

*Rhoda Elizabeth Playfair*

## BEND IN THE ROAD

EACH YEAR he made the trip by bus. Each of his fourteen summers he had travelled the same road, that wound past prairie fields and poplar groves and buffalo willow till it reached the river and the bridge that spanned straight to the second section of his journey, then passed through prairie villages that idled in the sun, and made a turn, and there it was—a certain hill, a single clump of trees, and just beyond—The Lake.

He always thought of it that way. In capitals. It had a name, but that was something other people used. To him, it was The Lake. Here he had dreamed his fourteen summers' dreams, that now were at an end.

Of all the things that mattered when his father first had said that they must move, The Lake came first. He could not think of summer as a season without The Lake and grandfather's small cottage on the rise that overlooked the shore. Long before memory had taken form and crystallized the shadows of his childhood, he had played upon that shore—dug moats that undermined his castles, searched for shell-shaped treasure, watched waves wash ceaselessly across the sand. How could this summer be the last?

Behind the cottage, thickets climbed the hill, and just beyond that hill were others where the berry bushes ripened in the sun and corn fields whispered in the evening. Paths criss-crossed in and out. He knew them all, had shared each one with rabbits, squirrels, skunks, and overheard while meadowlarks made music.

It was along these paths that cowslips, wild sweet peas and yellow daisies grew, and up and down the hollows, roses, scenting all of summer, stretched forth pinkly in the sun.

He had dug out some daisies one cool day and put them in the wagon that they used for hauling water, and brought them down to plant them in the garden. The garden was a rock affair dug from the little rise below the cottage, where his grandfather grew pansies, white alyssum, and the torrid-coloured zinnias that bloomed

until the frost. He had put the daisies here and there between the other flowers, and watered well. He often helped grandfather with the water. Pail on pail. He'd stand with his bare legs braced hard against the waves and scoop it up, and clump across the sand with water slopping at his knees and climb the rocky stairway till he reached the proper tier where he would ration it along the row. Then down again. And in, and out, and over, up and back. A garden took an awful lot of water. Who would be helping grandfather next year?

He'd learned so many things when he was at The Lake. Sometimes it seemed that all the worthwhile things he knew had been taught in those once-upon-a-summer. He'd learned to swim. But that, of course, was long ago, when he was very young, and time was just beginning. Still, he remembered all the way it was. The water, cold against his knees and thighs, and creeping to his waist, and underneath, the rock bits harsh beneath his feet. Often his grandfather would take the oars and put them in the boat and row along the bay, and he would try to hitch a ride behind.

"Hey Grandpa! Let me ride!"

"Why do you want to ride? Why don't you swim?"

"But I can't swim!"

"So? If you always ride—how will you learn?"

The boat would pull away and he would try again, arms flailing furiously, with back and legs refusing to co-operate until, at last, he mastered the new art, and hooking rides behind the boat was better than before because he didn't *have* to ride—could push away, pretend he was a porpoise, or seal-dive through a rising crest of wave.

And so the summers passed.

When he was older, he had learned to row. What he had really wanted was to take the boat, and motor up and down The Lake like other boys, but grandfather had said, "You walk before you run," and showed him how to fit the two oars in the oar locks, and pointed out that both must pull together if he wanted to go straight.

Gradually he learned. Hot afternoons when grandfather was napping, he would put on leather gloves and row around the bay, and back and forth, until the muscles in his back and arms grew strong and he could row clear to the point, beyond the rocks, and still be back in time for tea.

Grandfather would be waiting.

"How was it?"

"Good!"

They'd brace their bare feet in the sand and heave the boat up on its wooden rollers, and go sit upon the handkerchief of lawn between the garden and the shore, where grandmother poured tea. Tea nowhere ever tasted like that tea. Hot, sweet, sipped to the accompaniment of water murmuring old tales of time in eons long ago when wind and water were earth's sole communication. And while they drank, they would feed cookie corners to the dogs—the brown one with the gentlemanly whiskers and the big black Lab whose eyes were always sad. This year, both of the dogs were gone. The changes wrought from summer's end to summer were unthinkable.

Some of his best friends were the boys and girls in other cottages along the beach. They never wrote or even sent a card at Christmas, but when summer came again they took up time whence it had been suspended.

"Hi!"

"Hi!"

"When did you come?"

"This afternoon. The bus was twenty minutes late."

"You pass?"

"I don't know yet. Did you?"

"Yeah. Lucky, eh? We found out on Friday."

"Lucky."

"Dad's gone into town. He's bringing back some wieners. Come on down later and we'll have a fire. Okay?"

"Okay."

The bonds between, allowed so long to slacken, pulled taut and held as firmly as before.

Last summer there had been a little trouble. One of the girls had fooled around and put a stone through old McArter's window. The old man had gone to grandfather at once and *he* had got the blame. He'd let it stand. You couldn't blab on girls and anyway, a window wasn't that expensive. The tough part was the disappointed voice of grandfather—not telling him the truth. He kind of wished all winter that he had—but there were some things you just *couldn't* tell.

The days were winged from sunrise through to twilight. The nights were greedy, clutching at the dawn. Time was a Bluebeard, lopping all the hours off. For this last summer he must try to banish time.

He did the things he'd always done. He took the wagon that they used for hauling water down the road that led past grandfather's until it reached the pump, where he would pump the cream can full of water. The road was hot and sandy,

tempered to bare feet. Before the power came, he and grandfather would walk down to the icehouse where the ice remained in chunks all summer long, beneath its sawdust layers. All the kids had loved the icehouse. They had descended through its door into another world—dark, cold and damp—but all the way back with the ice their feet were grateful for hot sand and water waiting.

He tramped the hills and tried not to remember that when next season's leaves turned yellow, dried and fell, he would not see them.

He fed the squirrels grandfather had tamed behind the cottage, and made a wooden cross for one found dead.

He fished with grandfather. They were both quiet fishermen and liked to troll the bay at evening when the wind had blown on down towards the Dakotas, and the sun prepared to keep a rendezvous. This was peace. To fish, while overhead gulls wheeled in tireless orbit, and shadows crept on grey feet through the hills and every inch of sky was incandescent glory. This was time indescribable, imprinted on the heart.

"Hey, Grandpa."

"M'mmm?"

"Looks like we're skunked."

"Looks like it. Want to quit?"

"Okay."

"The fishing isn't what it used to be. Remember? We could always count on catching one or two—".

"I wish things never had to change!"

He swallowed past the lump that filled his throat and furiously yanked in on his line. He hadn't meant his voice to break that way. He hoped grandfather hadn't noticed. There was a moment's silence till a gull's shrill keening broke the spell and grandfather said quietly, "Perhaps tomorrow will be better."

The last day came. Somehow he hadn't quite believed in it though he had lived with it all summer. He'd always disliked summer's end when piers were taken in, and boats were put away, and autumn overnight possessed the beach. Even so, the leaves that fell in careless patterns up and down the land were blankets for new growth, and promised spring when he would come again. And so it had been bearable. This summer's end was different. Bleak and final. He felt pain in the marrow of his bones.

He got up early so that he could walk back in the hills, a pilgrimage he dreaded, but must make or brand himself a coward. His feet knew where to go. Along the cliff and down through a ravine, and up, until he reached a small plateau

where thistles bloomed and cactus lay in wait for feet that were unwary. Where the path forked, one branch went on out to the point that rounded out the bay, the other took him up again. He chose to climb, and presently he reached a high point where he stood and saw it all. The Lake, waves creaming in across the empty sand and, in the bay, two pelicans majestic in the sunlight.

This was goodbye. This was the moment he had lived all summer. Once he'd thought that he might cry, but now he knew he wouldn't. Tears couldn't alter things, or change the way he felt, or give him back one hour of summers past. He seized a rock and hurled it far across the water.

The road that led past grandfather's went far beyond the icehouse, turning here and there until it reached the highway and went on to everywhere. Whether he wanted to or not, he had to take it.

He raised his head. The wind blew in his face.

## CARMELITE NUN IN RETREAT

*Nancy-Lou Patterson*

This is chastity: to sit  
so still in the winterchastened woods  
that the wild male pheasant will carry the green  
flare of his sex within your reach;

to herd the hunters from the fields  
turning their long blue guns away  
letting the firetailed squirrel run hinderless  
the quivering hedgehog raise his silver pins  
the crows call out of towers of grey air  
above the disciplines of trees;

to climb barefoot in clumsy boots  
and walk in the tilted field now **stiff**  
with goldenrod gone shabby, where  
one day you will lie **content**  
in the arms of your bridegroom grave.