to go anywhere beyond the seven cottages that we considered our beach, we needed permission.

There were other, more flexible, rules that were not as vitally important, but those first three could not be broken or ignored. There were severe consequences for disobeying them.

The seven of us usually woke up early, put on our swimming suits, ate breakfast, and waited until a parent was willing to watch us. Then it was into the lake until we were either blue with cold or exhausted. We'd come out of the water, spread our towels in the sun, and eat the snack that Mom or Emmy Lou brought us. We often slept or dozed for a short period. Then it was back into the water until lunchtime. Before lunch we changed out of our suits and hung them, along with our towels, on the line to dry.



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Chapter 3

The Shack

The shack was a shed-like building connected to the main cottage by a large screened-in porch. It provided sleeping accommodations for the young 'uns. There were six bunk beds, army-issue, made of 2 x 4s. They were a dull army green when Dad got them, but before they were installed in the shack, he painted them a bright and glossy sun yellow. A couple of bunks are still in the shack and they are still the same sunny color. For a number of years, there was a cot for the seventh child. That was me.

After lunch, we were required to rest for an hour. The younger cousins usually slept. The older ones could read but were not allowed to talk.

When naptime was over, we could put on our swimsuits again if we wanted to. Those who didn't were usually the ones who hadn't hung theirs up to dry. It's no fun struggling into a cold, wet, and clammy

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suit. In fact, it's one of the most unpleasant things I've ever done. We learned early on — or most of us did — to hang our suits on the line behind the shack if we wanted to swim later in the day.

As we grew older, we began to dislike naptime and couldn't understand why it continued to be a requirement. But after we became adults with families of our own, we all realized that naptime wasn't for us. It was for Mom and Emmy Lou. They needed a break from the seven of us, as well as from the assorted and sundry neighborhood children.

When we got older, naptime was suspended, but we were still required to stay out of the water for a time after lunch. I do believe that parents invented the myth of getting cramps if you didn't wait for an hour after eating was based on their need for postprandial peace and quiet. If they had a valid reason, we wouldn't be able to argue with them!



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Chapter 4

Bedtime Stories

Help! I'm Stuck!

When my cousin, John, and I finally got the opportunity to sleep in a bunk, we were still fairly young, so Mom and Emmy Lou put six-inch-high boards between the mattress and the front of the bunk. This kept everybody safe and the blankets tucked tightly around the mattresses. Yet somehow John managed to fall off and break his arm. I, on the other hand, had the opposite happen. John got untucked, but I got overtucked.

Mom came out to the shack and tucked us in. She said good night, kissed me on the cheek, and went back into the cottage. Some time later, I woke up from a sound sleep and couldn't move! I was pinned down! I managed a muffled yell to my older sister. "Go get Mommy, I'm stuck! And tell her to bring a knife!"

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Bunk Bed in the Shack

Chapter 4 - Bedtime Stories

Kris ran into the cottage, shouting, “Martha’s stuck! Hurry! And bring a knife!”

Mom calmed Kris down and asked her to explain what was wrong. She did. Mom headed for the shack, Kris running along behind, repeating over and over, “You forgot the knife! She said to bring a knife.”

Mom entered the shack, approached my bunk, and said softly, “Martha, turn around. Your head is at the bottom of the bunk, and your feet are on your pillow.”

I did just that. I’ve had claustrophobia ever since, but I never fell off of my bunk.

Wake Up!

I had an odd experience years later. I had gone to bed and decided to read for a while. I must have fallen asleep while reading, because I was only vaguely aware of someone was talking to me.

My sister’s friend, Juanita, was home for a visit and had decided to come out to the lake to visit Kris. When she got to the cottage, she noticed that it was mostly dark. Nita was a very good friend of the family, so she was comfortable coming out at that time of the night, and she also knew that someone would probably still be up reading.

Nita saw my light on, so she came into the room and sat down on the edge of the bed. We talked for about an hour. She asked me to tell Kris that she was

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only in town for a few days and would like to see her before she left again. I said I would be sure to tell Kris, and Nita left.

About a week later, Kris came storming into my room and, very loudly, asked me why I hadn't told her that Nita had stopped at the cottage when she was home. I asked her why she was yelling at me and why she thought I should tell her something that I couldn't possibly know.

She said that Nita had called to ask why she hadn't come to see her. Kris said she had no idea that Nita had been home. Nita then explained that she had come out to the cottage, seen a light on, and called softly. She explained that I had said, "Come on in," and we had talked for almost an hour, after which she had asked me to tell Kris she was home and I had assured her that I would.

The only conclusion we could come to was that I had actually visited with Nita, that I had been asleep when she came, and apparently hadn't been completely awake when we talked. That was the only time I've ever carried on a conversation while not totally awake. I wasn't sleep-walking, but I certainly was sleep-talking.



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Chapter 5

Easter

Sometimes we went to the lake out of season. When I was two or three, the family went out to the cottage one Easter weekend. After that we often repeated our off-season visits. Sometimes there was ice on the lake; sometimes the water was open. But it was always chilly! And going there on Easter was especially exciting.

Before that first Easter visit, I worried. How did the Easter Bunny know that we would be at the lake? What if he hid all the Easter eggs out at the cottage, and then we stayed in town for Easter? We wouldn't have any eggs to find!

That particular Easter, Mom assured us that the Easter Bunny would know that we were going to the lake and he would hide our eggs there.

When we arrived at the cottage, we found that not only was the lake no longer frozen, but Uncle A.C.'s

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pier was already up. That was very unusual because we generally put our piers up on Memorial Day weekend.

Grandma B. offered to take the four of us out to look at the lake while Mom got the cottage warmed up and “found” the Easter baskets.

We walked over to A.C.’s pier next door. Grandma took Kris and me by the hand and sent Paul and Beth ahead of her. At some point, for reasons unknown, Grandma let go of my hand for a moment. When I saw her reach for my hand, I took two steps backwards. The second step took me into thin air and then into the lake. Grandma stood frozen for one horrified moment, then said just one word: “Beth!”

Beth turned around, saw me in the lake, and hesitating not a second, jumped in, clothes and all.

We were wearing our Easter finery, so it was imperative that we get out of the frigid water immediately! And believe me, the lakes of the Upper Midwest are excruciatingly frigid in early spring. Beth lifted me up. Grandma took me by both hands and set me back on the pier., then took my hand and Kris’s hand and said, “Come!”

We all trooped back to the cottage. I did get to hunt for eggs, just not in my Easter finery.

For the next couple of years we did not go to the cottage for our Easter egg hunt. Even though she was older than I was, Kris was very worried too. “What

Chapter 5 - Easter

if the Easter bunny hides our eggs out there, and we don't go to the lake? If he leaves them out there, we won't have any here to hunt for!"

Mom assured her that the Easter Bunny always knew where to hide the eggs. They would always be in the proper place, so Kris needn't worry.



In the Summertime: true stories of a multigenerational family knit together through summers and holidays on Lake Winnebago in Wisconsin.

The author's childhood at the little red cottage was filled with dramatic summer storms, unfortunate incidents involving bunk beds and outhouses, and an uncle with a talent for inventive pranks. There was a secret fort hidden in ancient cottonwoods, an unwanted critter in the house, fireworks on the Fourth of July, and rainy afternoons with pastimes that fed the imaginations of seven children.

ISBN 978-1-64007-923-6

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