

My Muskoka

By Susan Nairn

Following the path of rocks and trees to happiness

The jagged outcropping of land now called Armstrong Point, named for my ancestors, was loved by many family members before me. Muskoka was a summer pilgrimage that quickly evolved into the only place that I will ever truly call home.

The passion that began generations ago, rapidly coursed through my veins before I was even aware that I existed. The first family cottage in Port Carling was erected in 1908 after a fire claimed what had originally been built on the family plot of land. That first cottage was followed by two others in 1909 and 1911.

My Muskoka is a blurred beginning – scattered shadows of my youth that dance in the corners of my eyes are sprinkled with memories of being a kid at the cottage. It is recollections of playing hide and seek on the maid's staircase in my uncle's cottage, learning to dive from our dock, running from cottage to cottage around that beautiful point of land on Lake Rosseau and jumping on the spring boards over the creek that served as a shortcut back home. The cottage paved the way for my first dock spider encounter, my first picnic on an uninhabited island, my first scar and the first time tent caterpillars dropped from the trees in such multitudes that we had to walk with umbrellas on a sunny day. I caught my first fish, had my first cook-out at the point between our cottages and experienced my first loss of a pet at the cottage.

That cottage was the gateway to the person I have evolved into and the memories of all of those family moments will continue to shape my future self.

From the earliest of summers that are etched into my memory, we packed our car and headed north for the months of July and August. The excitement would begin to build as the school year came to a close. I would eagerly start folding shorts, T-shirts and bathing suits in anticipation of being able to fill that suitcase and wave goodbye to Oakville as we “hit the road” and headed for the place that truly cap-



Photograph: Heather Douglas

Susan Nairn's family has had a Muskoka cottage since the early 1900s. Her family moved to Muskoka full time in 1976 and she can't imagine living anywhere else.

tured our hearts and souls. The cottage would welcome my family with its familiar pungent scent and the weathered winter sheets were ceremoniously pulled from the windows. As the cobwebs were cleared from the corners, the cottage was brought to life and, once again, the warmth of our Muskoka home truly enveloped us.

In the true spirit of our home away from home, we sat on the porch listening to the waves hitting the shore and the song of the frogs welcoming us back for another season.

At the close of summer in 1976, our world changed forever. There was no rush to pack the car. There were no sheets put on the windows and the porch furnishings remained steadfast in their position. We

weren't going home – we were home. With slight trepidation, only because I could not say goodbye to my friends, I embarked on a new life as full-time Muskoka resident.

Winter, as a new native of Port Carling, was a whole new world. Although we had spent some time at Shamrock Lodge for a family weekend on several occasions, the snow was whiter than I had ever imagined it could be and the amount that fell was overwhelming. Forts that my brother and I created were more like igloos and the snow was so deep on the ground, my brother would mini-ski from the roof of our new year-round home and land on pillows of soft white flakes. The snow days that shut down our schools were abundant and the spirit of our white Christ-

mas was unequalled.

I was undoubtedly distraught when I had to leave for college in 1988, but upon graduation, the pull of home was too great and I left the bustling city life to return to the only place that I truly felt like myself. Friends from college would ask how I could live here year round, and I would ask “how could I not?” I never felt like the true version of me until both feet were on Muskoka soil and I was comforted by the show of cosmic pyrotechnics that are only visible north of that assiduous city life. The vast array of stars and Northern Lights are my security blanket. That Northern Star is the beacon that calls me home. I learned my multiplication tables here, I learned to drive here and I learned to love here.

I always feel the true sense of peace and a palpable change in energy when I am travelling north on Highway 400. The city lights are absorbed into the fading background and the rocks and trees carve the path to the place I feel the happiest.

My Muskoka is now my four season bliss. It cloaks me in the warmth of the summer nights and lets the dance of the snowflakes play before my eyes in winter. It awakens my senses and my feeling of renewal in the spring and it colours the palette of my world in autumn. It serenades me with the songs of the creatures that share my home and it lulls me to sleep with the symphony of the crickets.

Muskoka, for me, is a portal. It allows me to thrive in the present, it encourages me to dream of my future and it bathes me in the warm memories of my past.

It combines all of the beauty in my life and, in turn, reflects that beauty in its landscapes, its water, its sunsets and its ability to assuage any doubt that I belong in any place other than here.

Susan Nairn hopes to forever combine her two great passions – Muskoka and writing. She continues to write her blog and hopes to finish her first novel in 2013.