

Laurel Parry

## The Summer Lake Club

When I was growing up in Whitehorse, every year there was a Saturday when everyone decided it was summer, when the sun shone hot for the first time. It could be April or May. On that Saturday Dads pushed open backyard shed doors through the slush to exchange winter shovels for summer yard gear. Mothers stared at flower beds, poking at mulch with gentle toes to see which perennials survived. The world of the home suddenly expanded to include the lawn, the garden, the clothesline, the patio; and everyone knew that it wouldn't be long before lawn chairs, plant pots and the garden hose would be relegated to the shed again.

To be sixteen in the brief Yukon summer was a torment. We showed ourselves only to retreat. We shed layers of clothes, and replaced them with scanty ones, arranged carefully over our forms, and we stepped outside to the sun. Some of our group pushed forward, noisy and committed, like the V of the trumpeter swans pushing forth to the Arctic in an epic migration, while others stepped back, into the shadows and haven of home and routine with parents and little brothers. Safe but bored, and poised for another chance.

The summer I was sixteen, when I heard my father sweeping the driveway through the open window, I dressed in catalogue-bought shorts and a top, stood in front of the mirror and assessed winter's damage. Sun-deprived, dry skin, mauve tinged, fading bruises from gym, but otherwise, acceptable.

After a winter swaddled in wool and quilted nylon I was buoyant. As with my parents, my weekend world was about to grow too, no longer limited by winter to small parties inside cars, with odd and random gatherings at the gas station, or perhaps rec rooms in bungalows. Now the world opened and walking around was reasonable. Our feet were not used to sandals; our bodies not used to exposure.

In memory, every year on that first Saturday of summer I walked across the bridge to Rotary Park with my friends, and together we pretended that we lived in a normal Canadian town. We collectively ignored any

clues that we existed north of the sixtieth parallel. The grass, only recently exposed to the sun, was dusty and brown, revealing whorls of dry snow mold, and litter. Most roads were unpaved, and those few main roads that were paved, were dusty and covered with gravel that was flung from trucks over the winter to cover the ice.

One year, on a Saturday in May, Cubie and I pause on the bridge, lean over the rails, and look beyond the chunks of ice flowing north to see the water instead.

We are sixteen and on our way downtown.

We are among the girls who walk to the park and act like there's a big thing that needs to be done further downtown. The guys are there, showing up in their trucks, bought through loans co-signed by their mothers. They earn wages for truck payments from high paying jobs at SuperValu or the mine. They wear cut-offs, throw Frisbees, drink beer and pretend not to notice the bridge. Other girls are there, lounging on the grass, bored and haughty. Music from a vehicle's eight-track provides the sound track. A weekend promise of summer ahead.

"Let's not go down there," I say to Cubie at the last step on the bridge.

"Come on," she says, her feet already on the path. She stops, tilts a sandal to let out a small stone and faces me, hands on hips. "What is *with* you?" Her eyes have too much makeup; iridescent smears all the way to her plucked eyebrows. Behind her cosmetics, I catch a new intent in her eyes. We are trying too hard, the first rule broken. The Frisbee lands close to us. Cubie rocks on her sandals to test the trail and walks down the hill to pick it up. Another rule is broken and we still haven't had our first cigarette.

I hope we will walk by the park, be noticed and head to Hougen's to try on bras or buy ornaments for our rooms. After a reasonable amount of time, we walk back and if, I mean only if, someone notices us we might veer to the park. I am next to my best friend whose eyelids are glowing green and nasty, standing with one hip jutting out, holding the Frisbee and saying, "who wants it?" My toes, dusty and sweaty, slide forward from the tilt and hang over my new summer sandals. The shorts that seemed like a good idea an hour ago riding horribly high. Blisters might be next.

"Give it," says a guy in a Pablo Cruise muscle shirt. "Give it."

"Give it to him," from me.

"I don't know how to throw these things!" her bright reply. The girls notice us. Cubie senses them and lets the Frisbee fly in a perfect arc to

muscle shirt. Her macramé purse swings and bangs against her hip as she crosses the lawn to the girls. She throws herself beside them and asks for a light. I get there in time to hear a girl say that this is a private conversation. A fat kid runs near, picks up a stick and makes as if to throw it at us. I stand beside the group squinting to see four grade twelve girls dressed in ironed jeans and sweatshirts.

The noise of hockey cards clothes-pinned to bike wheels alerts the group to the road. Three grade niners ride by on their way downtown. They have swimming towels, and they are on their way to Public Swim at the Lion's Pool. I look at Cubie sitting on the grass away from the girls, surveying the Frisbee game. She ignores my "let's get out of here" look and rifles her hands through the dry grass, making a small heap. A plume of smoke rises from the pile.

"Something smells like burning hair," a newcomer, Grant, our grade. He has a ten speed and leans it against the fence before sitting beside Cubie. He looks at the Frisbee game.

"This is what happens in a public place," says Janice. She shoots a look at Cubie who grins back. Flames now. Still under control.

"It usually smells like shit around here," Janice says to Cubie before lifting her arms out of her sweatshirt, revealing an eyelet lace halter top underneath. She lays the sweatshirt on the ground and rolls over on her stomach with her head buried in her arms.

"We're going to the lake," the Pablo Cruise guy stumbles towards the group as if to fall on Janice. "Get up!" He lifts her by the arms and swings her to her feet laughing as she rag-dolls. This signals the majority to scramble to their vehicles. Shrugs tell us we are invited. Grant throws his bike in the back of a truck. My eyes find Cubie's. *Please, please*. She raises herself, brushes grass off her shorts, stamps out the tiny fire and swings her purse to hit me on the shoulder. *Come on*, her face says, and when she turns I see little red zigzags imprinted on the backs of her legs from sitting on the dry grass.

Me, sitting in the front of the pick-up. Legs straddling the gearshift. Trying not to crowd the driver. Cubie is looking out the window at the trees. Grant is squashed beside me. No one is talking. We are listening to a tape I have never heard. The lake is next to a gravel pit in production and the dust blinds us as we careen around a dirt road to the lake. More kids. Ten-speeds, cars, trucks.

"Do you want me to lock it?" I say. He doesn't hear me. Cubie gives me a withering look and I follow the group to the beach.

The four girls head out of trucks and walk to the edge of the water. They look matched with their shiny long hair, little cotton tops (now that

their sweatshirts are discarded) and jeans, poised at the edge of the water looking out at a point across the lake. They are separate to the guys, to assembled crowd, and even to each other. The rhythm of the day is in abeyance waiting for a signal. The smell of boiled hot dogs wafts across the lake and I strain to see a family with a Coleman stove and too many beach toys. Cubie is watching the scene and places herself in line with the girls. Their solidarity in shunning her is brittle and Cubie's face is rigid. *Come here*, we say to each other in silence. The guys stand in a semicircle.

A splash and Cubie is in the water. Her sandals and purse tossed aside. She swims across the lake with strong strokes and her laugh peals past the boiled hot dogs, over the gravel pit machines and pierces the eyelets in the lace undershirts of Janice and her crew. She throws her body under a small wave and her plump behind flashes up before she resumes her stroke. A snarl rises from the foursome but it doesn't carry. It is defeated by the exuberant pitching of male bodies into the waves as they race to catch up.

The sound of Cubie swimming and laughing carries across the lake and the years. The brilliant dots of sun on the lake obscured my view of Cubie on the other side. The day we set out to the park must have been months before Cubie jumped in the lake. Memory fuses the days together. On that Saturday there would have been shards of candle ice clinging to the edge of the bank. I lingered that summer but Cubie hurried. I remember my torment when she marched ahead of me on the bridge, in a hurry to pick up the game and plunge in the lake. I stood on the shore, drenched with relief, yet dry as the dust that spiraled from the gravel pit.

Crossing the bridge back to Riverdale, that day, I hear the rabble of a flock of trumpeter swans, following the course of the river, on their way north. They all face the same direction in their movement, and I see how they hold themselves in aerodynamic precision, beaks straight ahead, webbed feet held horizontal to the land below, wings flapping, their movements and colours in complete unison. Their voices broadcast: spring is here, there are things to do, and more open water will be found ahead. Once they pass, their voices fade into the breeze and it is silent except for the sound of water and a car crossing the bridge. I hear another voice. It is a swan, separated from the flock, flying solo, a formation of one, but there is no desperation in its motions; and I guess it is a scout, either setting off on its own to find the course, or taking the role of a sweep, gauging the landscape and ensuring that no member of the flock is left behind.