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Lake Stones

Kristine M. Miller

Corn, corn, on the cob!

Corn, corn—

I was ten that summer and too old for the silly sing-song I had made up when I was younger. But it still helped to pass the endless hour's journey to Grandpa and Grandma's cottage—and to control the excitement that made me itch to grip my hands on the wheel. I was sure that if I could drive, I'd get us there much faster than my father, who seemed to be going deliberately slowly this Friday afternoon.

Labor Day weekend. The last weekend of the green Wisconsin summer. The last trip to the cottage before Grandpa and Grandma shut it for the winter. "Some folks close up the weekend before Labor Day," Grandpa had once said with a snort. "But not me."

The car rolled on. The westering sun glowed through the tall green leaves waving in the roadside fields.

Corn, corn, on the cob!

My little sister joined in, the two of us bouncing up and down.

Corn, corn, on the cob!

Suddenly I sat up straight. We were turning off the main highway onto "J" Road, the final mile and a quarter before the cottage. On this stretch, the car's tires hit gravel just as we passed the boarded-up schoolhouse, stirring a tremendous cloud of dove-gray dust outside and a flurry of activity inside. My father, mother, little sister, and I all rushed to crank the windows before the dust cloud boiled in. Low-hanging branches swished the car's roof as we passed, streaking the film that blanketed the vehicle. We lurched in the road's ruts, and my knuckles whitened from gripping the handstrap. My foot twitched furiously.

There was the driveway—and the crimson cardinal perched forever atop the sign that read, A.T. Meisterhardt.

The car turned in slow motion onto the large grassy lawn. Almost before it stopped moving, I leaped out and raced across the grass to Grandpa, who quit pushing the hand mower and stood with open arms. I bounded into his sweaty embrace.

"We-e-e-l. Look who's here!" He chuckled and tossed me into the air. I flew like a little bird, but he caught me again and gave me another squeeze against his damp, white-ribbed undershirt. It smelled sweet, like aftershave and mosquito repellent and sweat. Then he turned to amble toward my folks and my little sister, his baggy brown pants flapping around his short legs.

And I took off running through the woods to see the Lake. Light flickered on the damp stones of the path and mosquitoes snipped at my face. Branches and leaves whipped against my bare arms. I burst from behind the veil of green, and there it was—Lake Michigan, flowing from one end of the horizon to the other in the late afternoon sun.

I felt all my hurry melt away.

The Lake's fresh breath blew full in my face. The smell gave the air a different quality, like wind newly washed by rain, or the breeze at the top of a mountain.

The Lake's color changed with its moods—one day exuberant blue, another sulky gray or angry white. Its voice changed, too—now roaring, now murmuring, but always speaking to me.

I stood drinking it in, wishing I could stay there endlessly. But the shadows of the trees stretched all the way across the beach to touch the water now, and I knew I should go inside.

Grandpa was just holding a match to the logs laid in the huge stone fireplace when I walked into the living room. Grandma set her book down and rose from the corner armchair. Its flowered muslin slipcover gave off a musty smell. She came toward me with small steps like a doe, exclaiming as she always did, "Oh, Katie, your eyes are just the blue of the Lake!" A sweet smile lighted her face, and she reached down to touch my cheek.

I gave her a quick kiss, grabbed a sandwich off the plate on the table, and turned to squat by the fireplace next to Grandpa, who was now probing in the flames with a long iron poker.

The fireplace was made of large, round stones colored the same salmon, gray, black, and puce hues as pebbles from the beach. But these stones were, emphatically, not from the Lake. "If they were, they might explode when they got hot," my father had explained over and over. He made me smile. He thought he was the only one who knew that. But Grandpa had told me all about the stones long ago.

I looked over at Grandpa. "Tell me about the stones again, please." No answer. He was staring absently into the fire, a faraway look on his face. "Grandpa?" I was just about to tap him on the shoulder when he cleared his throat and stood up abruptly, pulling me to my feet with him. He stuck his thumbs under the lapels of his old flannel shirt, put on his storyteller's voice, and began.

"These stones are very porous," he said, grabbing my hand and rubbing my fingers over their rough surface. "That means that if they sit in the Lake they absorb water. Now, what happens when we heat water? When Grandma puts the teakettle on?" He rushed on without waiting for my answer. "Yes! The teakettle whistles because the water heats to boiling and turns to steam and the steam has to have somewhere to escape and so it goes out through the whistle!"

He paused and raised his index finger slowly. "Now. Suppose that we heat these stones that are full of water because they have been sitting in the Lake. What happens? Same thing. The water starts to turn to steam. But the steam has nowhere to escape, so it builds and builds and builds until so much steam pressure has built up that KERBLOOIE! The stones explode!" His hands flew apart in a sudden explosion of their own that startled me and I jumped a little bit. He reached down and tapped me on the end of the nose with one finger. "And that, Miss Katie, is why we don't build fireplaces with Lake stones!"

He gave a little sigh and squatted back down in front of the fire, continuing to poke at it with that same faraway look on his face, while my mother came to shoo me upstairs to bed.

There were two bedrooms in the attic, and they were as different as Grandma and Grandpa. One room faced the forest on the west. A hush fell as you stepped into this room, like stepping into a church. Then came the early evening twittering of a bird, the rustle of trees in a light breeze. Soft starlight filtered gently

through the window, hung with simple white curtains.

The other room faced the Lake, and often the noise of the waves roared an exciting challenge. A reckless sense of adventure filled me. I imagined myself a brave and beautiful nurse saving the lives of handsome soldiers, the most handsome of whom would fall in love with me.

Both rooms fascinated me, yet I always seemed to choose the Lake room to sleep in, as I did tonight. My little sister followed suit. After I was tucked in between the clean, rough sheets, I studied the electrical conduit twisting its way up to the wooden rafters. I still watched it, after the single bulb had been clicked off, by the spartan moonlight shining in through the uncurtained window. For a long time, I couldn't sleep because of the inexpressible joy at being at Grandpa's cottage again—and sadness that it was the end of another season. The waves' crashing quieted to shooshing on the sand, and the sound finally lulled me to sleep.

I woke up very early, when it was barely light, and saw that Grandpa had come up to sleep on the spare cot, as he often did, to listen to the waves in his sleep, too. A thin, black sock lay across his eyes—his window shade. I thought I heard him sigh, softly and sadly. But maybe it was just the waves.

When I woke again, the morning sun glared through the window. Grandpa was not there. The black sock lay folded neatly on top of his pillow. I dressed quickly and tiptoed down the stairs and out to the front lawn, where I discovered him, as I had many times before, dressed in his plaid robe and striped pajamas, staring out at the morning sun sparkling on the Lake's placid surface.

"Calm as a mill pond," he murmured as I padded up to his side. The tiniest waves lapped. Grandpa took a deep breath of dew-fresh Lake air and exhaled slowly. "Ahhhhh. Smell that! And where else can a man stand in his front yard in his bathrobe?" He stretched grandly.

After we had gazed our fill, he and I went in companionable silence to the kitchen and sat at the corner table, where he made toast for me, inserting the thin slices of white bread into the side flaps of the toaster. The heating coils snaking back and forth glowed red. A delicious smell rose. At just the right instant, Grandpa snapped the flaps down and flipped the browning slices with expert fingers. I had never seen him burn a piece of toast. Ever.

Down the hall, the floor creaked. Grandma was up. The early morning quiet was over.

There was the sound of voices, and my parents came down the stairs carrying my sleepy-eyed little sister. Grandma walked into the kitchen; pots and pans clanked. The voices carried over their din. Above it all came the bang of the screen door and the noise of excited confusion. The uncles and aunts were arriving for the day—a day that flew by in swimming and sunning and building sand forts. Too soon this last day at Grandpa and Grandma's cottage was almost over. We would not stay for Sunday—that was a day of rest.

Before supper ("to work up an appetite," explained Grandpa) or sometimes after ("to walk off our meal") or sometimes just for no particular reason at all, we went for long walks down the beach, the sand squeaking under our bare feet. "Only sand in the U.S. that squeaks," swore my father and uncles. Tonight, as always, Grandpa led the procession, walking briskly, gesturing at this or that point of interest—a gull swooping low

over our heads and skimming out across the water; a flock of sandpipers scurrying away, marking the damp sand with honeycomb-patterned claw prints; a smooth, round stone, perfect for skipping.

Grandpa bent and picked it up, caressing it and flipping it in his palm like a collector testing the worth of a rare gold coin. When it passed the test, he gripped the stone lightly in his fingertips, drew his elbow back, and then with a swift flick of his wrist, sent it flying parallel to the water's surface.

We held our breaths to see how many times it would touch down. Once. Twice. Three times—skip-skip-skip. Nice. Six times! Aaaaaaaah. A good one.

Now my father and my uncles were picking the beach for skipping stones, swaying like hunchbacks, eyes and hands darting here and there. Finally finding the perfect stone they would straighten up and send it flying. Flick!

But on the way home, Grandpa walked more slowly, that same sad look on his face, until he lagged far behind. The others didn't notice. But I hung back a little, too, to watch him. He was the last one up from the beach.

When we bounded into the warmth of the cottage, it was time to shuck the corn for dinner. Everyone pitched in, crowding around the huge tub full of swimming green ears, reaching in and grasping an ear in one hand, gripping a handful of green husk with the other. One mighty tug and the husk ripped away, exposing rows of bursting yellow kernels and releasing fragrant pollen that set my eyes to itching furiously.

Soon the corn danced in a cauldron of boiling water, and my sister and I had time to help our mother and aunts finish setting innumerable places at the dining table—elongated, picnic-style, with polished cedar legs that crossed like a lady's, almost at the ankles.

And then we were seated around it, snuggled together on the long benches on either side. A hush fell. Grandpa rose, drawing himself to his full five-foot, five-inch stature. Standing, with his feet planted a comfortable distance apart, his stubby fingers grasping the chair's back, Grandpa took a deep breath. The voice that boomed out next always made me shiver. "Our gracious Heavenly Father!" it began. It was the voice of an orator. A patriarch. A voice that, I had no doubt, was heeded by God. And when that voice finished, we and the food had been blessed.

Dinner was full of jokes and loud talking and platters of corn going round and round. "Darryl. Frank. Sammy," said Grandma. "Have some more!" Yet through it all Grandpa sat, his ear of corn untouched on his plate, that same sad look deepening in his eyes.

Uncle Frank was the first to notice. "Hey, Dad." He poked Grandpa in the ribs, gently. "Did you hear the one about—" And he told one of his crazy, goofy jokes. Everyone else laughed—heartily at the start, then in more strained tones as they realized that Grandpa was not joining in. What was wrong? Was Grandpa sick? No—except for the sorrow on his face, he looked as robust as ever. It must be something else. People picked at their food and glanced furtively at one another, but eventually their eyes followed Grandma's example: Everyone stared straight at Grandpa.

After what seemed an age, Grandpa lifted his head, saw the eyes, and rose slowly again. His chair scraped back. He cleared his throat.

"Sons and daughters," he began. The orator's voice had a catch in it. But it

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went on. “For nearly thirty years now this cottage has been a happy place for us all. A place of rest and refreshment. And we are grateful to the Lord for the time we have had here.

“But times and people change, and Grandma and I are not so young as we once were. Keeping up the cottage has become too great a burden on both of us.” He stopped a minute and looked at Grandma, but she was staring fixedly down at the table. Grandpa cleared his throat once more and continued.

“And so we have felt that it was in all of our best interests to do what we have now done.

“As of Tuesday at 10:00 AM, the title to this property will pass to Mr. Henry Schmidt of Oostberg.”

There was a stunned silence.

He had sold the cottage.

Then, angry voices roared. The foundation stones of my world were exploding around me. The harsh words flew like shattered granite. Grandpa stood with his jaw set like a rock. The voices clamored. How could you do this to us? Why didn't you ask us first? Surely you knew that we would want to buy . . . Grandma clucked her tongue. Twice.

I rushed blindly from the table, but no one noticed, any more than they would have noticed my angry little pebble voice if I'd tried to join the fray. It would have skipped over the troubled waters and been swallowed up. I pounded up the stairs into the Lake room, threw myself on Grandpa's cot, and began beating on his pillow while tears poured down my face. “I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” I tore at the pillowcase with my teeth. The thin black sock fell off. I grabbed it in my fists and pulled and pulled to rend it limb from limb, but it was too tough and elastic for me. I fell back exhausted and slept.

When I woke, the moon had risen an hour's worth in the sky and shone in the attic window. I tiptoed down the stairs. The lights were still on, but the fire that had blazed so brightly before dinner had died to embers. The uncles and aunts had already left. My sister slept, curled in a corner of the muslin chair like a lost kitten. I could hear my parents and grandparents in the back room, still talking in low, tense whispers.

I slipped out to gaze at the Lake from the lawn one more time, to grieve my loss. The night air was damp from the Lake. The full moon's light almost flooded out the glittery stars. I strained to take it all in, to photograph it over and over in my memory, driven by the thought, It will never be the same again.

The moon and stars ran together in little puddles of light, and I felt an unbearable ache in my throat.

And an arm around my shoulder.

Grandpa.

I stiffened under his touch. Was he aware of my hurt and anger at him? No.

I felt rage rise inside me again.

He cleared his throat as if to speak, but no words came. He stood silent as a stone. I stole a glance at him as he stood staring down the moon's silver highway on the Lake, and the look of pain on his face struck me.

I softened toward him then, a little, and slipped my hand up to his shoulder, which to my surprise, did not seem as tall anymore.