



# A snake in the grass

Some of our cottage fears are easy to see.  
Others sneak up on you

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## MAY 2020

**MOST OF THE COTTAGES** on the bay are still shuttered. The dock in front of the log cabin that we are hoping to buy is floating, disconnected from the shore to protect it from winter's crushing ice.

Dennis, our real estate agent, pilots the barge to the dock where Karl, the cabin's owner, is waiting to greet us. We throw him a line, but the boat drifts away and pulls Karl with it. Now he is hanging off the side of the barge, feet dangling. His rubber boots fill with water before we can hoist him up. "Never hold on, that's the first rule of boats," says Dennis. "It's important to know when to let go."

After the inspection, he hands me a stack of purchase papers. "Sign them when you are ready."

Dennis's wife is waiting for us at the marina. She has been in town, stockpiling groceries for their island home. We are in the midst of the first COVID-19 lockdown, and everyone is striving to be an island now. We exchange a few words from a careful distance, wearing masks.

"Rubber boots," she says, as they walk away. "Get your kids rubber boots. You can't be too careful with rattlesnakes."

## JUNE 2020

**I TURN THE KEY.** The boat's motor starts right away, but my heart is revving faster than the engine.

For the first time in my life, I'm in the driver's seat of a boat. Proof of my new pleasure craft licence is printed and folded and carefully stowed in the Princecraft's glove compartment. A recurring question on the tests concerned maximum load and carrying capacity. I am quite sure we have exceeded ours. I can barely see over the bow, which is piled with furniture and groceries and cleaning supplies.

What I remember most from that boat trip, from the day we took possession of our little log cabin on Georgian Bay, on the edge of the world's largest freshwater archipelago: my heart banging at my ribs so hard I can barely breathe and a burning sensation in my right hand as I grip the gear shift. The bow tipped up, and the stern dragged down. My eldest daughter, Emma, next to me, trying to calm me. My husband, Anton, and our younger daughter, Rowan, paddling next to us in the yellow Kipawa canoe that my father gave me for my 21st birthday, more than two decades ago. Anton and Rowan arrive at our new dock at the same time we do, I am driving that slowly. This fear—the force of it, the sheer physicality of it—takes me by surprise.

I have spent my life in boats. Scuba diving off protected reefs and further out on the high seas where poachers gunned across international waters. Gunwale bobbing on Lake Simcoe, at my childhood cottage; canoeing northern lakes and rivers. Anton and I once wrapped a canoe around a rock in fast water, hundreds of kilometres from any human settlement in the Northwest Territories. We spent five hours and all of our energy pulling the canoe off the rock with a system of carabiners and ropes.

And yet. In all those adventures, I never took the stern. I did not know how to paddle a J-stroke, the stroke used to steer a canoe and keep it following a straight line.

This was odd because my father, Francis, with whom I was particularly close, was an expert paddler. He could bring a canoe to shore in any weather, silently and precisely. He helped map the official portage routes for Killarney Provincial Park, where he knew all the old logging trails. Canoes often turned up in the documentary films that my father and his twin brother made about Ontario and the North. >>



## APRIL 2020

**WE ARE ONLY WEEKS** into the first coronavirus lockdown. No March Break traveling, no Passover gathering, no Easter egg hunting. It is dark and cold, and there is nowhere to go. It seems strange, dangerous even, to be anywhere but home. And anyway, it is the middle of the night.

The fluorescent lights sting my eyes as I step through the unlocked door. I have been standing outside the veterinary emergency entrance for what seems like hours, watching bleary-eyed staff come and go, arriving by bicycle, taking smoke breaks, picking up lonely paper bags—Uber Eats—sitting on the pavement. I am wearing a mask; a woman asks me to put on a face shield and blue gloves too. Everyone would rather I was not here, but they understand why I have come inside.

I kneel down on the cold, hard floor next to our dog, Muddy.

The staff have wrapped him in blankets. Oxygen blows at his snout, but his breathing is laboured. He has a mysterious respiratory illness that will not respond to antibiotics. I pat the top of his head, the softest, smoothest patch of black fur. It still feels puppy-ish though he is in his middle age like me. Also puppy-ish: the way his muscles have relaxed because of the hydromorphine. As if he is slowly turning into a puddle on the floor, softening at the edges. The veterinarian primes the syringe. There will be two injections: one to block all feeling, another to stop his heart. I whisper and cluck and cradle him. All this touch, all these sounds saying one thing: *I am with you, here. You are not alone.*

I have birthed two children and watched them awaken to the world, but I have never held a body as awareness left it.

I walk out of the clinic and toss the gloves and face shield into a garbage can. I am glad I insisted on being there. For Muddy's sake and my own. For nearly 50 years I've been holding on, afraid to let go.

## JUNE 2020

**THERE ARE TWO PATHS UP TO THE NEW CABIN:** the exercise path and the nature path. The first one climbs steeply across open rock. The second meanders through a forest of pine and hemlock and cedar and oak and poplar and maple and birch.

I am walking down the nature path, inhaling the heart-opening scent of pine, listening to the west wind sigh through the needled branches, when my body stops. I spin around and start walking the other way before my mind can process what the rest of me already knows: there is a large snake curled in the middle of the path, shaking its keratin rattle. I nearly crash into Anton, who is walking behind me. "Rattlesnake," I squawk. Anton looks at me in disbelief.

"Well, we did buy a cottage on the edge of Massasauga Provincial Park," I say, my heart still drumming. "I think we're going to have to learn how to live with them." Massasauga means "mouth of the river" in Ojibwe; it's also the name for Ontario's only venomous snake. Early in his career, Anton worked in the emergency room in Parry Sound; he remembers the summer they ran out of antivenin.

There is perhaps no human fear more common or visceral than the fear of snakes. For years, scientists have debated whether or not it is innate.

In 1992, a behavioural ecologist named Lynne Isbell was running through a glade in Kenya. She stopped in front of a cobra before she could process why she had stopped. Isbell spent the next two decades trying to understand what had happened. She hypothesized that evolution has favoured primates with good vision to detect snakes; those living with poisonous snakes tend to have better vision. Lemurs in Madagascar, on the other hand, have terrible eyesight: there are no poisonous snakes on the island.

Neuroscientists in Japan and Brazil found brain-based evidence to support Isbell's theory by studying the pulvinar, a cluster of neurons that may help us recognize potential threats and direct our attention. Macaques that had never encountered snakes responded quickly and frequently to images of snakes—more quickly, even, than when they looked at faces. They seemed hardwired to detect them.

Fear, it seems, helps us see things. Quickly, clearly.

And yet. Only two deaths by rattlesnake have been recorded in the history of Ontario. Massasaugas have far more reason to fear people: settlers killed thousands as they moved into their habitat and latticed the province with wider and busier roads.

Persecution has been widespread. Even the staff at nearby Killbear Provincial Park routinely killed the snakes when the park first opened in the 1960s; there were so many of them. The habitat is ideal. Killbear snakes can find good hibernation and gestation sites within a few hundred metres, a tenth of the distance they might have to travel elsewhere.

In the 1970s, staff stopped killing snakes: conservation-minded scientists argued that the park should be protecting all species, not just the cutest and the fuzziest. Instead of taking a shovel to snake heads, park employees would now move rattlesnakes away from campsites. Only later did biologists realize that this strategy was nearly as fatal.

Rattlesnakes, like most snakes, have a strong fidelity to the first hibernation spot they choose. Once they've chosen a site and survived the first winter, they will return to the same spot for the winters following. If you move them too far, they keep looking for their old place. They will freeze to death instead of finding a new place to settle in.

In the first half of my life, there were two things I feared most: losing my father and losing Romany Wood, my family's summer property. Really they amounted to the same thing. I could not imagine who I was without my father, my family history, and the storied place I'd grown up in. One hundred years ago, my architect grandfather designed and built three cottages on the south shore of Lake Simcoe. The cottages looked like something out of a Tudor fairy tale: half-timbered and stuccoed white with lead-paned windows. Each had its own name. The tidiest and smallest was called The Bears after the Goldilocks tale; the grandest, with a moth-eaten tapestry, moose antlers in the great hall, and a large bell at the peak of its roof, was called Pendragon after the castle built by King Arthur's father. Outside, a massive oak tree grew up from an acorn my grandmother had planted.

When you come to really know a place, you see time moving through it in subtle changes of growth and decay. There I had watched moss and ferns colonize old tree stumps over decades and meadows grow into forest. I knew where to find the remains of the old sugar shack hidden among the maples, which trees had housed honeybees before they swarmed or died off, and which diseased apple trees still yielded sweet fruit.

My father felt this deep connection to the land as well. He said he didn't need a flashlight to walk the winding paths through the dark woods at night. His feet knew the way.

Growing up, I imagined that we'd lived on the shores of Lake Simcoe forever. There were six generations of Chapmans planted at a neighbouring church that overlooked the lake. But the tree roots challenged my fantasies of permanence: they pushed up the oldest Chapman gravestones and made them list to one side.

My fear of losing our place on Lake Simcoe sharpened when my father was forced to sell our home in the city, where four generations of family had lived. Trying to hold onto it nearly bankrupted him. Even at 13, I knew he regarded letting go as a failure, and I internalized this feeling. >>

## AUGUST 2020

**MY FATHER'S UNIT IS STILL CLOSED** to all visitors but one: an essential caregiver, who, in this instance, is my mother. So we do video calls twice a week instead. I walk him through the forest at our little cabin, pointing out the different trees. "Are there birches?" he'd ask, thinking wistfully of spring canoe trips, before the trees leafed out, when the branches had a soft purple hue. "Yes," I'd say, walking over to a little stand to show him. Together, we looked at the wildflowers that seemed to grow everywhere, and examined a baby snake in the garden.

I told him we'd named the first rattlesnake we saw Herbert, to make it seem less scary. Since then, we'd heard snakes buzzing under our deck and found another one curled up by the bunkie. We were getting used to the idea of living with them. After all, this place had been their home first. We were the trespassers.

My father and I often talked about how everything was interconnected, a subject that fascinated him, and one that took on a more personal meaning as he moved closer to his own end. As his body got weaker, he said, he felt like he was opening to the universe. It was harder and harder to imagine the boundaries between him and the rest of the world. He felt they were dissolving, and he was being absorbed back into the system he had always been a part of.

Before the pandemic, we had a long conversation about ecology, which translates literally from the Greek as the study of home. "The problem with thinking about the environment as something separate from us," said my father slowly, his blue eyes now half-hooded, "is in trying to determine what surrounds what. It's a problem of where you draw the boundaries."

This observation kept repeating in my head after COVID hit. We were all trying desperately to draw boundaries around ourselves and around others to keep each other safe. I thought of it, too, each time I encountered a rattlesnake. If you're going to live next to nature, you've got to take the whole thing, a biologist once told me. Nature can be scary and dangerous, but it's beautiful too.

"You have a responsibility to be a steward to all the creatures that live there," says Jonathon Choquette, a biologist who leads a rattlesnake recovery program for Wildlife Preservation Canada. Building fences is useful sometimes—to protect the snakes from the dangers of crossing roads and from the people who feared them turning up in their suburban gardens—but fences can only do so much. Too many can lead to fragmentation of habitat, turning smaller and smaller snake populations into islands of genetic homogeneity. There's something in nature, as Robert Frost remarked, "that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down."

In Killbear, staff had solved this problem by building ecopassages—openings in the snake-fencing—that tunnel under the road and let light and warmth in, facilitating safer snake crossings from one marooned habitat to another. >>

My father had developed Parkinson's. The doctors said it was why he lost his balance. People with Parkinson's lose their proprioception—the ability to sense the place they are in, where their body is located in space. The neurological disease progressed more quickly after he fell and kept him in the hospital for nearly three years. At first, he suffered terrible hallucinations. He imagined himself on a narrow ledge, about to fall. He was sure that the curtains at the end of the hospital bed were the floor—as if his bed had been set vertical and was about to pitch him forward.

He had lost his sense of place in the world. It did not seem coincidental that he had lost it so completely on the closing night of the sale.

My father held on. Two years after his fall he was still lying in hospital, now unable to regulate his blood pressure. He would faint if he sat up or tried to stand. The rest of Romany Wood was sold. I told myself I was finally ready to let it go. There were too many memories, too much history weighing me down.

Then COVID hit. My father's hospital was locked down. No visitors would be allowed for the foreseeable future. Now I was losing my father too.

My fears shifted and became more concrete. I was not so much afraid of my father dying now. Instead, I was afraid I would not be with him.

When he first arrived in hospital, in the days when he was constantly lost in fear and hallucination, I'd held his hands for hours. We were on the narrow ledge together, I'd say, squeezing his stiff, taloned hands. Now we are stepping down to safety. When he stared in terror at the curtains hanging at the end of his bed, imagining them to be the floor, I'd ask him to feel the cool sheets at his back and the railings on either side.

It felt good to be able to do this, to allay his fears. I began to realize I had always wanted to protect him. If not from death itself, then from the many fears that are the dress rehearsal for it.

My father was older and had a full life as a filmmaker before settling down to have a family at 44. There were stories of him exploring the north shore of Superior, of crash landings in the Arctic. He and his twin, Christopher, had sailed on the *Bluenose II's* maiden voyage, documenting a search for lost treasure on Cocos Island off Costa Rica. In the 1950s, he'd driven from England to the Congo Basin with an anthropologist to record the lives of Ituri Forest people. He recalled walking through the dark jungle and suddenly finding a small hand in his, guiding him through the night.

The last vestige of that adventurous life—before marriage, before children—were the canoe trips he ventured on each spring and fall that he continued to take into his 70s.

The older I got, the stranger it seemed that he had never taught me to paddle, nor taken me with him on a camping trip. Something in my father must have thought it was strange too. Out of the blue, he gave me a canoe for my 21st birthday.

The J-stroke is not so difficult to master: you pull your paddle towards you and then turn the blade outward to "correct" the stroke—to prevent the nose of your boat veering to one side. I could have easily asked a friend to teach me or tried to learn it myself. But I was too embarrassed to admit that I needed instruction. I was also afraid—afraid to move forward, afraid to take the helm.

In my 20s, I invited myself on an early spring canoe trip with my father and his 60-something cronies. I came home with stories about how the wind shifted and drove the ice against our campsite's shore. How we paddled anyway, through ice that looked uniform and thick but broke magically into hexagon candles that bobbed out of the way when we pulled our blades through them.

But I did not like to admit that this man I idolized, this expert canoeist and wildlife documentary filmmaker, had not taught me how to stern.

In 2017, the Chapman family sold a third of Romany Wood. My father fell that same night. He hit the corner of a bookshelf on his way down. It punctured his lung and he developed pneumonia. He very nearly died.

"Do you know why you're in the hospital?" a nurse asked in the loud, nasal voice people reserve for foreigners and old people deemed unable to understand them.

"I had a fight with a piece of furniture," he replied dryly, even when he was in the midst of his most terrifying hallucinations. "And the furniture won."



## SEPTEMBER 2020

A few days before my father contracted pneumonia again, I went to visit Killbear. I wanted to see how a small town—4,000 visitors are typical on a summer day—manages to co-exist peacefully in perfect rattlesnake habitat with only four kilometres of fencing and four ecopassages to direct snake traffic.

On one of the walking paths, staff had set up pylons to direct foot traffic across the open rock barrens: there were gestating females and dozens of juvenile rattlers on the other side of them. Campers walked blithely past. A few stopped and asked if we'd seen any snakes. Kenton Otterbein, the chief park naturalist, answered vaguely. Rattlesnakes are the “gin-seng” of the snake world. You never knew who might be a poacher. I knelt down to look at a baby rattler, curled up next to a stick. Its siblings had all moved on.

“It's fully loaded,” said Otterbein, warning me not to get too close, “but 25 per cent of the time it's a dry bite anyway.”

I picked my way even more slowly and carefully through the landscape after that, seeing things I would not otherwise see—the various textures in the sphagnum moss, the occasional tiny green leaf turned bright red by a virus of its own. Crevices in the tabled rock where a snake might hide.



During our next call, I tell my father about the trip to Killbear and about the two little pines down by our property's shore. The two pines stand side by side, close enough to interlock their branches, but far enough apart to keep pace with each other and grow out. The way the branches intertwined reminded me of the black and white pictures I'd seen of my father and his twin as children. In so many of them, one of them has his arm around the other in an easy embrace. As adults, the two brothers were less demonstrative, but they always mirrored each other in their body language. When my father and uncle were standing down by the water, it was impossible for me to tell them apart.

I'd also discovered an island called “Francis” and another called “Georgina”—our old township on Lake Simcoe. I wanted him to know that I was not going to let go of him or our family's past.

**MY FATHER CAN BARELY BREATHE.** This time, he chooses comfort over treatment. I am finally allowed to visit. This time the hallucinations are no longer shot through with fear. But this time his speech is garbled; the Parkinson's makes him difficult to understand.

At first his inability to communicate is frustrating. Then it is irrelevant. It is only important to be there, and to feel each other's presence.

I talk and sing and read him poetry.

I squeeze and rub his stiff hands and listen for the gaps between his breaths. The palliative care doctor says he might not last the night.

But he does. The gaps grow longer with each passing night. Now he stops breathing when I stop singing. He starts breathing again when I resume singing. I hold his hand tightly but tell him it is the season for letting go. The trees will soon lose their leaves. I remind him of the two pines down by the water. I tell him I have nicknamed them “The Twins.” He squeezes my hand. Shortly after, he stops breathing altogether.



To survive the winter, a Massasauga must choose its hibernation site carefully. Enough snow must fall to insulate the hibernacula and keep the groundwater from freezing. There must be an air pocket so the snake can breathe.

Rattlesnakes used to survive best by returning to the same place each winter, but overwintering is becoming harder. Snowfalls and the cycle of freezing and thawing are less predictable, more extreme. A site that ensures survival one year may no longer guarantee survival the next.

As a documentary filmmaker and writer, it was my father's job to collect stories and build an archive. To preserve. He was a rescuer—of broken things and people, of stories that would otherwise disappear. But you can't hold onto everything. What was in him, what drove him to hold onto Romany Wood when it was no longer a reasonable option?

In spring, I scatter some of my father's ashes, and his brother's too, and wait for the snakes to emerge from their winter homes. The more time I spend with the Massasaugas, the less afraid I am. They rattle their keratin tails politely if I come too close and remind me to pay closer attention to my surroundings. They remind me there are no walls between us. This is what makes us so vulnerable, but also more connected—to each other and to the place we choose to land. 🐍

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