

Home is Where the Art Is

The painting hung on the wall unnoticed by most who passed it. It was not a lack of quality or style that caused its obscurity but its location. The wall of the old lodge on Lake Clear was not the place one expected to find fine art. A photo of a large pike would have more aroused the anglers who frequently walked by it. Yet, over the years the painting held its place of honour, if for no other purpose, than as a concession to the few visitors that were not walking tackle boxes. The painting was not important in the world of art. No one would have mistaken it for a newly discovered work from the Group of Seven. It seemed more the work of a talented, yet untrained amateur. Still, it had a certain charm that made it seem not too out of place on the wall of the old lodge. The scene was of a moonlit night, with a hazy, cloud draped moon suspended in a misty sky over a laneway leading to a dimly visible cottage in the background. In the foreground, walking down the laneway, stood a young woman, her back to the viewer and clothed in a white cotton dress. The moon light played magically off her long blond hair giving it a translucent, halo quality. It was this dusky blond woman that gave the painting its charm. She seemed so vulnerable and alone standing in that empty, moonlit laneway. Why, you could almost feel the chill of the damp night air raise goose-bumps on her bare arms and legs.

Over the years, the painting would draw comments from the few guests who noticed it and was the topic of endless speculation as to whom the woman was and where the cottage might be located. Since the work was unsigned and no one knew just who had painted it, these speculations were destined to go on without end. Each year a new crop of visitors would view the painting and offer their opinion as to whom the mystery woman was and what she was doing out

alone on that moonlit night. Around the campfires and cottages many evenings were spent speculating on the various tales the painting could tell.

John Calvert was feeling a lot older than his newly acquired eighteen years. Vacationing on his own for the first time, he had talked his parents into lending him and his buddies the Desota for a vacation in the Canadian woods. Fresh out of high school, this was to be their first trip as adults. They viewed it as a right of passage, free and on their own to experience the adventures of life without the restraint of parental rules. They had arrived too late in the evening to go out fishing, but they were just in time for the dance held each Saturday night in the old lodge. While they didn't have any dates and knew no local girls, they went anyway to enjoy the beer and fiddle music that Mrs. Franklin assured them would be available in ample supply. John was just brushing the sawdust off the wet beer bottle when his eyes were caught and held by the painting.

Maybe it was the moonlight. Maybe it was the girl. Maybe it was an empathy he felt for her loneliness, he being far away from his home and on his own for the first time. Whatever it was, he was captured. He pulled a chair around to the side of a nearby table and spent the evening with his eyes locked onto the canvas. His friends tried two or three times to interest him in what they were doing, but John refused to respond. Finally, with a bit of disgust in their voices they bid him good night and suggested that he could find his own way back to the cottage whenever he snapped out of the daze he appeared to be in. It wasn't until closing time with Mrs. Franklin's gentle coaxing, that John finally trudged back to his cabin, to sleep and to dream.

For the rest of the vacation John was a disappointment to his friends. He seemed aloof and distracted. His mind was somewhere distant from whatever they were doing. He fished, he hiked and he played around a bit, but it was not with his usual intensity and concentration. The only time he showed any spark at all was when they sat down to one of Mrs. Franklin's home cooked meals, served in the old lodge. During these times, John would gulp down his food and spend the majority of the dinner hour lost in a daze, staring at the painting. He would sit locked in this stupor until either Mrs. Franklin or one of his buddies would stand in front of him, blocking his view and insist that it was time for him to go back to the cottage. Eventually, his friends gave up their efforts to break his moody behaviour and left him to find adventures of their own.

Two weeks passed in a flash and John soon realized that he had to leave his daydreams to return home. Before leaving he tried unsuccessfully to buy the painting from Mrs. Franklin. "Sorry," she had said, "that painting is just too much a part of this old lodge for me to let it go." Despite his strongest pleas and offers of cash, Mrs Franklin was steadfast in her refusal to sell. Finally, in response to the pleas and pestering of his friends, John gave up on the painting and headed the Desota back to the states.

John's parents hardly knew the young man that walked back into their house. At first, they dismissed the difference in their son as part of his passage from boy to man, but the changes that had overtaken their son were more than a simple loss of adolescence. He no longer seemed to have any drive or ambition. Previously, he had talked at great lengths about his plans for college and the future. Now, his days were spent locked away in his room, a ghost of a man who had to be persuaded to join the family for meals. At first his friends tried to coax him back into his

active lifestyle, but one by one, they disappeared into lives that no longer took notice of John. As weeks evolved into months without a change in his lethargy, John's parents decided he would have to find a job. However, the mopey, detached behaviour that John had developed made him virtually unemployable. He drifted from job to job until landing a position as nightwatchman at a local construction site. At last, he had found a suitable vocation. No one watches a watchman or cares if he daydreams. John's winter passed in a fog of days and nights that seemed to run together without visible separation. In the fall the dreams began.

At first it seemed to be just another daydream, only the characters seemed more real and better defined. The focus was the girl in the painting. In his many daydreams she never seemed this close. She is married and lives in the cottage. It is not a marriage of love. Her husband is a coarse man apparently ten or so years older than the girl. He is a friend of her father's and she has been persuaded to marry him to prevent his family from breaking her father's legs over an unpaid gambling debt. While she does not love him, he is from a well off family and her marriage will make her father's debts a family matter not subject to forceful retaliation. John seems to know all of this without actually participating. As if some unseen ghost, he drifts through this woman's life as it unfolds, able to see and hear all, but affecting nothing.

Each dream is like an act in a continuing drama. Each time John is drawn ever deeper into the young woman's life. Her marriage is happy at first. She lives in a fine cottage and her husband seems attentive and kind. If anything, he seems overly concerned about how she spends her time. His questions about her daily routine are detailed and probing. She discovers that any change in her routine is met with additional questions and sometimes anger. Despite his lavish spending, he

begins to demand an accounting for each penny she spends and becomes increasingly more reluctant to authorize her to purchase anything other than necessities. He begins to spend more and more time away from home. Lonely and bored she uses her time to cultivate a few friendships among some women who live nearby. One is an artist and offers to teach her a bit about painting. Painting changes her world.

On canvas she lives as she never guessed possible. Everything a mind can conceive can be made to take form and live. All of life's imperfections disappear upon her whim or are magnified into a distortion of reality. Using borrowed paints and stolen time she transforms her life into something that transcends reality. The student surpasses the teacher and longs to explore on her own. Her friend suggests that if she were to plant a garden she would help her sell enough of the produce to buy a few paints and canvases of her own. These are purchased, hidden under a step and away from her husband's investigations.

In John's world, reality was seeking to reestablish its control over his life. A watchman is paid to watch and not to sleep. Daydreaming may be acceptable so long as nothing gets stolen; but, being caught twice for sleeping will get you fired. John was out of options. Out of work, void of friends and unable to concentrate, he accepted a suggestion from his parents to seek psychiatric help.

The Psychiatrist did not take long to focus in on John's problem. Delusional fantasy is best treated with harsh doses of reality and mild doses of Librium. Through therapy John was made to see that his dreams could be controlled and dismissed. A painting was just a painting and nothing more. Within a year his life was beginning to return to normal.

Normalcy overtook John with nearly the same speed as his delusions. Before long he was back to school, surrounded by friends and strongly interested in a young woman who left no doubt about her reality. The painting and the dreams were but a blip in a largely normal past. Years passed.

On their wedding day John's new bride announced that she wanted to crush forever any lingering doubt he might have about his sanity. With the blessings of his family and psychiatrist, she suggested a return to Mrs. Franklin's Lodge for the honeymoon. This would forever bury that one unsettling period in John's life. Although uncertain, John agreed, encouraged by his bride's joking vow to use the warm arts of her heart to make him forget that cold creature of oil and canvas.

The lodge had remained unchanged since John's last visit. Surely Mrs. Franklin had added a new wrinkle or two to her wind beaten cheeks, but they passed unnoticed to John's eyes. To his new bride's relief, he never glanced at the painting after pointing it out to her on the day they arrived. Her boast was affirmed and to her thinking John's cure was complete. They settled into an enjoyable vacation. On the third night of their stay the dreams returned.

The garden is doing quite well. Neighbours are coming from around the countryside to buy nearly all she can produce both with soil or brush. Even her husband seems pleased to have the fresh vegetables. The collection of paints and canvases under the stairs has grown. However, her husband's pleasure at the vegetables is short lived. Why must she grow so much? What's she doing with all the excess? His questioning becomes more determined as he detects an uneasiness in his wife which he is certain is a sign she is hiding something. His trips away grow longer and

when he returns he is drunken and quick tempered. There is a meanness in the man now. Fuelled by alcohol, anger and a desire to dominate, his questions tear at her in an unanswerable spray spiked with rye whiskey and profanity. She sits, withstanding the onslaught in terrified silence. The anger and profanity rage onto a level defying all reason, drawing power from her silence and fear. A hand is raised and a blow delivered. John felt it crash into his face grinding teeth against teeth. He awoke.

John's wife sat looking down at him. "Some dream," she said, "Want to talk about it?" John looked up at her, unsure of just where he was. He recovered quickly and feeling a bit embarrassed asked, "Did I wake you?" She answered, that while he had awakened her she was ready to get up anyway. She was more concerned about the apparently violent way that John had come out of his dream. She was worried that maybe they had pushed things a bit too far coming back to this place. John assured her that his dream was just a common falling dream and nothing to be concerned about. He suggested they both grab some breakfast and go for a walk.

After breakfast they headed out down the dirt road leading away from the lake and back through some abandoned farmsteads. It was a pleasant day and they walked at a brisk pace. They chose no specific direction, turning onto side roads as their whimsey determined. Within an hour they were delightfully lost and caught up in the adventure of exploration. Off to their left they noticed an older cottage set well back from the road down an overgrown laneway. It looked empty and deserted. His wife suggested they walk up and look around. "Who knows, maybe there is treasure or a ghost or two about!" she remarked.

The house was deserted enough, at least of human inhabitants. Apparently, there was a small menagerie of mice, racoons and squirrels that still called this place home. Dim light filtered in through the curtainless windows, casting shadows across the few odds and ends that were scattered about. The air was musty with animal smells and damp rot. The walls and ceiling were stained by water that had leaked in through the neglected roof. “Even a ghost would find this place a bit creepy.” John’s wife announced, “I guess we better head back before it gets too dark.” The walk home was subdued by the ruined spirit they both found to be the true inhabitant of the place.

That night John dreamed again. A fight is in progress. Glass is breaking and a woman sobs. The woman in the white dress is being dragged by her hair. Her husband, in a drunken rage, is pulling her towards the door, a painting in his other hand. She is bleeding. He throws her out into the night the painting with her. She screams and begs to be let back into the house. The husband in a drunken rage is tearing the house apart looking for other evidence of his wife's artistic activities. He warns her to stay close because he is far from being finished with her. She is terrified. In a single instance, she is both too afraid to run or stay. She seems to look directly at John and screams for help.

Suddenly, John is in the dream. He sees the house in the distance, down the moonlit laneway. He can hear the sobs and breaking glass. He runs to the house to see the woman, just as her husband opens the door to drag her back inside. The man sees him and grabs for him, but John is quick and agile. He dodges the drunken lunge, causing the husband to go flying off the porch and into the dark. A scream cuts through the darkness and then there is silence. As the moon emerges

from behind a cloud its light reveals the husband impaled on the iron spiked top of the fence.

John's wife awoke to an empty bed. Outside the dawn was still an hour away behind the slate grey morning sky. She waited, expecting to find John wandering in after some dreamy morning walk along the county roads. It was so like John to go off wandering, she thought. Soon she grew tired of waiting and wandered off herself to find some breakfast. When breakfast had long ago been served, eaten and the mess carried away, Mrs Franklin suggested that she gather a few men and have a look about for her missing husband. "Probably find him out on the lake fishing," she encouraged. With the help of a few of the men from the other cottages she set off to look for John. After checking the boats; none were missing, and the road along the lake, their search led them back the dusty old laneway to the old farm cottage. They found John there. He had pried up a loose step, revealing some long ago dried up paints and brushes, as well as a few unfinished canvases. John was quite dead his hand resting along the edge of a painting: an unfinished portrait of a woman with sad eyes and long, tangled blonde hair, her pale lips curled into the beginnings of a smile.

The coroner's report said heart attack, but John's wife and Mrs. Franklin found that hard to accept. There was too much wrong with such a simple explanation. Even if they could overlook John's young age and strong physical condition, the diagnosis of heart attack still failed to explain one curious, yet unprovable fact. Later that week, back at the old lodge, Mrs. Franklin was serving coffee and listening the that morning's catch of fish stories. Suddenly, the pot slipped from her fingers and crashed to the floor. She faced the wall, her eyes fixed upon the painting. Two figures now stood looking down the moonlit laneway: the woman in the white

cotton dress and a taller, masculine figure who was never there before. A man, who all agreed, looked suspiciously like John. They stand there to this day, locked forever in moonlight, hand in hand.