STAR LAKE By Lee MacDougall

When we were young the grown-ups would say the only things you could be sure of in life were death and taxes. Having had nothing to do with death, except for the sudden loss of our budgie Tinkerbell; and having even less to do with taxes, this statement didn't ring true for us kids. My Uncle Cam said he had a few friends who had never paid taxes, but he couldn't tell us their names. He told us the only things we could be sure of were death and garbage. Whenever he talked like that Aunt Marion would tell him to hush up.

Aunt Marion was one of my dad's sisters. There were six siblings in the family, my father being the baby, so we had a lot of aunts, uncles and cousins on that side. Marion and Cam lived north of us in Timmins, and as their kids were close in age to us, we used to visit them a lot. One of Cam's specialties was his slide shows. At some point during every visit, out would come the projector, up would go the tattered screen, and we'd sit in the dark for hours watching the same parade of old black and white shots, and then - in colour - a long series of family reunions and fishing trips that showed us kids as babies, then toddlers, until finally, when most of us were asleep, there would be a few shots of last summer at Star Lake.

Marion and Cam owned a cottage on a small lake outside of Timmins. It was a rustic ramshackle place, with a wood stove in the kitchen, funny old mis-matched furniture in the living room, and two small bedrooms with walls that didn't go all the way to the ceiling. You entered from the back through a screen door that slammed all summer; directly in front of you was a picture window that overlooked the sparkling lake. It did have electricity, so we had lights if we needed them, and an old wooden console radio from the nineteen thirties that could pick up shortwave stations in strange foreign languages late at night. It didn't have a washroom, but a classic one-hole outhouse about thirty feet up a trail into the forest. If you had to go after dark you had to bring the flashlight in case there were bears wandering around looking for food. The black of the forest at night was terrifying, so we kids would go in a group for company. We used to turn off the flashlight just to hear my sister scream.

Cam and Marion spent most of the summer weekends at the lake, and sometimes we were invited to stay with them. Eventually, with their two kids and our three, they realized it was too small a place to share, and offered to let our family have it occasionally to ourselves.

My brother Billy and I liked to explore the shoreline near the cottage, looking for stones that were good skippers, or worn pieces of driftwood that looked like animals. There were a lot of chipmunks in the area. We would set up elaborate traps using old minnow pails and bread crumbs, would watch for hours until we managed to lure one in, then we'd pull the lid closed with a long stretch of fishing line. We would proudly show everyone our trophy, then let him go back up into the trees, where he would sit and scold us for the rest of the day. Sometimes we would leave the barbeque rack in the lake to soak, and tiny perfect crayfish would crawl out from under the dock to clean it off. They would dart away backwards when you tried to catch them. If we walked along the shallows of the lake, eventually someone would scream that they had a bloodsucker on their foot, and the salt shaker would have to be fetched. The sucker would writhe and drop off once it had been well doused, and we would go back to our quest for colourful stones and other washed-up treasures.

There was an odd collection of old towels and hats at the cottage, and we would take turns wearing whatever we could find. There was also a worn out chenille house coat that looked like it was a left-over from the forties. It had slightly padded shoulders, a tapered waist, and a long flared skirt that reached to the floor if you were the right height. The balding chenille material gave it a comic look, but the vintage cut made it look like something Katharine Hepburn might have worn around the pool. My sister would wear it down to the lake, pretending to be a model as she sashayed down the stone path to the dock. Then my brother started wearing it, and had us all in stitches as he ran through the woods pretending to be Zorro, or Dracula, or Lauren Bacall.

Our main activity during the hot days of summer was swimming. Star Lake wasn't very big, but it was spring fed, so the water was always cold. We'd stay in as long as we could, then stand shivering on the dock until the sun warmed us up, then back in we'd go. I couldn't really

swim yet, so I spent my time either standing in the water up to my armpits, jumping as the waves rolled in, or holding my breath and doing what I called the submarine, a kind of underwater thing with my arms at my sides and my feet kicking frantically. There were a couple of old rotting scuba masks that we would spend hours using, paddling around marveling at whatever we could find along the shore. When they filled with water, we'd stand up gasping, tilt our heads back to drain them, and dive back under.

One afternoon Billy and I were down by the lake, with my father a few feet away, asleep in a lawn chair. Mother was cleaning up after lunch, and my sister was either putting lemon juice in her hair to lighten it, or lathering herself with baby oil to deepen her tan. I was looking for a good mask, and at the bottom of the box I found an old green flipper. There was only one, but I thought it would help me as I submarined along the shore. It was too big for me, so I spent a while trying to tighten the frayed strap around my small foot. As soon as I started to swim with it, I was amazed at how fast I was able to move. We had seen Jacques Cousteau documentaries on television, and suddenly I was part of the team, exploring the rugged coast of some tropical isle.

Having never worn a flipper before I didn't realize that the one-sided propulsion would force me in a large circle. As I motored along, I was too excited by my new speed to realize that I was making a slow turn to the left. I noticed the rocks and sticks getting further away as I moved over them, but when I couldn't see anything below me, it didn't occur to me that I might be in deep water. Thinking I saw the shadow of a fish, I stood up to tell my brother. I was surprised when I surfaced to find myself out past the end of the dock. I saw him shivering, with a towel wrapped around him. The flipper was heavy, and as soon as I tried to stand up it slipped from my foot and sank to the bottom. I tried to reach for the sand and rocks below me. I looked at my brother through my half-filled mask, and it was only then that I realized I was over my head. I tried to keep myself above the surface, but I didn't know how. I swallowed water, or inhaled some in my panic. I felt myself going under. Because I still had the mask on, I could see the sunlight streaming through the murky water before me. I fought my way toward the sky, and managed to make it up to gasp and cough one short breath. Billy stood, watching me. He knew what was happening, but was frozen in fear.

Who knows what happens in moments like this? Years later, when I was a teenager working as a lifeguard at the town pool, I would see someone drowning and I'd wonder if they were pretending, because real drowning looks exactly like a fake job done to get a laugh from friends. I'd wait for them to get control of their bodies and stay on the surface, and after a few seconds of their struggle I'd realize that a) they couldn't swim, and b) really were drowning, and therefore c) I was going to get wet. I saved two girls within ten minutes one day. In both instances I sat on the guard tower and thought, "Is that fake drowning? Or real?"

I watched my brother disappear a second time and sank a little further. I have a vision of my arms flailing in front of me, both of them caught in the sunlight as my hands clawed for the surface. I could see the crumbling wooden frame of the old dock, and the rocks that supported it. I'm not sure if Billy had managed to say something, or if I had croaked a cry before my second submergence, but when I fought my way to the air the third time, my father was there, looking down at me. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, a pair of loud Bermuda shorts, and his new Volunteer Fireman baseball hat. Not wanting to get his prize hat wet, I saw him throw it to his left as he prepared to jump in; in his exuberance he missed the dock and threw the cap into the lake.

I had inhaled another mouthful during my last struggle to the surface; now I was going down for the third time. I felt myself relax. Time stretched. My fear evaporated, and I sank to the cold dark depths. As I floated downward, I started to see scenes from my short life pass before me. I was only eight, but I had lived long enough that there were a few indelible images: an early birthday, a dark Christmas morning, my sister crying, my mother dressed up to go out, looking beautiful, my brother and I on our bikes. The interesting thing about the progression of images was the form: it was like a slide show, another chapter in one of Uncle Cam's long evenings. "Oh don't fall asleep yet, we haven't finished Lee's life."

The splash of my father hitting the water snapped me back to real time. He had me up and out before I knew what had happened. He pushed me toward the dock, and I clambered up, coughing and spitting, amazed that I could be back on dry land so quickly. I watched my father

pull himself out of the water. I was mortified that he'd had to jump in in his clothes. He took off his non-waterproof watch, and pulled his soaked wallet from his pocket. I looked at my brother. My first thought: blame someone else.

"You didn't do anything."

"I knew Dad would get you," he said.

"It doesn't matter," said my sodden father. "Where's my hat?"

I pointed to it, floating just below the surface, to the side of the dock. My father walked up to the beach, then waded in to fetch it. I grabbed a towel, and wrapped it around my shaking shoulders.

"I was wearing a flipper. I think it's still down there," I said, pointing to the depths out past the dock.

"And that's where it'll stay," said my father. He wasn't angry, in fact he seemed very calm as he lifted his soggy hat from the lake.

"I'm not swimming anymore today," I said to no one in particular. I ran up the path toward the cottage. I couldn't believe that the sun was so warm, that the wind was still blowing through the trees, that everything was going on as if I hadn't just drowned. I wished I could wear the old chenille dressing gown to tell my story. Alas I was too short; it dragged on the ground.

I burst through the screen door and yelled, "I almost drowned! Dad had to jump in in his clothes. Billy just stood there. I had one flipper on and it made me go in a big circle out over my head. I went down three times and everything!" My mother was suitably shaken. When my father came in dripping, she got him a towel. We sat and told our stories, over and over.

A few days later our week at Star Lake had come to an end. Dad had to go back to work, so we had our last swim, our last run around the property, and our last chance to see how many

skips we could get with a good flat stone. We spent the morning cleaning the cottage, or trying not to track in sand once my mother had swept. We had one last errand before we hit the highway for home. We had to take our garbage to the cottager's dump. We put everything that we hadn't burned in a couple of bags, and drove down the dirt road looking for the hand-written sign. The car smelled of left-over food, and sweat, and garbage, and the sadness of having to leave.

When we found the sign, we turned and bumped along the narrow track as far as we could. The muddy ruts were getting deeper, and eventually the road became a trail that led to a few scattered piles of refuse. Dad stopped the car, and turned off the ignition.

My brother said he'd take the bags of garbage down, and I said I'd go too. You never knew what you'd find in the old junk; people sometimes threw out good stuff. Billy took one bag, and I followed with the other. My parents and sister waited in the car.

The sun was shining, a few seagulls and crows were flapping around as we approached. There was a bit of smoke drifting up from one of the heaps. When we were about fifty feet from the car, we saw something small and black move on one of the piles of garbage.

"Is that a dog?" I asked my brother.

"No stupid, it's a bear cub."

There were two of them. They were so small, just a bit bigger than teddy bears; maybe the size of cats. They were so cute. They were rolling and playing with each other, chewing things and throwing them from their mouths.

I looked back at Debbie and my parents, and pointed at the cubs. The pile of garbage they were playing in was off in the woods a bit. They couldn't see what had stopped us.

We knew bears. Having been raised in Kirkland Lake, we heard about bears coming out of the bush every year. "Bad year for blueberries; bears'll be coming out for the garbage."

Sometimes if there was nothing on t.v. my father would take us out to the Kirkland dump to see the bears. We'd park with the other cars and watch the black lumps waddle around, until someone tried to take a picture, or made too much noise, and they would disappear into the woods.

But we had never seen cubs this young. They were wrestling with each other now, fighting over an old ice cream carton. They were much cuter than on Walt Disney, and the fact that they were wild made it all the more exciting. I was wishing we could take them home. I was thinking how amazing it would be to have bear cubs for pets. Where would we keep them? In the garage? In the basement? What would we feed them?

My father had stepped out of the car now, and was leaning forward, trying to see what we were looking at. Just at the moment it occurred to me that the cubs must be orphans, and we'd *have* to take them home - we saw the mother bear.

We had been very still before we saw her, trying not to scare the cubs away; once we saw the large mother, we were petrified. She lifted her nose in the air and sniffed above the pile in front of her. The cubs were rolling down the side of another mound, oblivious to the human cubs nearby. The mother must have caught our scent. She turned her head toward us, and stopped. She looked at us with dark shiny eyes. She grunted, and the cubs were gone in a flash. She took a step toward us, then three quick steps and reared onto her hind legs. She lifted her front legs above her, and roared at my brother and me.

Billy was past me up the trail before the roar was finished. He had dropped his bag of garbage and was flying back toward the car. I turned and ran as fast as I could after him. I think I was screaming as I ran. I saw my father smiling, beckoning us to hurry along to the car; as if it was just beginning to rain, and he didn't want us to get wet.

My brother got to the car just as my father was getting back in. I guess Dad figured we should make a hasty retreat after all, just in case momma bear decided to follow us. My brother

jumped into the back seat and slammed the door behind him. As I got to that side of the car, he locked the door. I grabbed the handle, and made a sound that wasn't really a cry or a scream, just something in between.

My mother turned to my brother and said calmly, "Open that door."

I had already gone around to the other side. I was in the car before his hand got to the lock button. My father backed the car up the path. I was hoping that we wouldn't get stuck in the mud, and be dragged from the car by a raging carnivore. When we looked down the trail from the safety of the back seat, the bears were long gone.

We laughed about it all the way home. That my brother had said nothing, just sprinted past me toward the car. That he'd locked me out of the car. That we knew that if you see baby bears, the mother will be very close by. That they were so cute, we forgot everything we knew. That from cub-sighting to mother-roar had been about six seconds. The speed with which we made it back to the car. My mother said she'd just about had it with Nature for that year.

Star Lake was further north than Kirkland, and being that bit closer to the Arctic circle, the days were longer in July, and we could stretch our games of chase, or cards, or work on a jigsaw puzzle well into the evenings. I remember watching a golden sunset, eating chips and burnt marshmallows by a big bonfire, and it was almost ten o'clock. Usually I wouldn't be allowed to stay up that late, but at Star Lake amazing things happened. Things like death. And garbage.