

Catharine Leggett

In Progress

paperbytes

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TREE BRANCHES scraped the sides of the trailer. Connie tightened her grip around the seat. It would take Dennis a while to get used to hauling it and parking it in tight spots.

Linda jumped up from a chaise longue set in the sun in the site next door, came running over, paperback in hand, and directed them. Her arms made wide sweeps through the air.

“I see you, I see you,” Dennis said. Linda wouldn’t hear with the windows rolled up.

Connie hadn’t seen her sister-in-law in almost five years, but watching her motion wildly and dart back and forth to check for clearance on either side made her remember how Connie’s family had always called her a take-charge type. Connie rolled down the

window and smiled, her fingers fluttering in a wave.

“Keith, they’re here,” Linda shouted over to her site, to Connie’s oldest brother, then called out to Dennis, “You’re too close to those trees. Stop.” She thrust both palms into the air. “You’re cutting it too close. Back up. Approach again.”

Dennis inched the trailer straight ahead, tilted his head from one side to the other to check the mirrors mounted on both sides of the van. “Those branches won’t hurt anything,” he said. The branches screamed against the sides of the trailer.

Dennis stopped, turned off the motor, and Connie slid from the seat into Linda’s embrace. “We expected you earlier. We’ve been watching since noon.” Linda released Connie and stepped back. “Hope the branches didn’t leave scratches.”

“Heavy traffic,” Connie said, then looked up to the top of the trailer. “I don’t think so.”

Linda had put on about twenty pounds, perhaps because of the

hysterectomy, though during phone conversations she'd claimed there were no side effects, just no more periods, and that not a side effect but a blessing.

Keith came down the short path between the two sites and stepped in behind Linda. "Hi there." He smiled and raised his hands, together open book style and full of fishing lures, oblong shapes of bright red, green, yellow, orange, pretty enough to be pieces of jewellery. "My hands are tied." His way of saying he'd have to forgo a hug from Connie and a handshake from Dennis. "You made it, I see. How did it handle?" Keith meant the trailer. "You got enough power in that?" He nodded to their van. He pulled his trailer with a half-ton.

"Seemed to," Dennis said.

"No problem with overheating?"

"Maybe a little on hills. Nothing serious."

"That's good." Keith hadn't stopped smiling. Connie remembered how that was a sign of his nervousness. "Let's get it unhitched and

positioned, get the legs dropped.” Keith looked at the lures in his hands, then headed to the picnic table. “I’ll go put these down.”

“I’ve got eggs boiling,” Linda said to Connie. “Come on over to our place and we’ll have a drink while the guys are setting up.”

In the trailer, Linda said, “Have a look inside there.” She grabbed a bottle of white wine and held the refrigerator door open for Connie to take a peek. A mountainous macaroni salad occupied most of the middle shelf, and a bowl of cole slaw and a pan of squares filled the shelf below. “I’ve got burgers for tonight, enough for Mark and Sheila, too, but I’ve got bad news about them.” She turned around to look up at Connie, her face flushed from bending and rearranging the fridge, her grey hair shining in its light. “They won’t be here until tomorrow.”

“Why not?” They were all to be here today. It had been planned for months.

“Their motor home broke down on the highway. It’s a rental. It won’t be fixed until tomorrow. I’ve got enough food here to feed an army.”

Food. Say reunion to Sheila and Keith and immediately they started to talk about food.

“Oh well, we’ll have to eat plenty. It won’t keep for long.” Sheila popped the cork on the wine bottle.

AFTER DINNER, after the cleaning up, they sat around Keith and Linda’s campfire and sipped Scotch.

Keith answered Connie’s question about this year’s fishing expeditions with one of his own. “Did I tell you about my Quebec fishing trip?”

He may have. She may have forgotten. “No.”

“No? Back in February? The week of the twelfth. Was it, Linda? Or was it the fifth? Oh, never mind, it doesn’t matter. I think it was the twelfth. It was a Saturday, anyway. Sure I didn’t tell you?”

“I’ll stop you if you have.”

A couple of times Connie thought the story sounded familiar. He’d gone with a bunch of guys to a lake deep in Northern Quebec.

“You have to understand, when I say remote, I mean it.”

“I understand.”

“The fishing shack was two hours out from the nearest town which was already far away from a city of any size, then we took snowmobiles the rest of the way, about thirty kilometres back on trails. I mean remote.” First he described the guys who went on the trip, then the lake.

Connie watched the fire’s light splash over his face. They had camped together as children and every night they gathered around the campfire and told stories. She tried to remember as many of the details as she could – how old they’d been, what they wore, her mother, her father, what they did for entertainment out in the bush. She’d been doing this lately, attempting to fill in the blanks of her past, search for a more complete picture. Many times she couldn’t remember herself in the pictures, as if she hadn’t been present in her own childhood.

Keith's voice changed. He was giving details, of no consequence to the story, but which made him smile.

Connie nodded and said, "Uh-huh." She had been doing this all along, to show that she was listening, when of course she hadn't been.

"One of the guys got sick. Chest pains. Scared the hell out of us. Another fellow and I decided to go and get a doctor; the guy was too sick to move. So we went back and picked up the doctor, and we started back to the cabin and on the way back, the other guy's snowmobile broke down."

"Really?" This, then, was the crux of the matter, what he had been angling for, the central point around which the rest of the story depended. Connie thought how her *Really?* might have sounded adolescent, possibly insincere. What should she say? Early on, Keith had singled her out as the audience. Linda would have heard the story many times before, and Dennis kept poking the fire with a long stick, which made the flames spit sparks into the night. Keith could strike up a con-

versation with just about anyone, but not with Dennis, a man of few words, certainly fewer than Keith, and with different interests, an enigma as far as Keith was concerned.

“Yes, *really*. We tried to get it going again, but we couldn’t. And it was snowing, coming down hard, not quite a blizzard, would have been if there’d been any wind at all. A bad one, too. I drove the rest of the way to the cabin with the doctor, and left the other guy.”

Keith halted the story to ask himself what the other guy’s name was. He listed a few and settled on one. “Walter. That’s what it was. No, wait a minute. Wilfred. No, no, Walter. Something that started with W. Jesus, my memory’s bad. No, it was Walter. I’m sure of it.”

Connie wondered if, as a little girl camping with her family, she had told campfire stories. Probably not. She was the youngest. And a girl. Girl stories were boring, lacked adventure.

Keith was telling how the doctor medicated the sick man who had turned blue by the time they got back, and who would have died if the

doctor hadn't come. Keith went back to collect Walter-Wilfred in the near-blinding-blizzard, in the pitch-black of night, and on their way back to the cabin, they almost got lost several times, a harrowing story in itself. The rest of the trip was uneventful, except they caught a lot of fish. Later, he'd heard the blue man had a quadruple bypass and now golfed eighteen holes, no problem.

"I'm going to bed. I'm beat. I got up early today," Dennis said, shortly after Keith had finished. He stood, adjusted his pants and shirt and looked at Connie. "You coming?"

"I'll be along soon. You go ahead."

"I'll bring you a flashlight."

Dennis disappeared down the path through the trees and came back with the flashlight.

"Fishing tomorrow?" Keith asked him.

"We'll see."

The worst thing Dennis could have said, so unenthusiastic, non-

committal, parental sounding. Keith looked disappointed, almost sullen. Or was it disgust? He wanted Dennis to speculate about what might be biting, and what kind of lures they'd use. He wanted to haul out his tackle box right now, take it to an empty picnic table, huddle with Dennis under the glow of the Coleman lamp to rummage through and select their bait. Keith held out some kind of last-ditch hope that Dennis might experience a spiritual breakthrough and become a fisherman, better still, a partner. Keith could stop hoping: Dennis would rather be out on the highway driving to some place where he'd never been, the van eating up mile after mile of roads. Sometimes, Connie wished Dennis would go along with Keith to make him happy, instead of the way he looked right now, disappointed that his brother-in-law was such a wuss.

Dennis said goodnight again and left. Keith poked away at the huge bed of burning embers, coaxed more flames out of it, then tossed on a couple of more logs. He gathered up the glasses and returned with

another round of Scotches.

“You know, after that incident in the bush with the guy who had the heart attack and everything, I took stock of my own life. It’s a real wake up call, I can tell you.” He and Linda, Connie might be surprised to hear, had taken up walking every night for an hour. Their doctor told them both they had to get their weight under control or risk serious health problems.

“Yes,” Linda said. “We’ve become a pair of regular old farts.”

Keith and Linda talked about their health, the health of their friends, listing the surgeries, the illnesses, the divorces, the deaths, the grandchildren. They sounded much older than Connie, but it was only eight years in Keith’s case, five in Linda’s.

She heard a Whip-poor-will in the distance. It brought a memory of early camping days, loosened by her daydreaming earlier. She walked with her mother on their way to the outhouse. Her mother swung the flashlight and Connie watched as the circle of light skated

over the gravel road. Beyond that light, total darkness, thick and impenetrable, as if it were a wall. “Listen,” her mother said. “A Whip-poor-will. Hear it?” They stopped. Her mother turned off the flashlight. The bird’s call echoed through the night. “Some people think it means bad luck is on the way, or that there will be a death soon. I think it’s beautiful.”

Now, the Whip-poor-will’s song rippled from an increasing distance.

Dew had fallen, the fire had collapsed to an orange-red puddle. Connie’s belly burned with Scotch. Too much Scotch, she’d think tomorrow. She said good night and picked her way along the pitch-black path to the trailer without using the flashlight Dennis had brought her.

MARK AND SHEILA pulled in around noon the next day. An adjoining site had been reserved for them on the other side of Linda and Keith. The original plan had been for the guys to get up early to go

fishing, but since Mark and Sheila hadn't shown up on the day they were supposed to, and since they arrived in the early afternoon, the original plan had been, as Keith had put it at mid-morning, shot to hell. "I might as well have stayed in the city." He slammed his trailer door. Dennis carried his coffee back to their trailer, where he sat and read the paper. He'd walked to the box out on the highway, early this morning, while everyone else still slept.

Mark's arrival set off a group of crows, high atop a spruce, into a squawking frenzy. "Isn't anyone going to offer me a beer?" he asked, once the greetings were over.

Mark had a way of energizing people, making them enjoy themselves. Without him, the rest of them were putting in time, waiting for him to officially kick things off, bring on the excitement and the party. Sheila stood behind him and smiled. Mark had acquired a slight paunch. A blue vein bubbled down Sheila's leg. They'd both aged a little, but looked well.

Mark waved at the motor home he'd rented. "The only good thing about this piece of shit is that it has a queen-size bed. Sorry we're late. There was this awful grinding noise coming out of it, and I didn't know what the hell it was, so we pulled off at a service centre to have it looked at and guess what? I bumped into an old buddy from the west coast. Can you believe that?" He looked around at the others.

"No shit," Keith said, impressed.

"For heaven's sakes," Linda said.

"When was the last time you saw him?" Connie asked.

"About twenty years ago. So, while the mechanics were figuring out the rattle, we had coffee with this guy, Brad, his wife's Susan, a bit of a looker, too." Sheila rolled her eyes. "He tells us he's a lodge owner on a place called Shywind Lake, not too far from there. He asked us if we wanted to be his overnight guests while the motor home was being fixed. At first we said no, but the trailer wasn't done and who knew when it might be, and he kept upping the ante, said he'd had some lobsters

flown in from the east coast, we could join them in a lobster feast. He offered us a room with a Jacuzzi overlooking the lake, and promised me a round of golf. So,” Mark shrugged his shoulders and threw his arms open, “it got impossible to say no. Hope you guys didn’t mind. By the time the motor home got fixed we would have been really late getting here last night. I thought it would give you all a chance to get caught up. Plus I thought, what the hell, one night won’t hurt.”

“I thought it wasn’t going to be fixed until today,” Linda said.

“No, yesterday, but late.”

“Hell,” Keith said. “You should have stayed with them two nights.”

Keith meant that as a kind of self-punishment. He’d been stuck here with the women and Dennis, who might as well have been another woman for all the fishing he’d talk about or do, while Mark was out there having an adventure. Worse, Keith had lost a fishing trip on account of Mark.

“I could have,” Mark said. “We were invited. I was tempted; it was very

nice. Five stars.” Mark twisted his watch to reposition it on his wrist. “For breakfast we had eggs benedict, best I’ve ever eaten, fresh fruit, fresh-baked croissants. It was really very nice.”

How Mark loved excess, though he could be critical of it in others if it crossed over into tackiness.

Connie, Linda and Sheila went to Linda’s campsite to catch up on family news, mostly about kids and grandchildren, while the men set up Mark’s rig. Sheila and Mark had both been married before, had only been together for seven years. Sheila talked about her kids from her other marriage. It was as if she talked about strangers.

Keith came to ask Linda where she’d put the crescent wrench. Sweat poured down his flushed face.

“I haven’t seen it,” she said.

He raised his hands and looked off into the bush, made a huffing noise, then turned back to her. “If you’d just leave things where I put them, then I wouldn’t have to waste all this time looking for them.”

He stomped off to the pick-up truck.

“I didn’t touch your fucking tools,” Linda shouted after him. She looked first at Sheila, then at Connie. “You can see *he* hasn’t changed. Same old disgusting habits. Blaming everyone else when he lost it. You see what I have to go through all the time?”

Years ago Connie would have been sympathetic. *You poor thing. It’s not fair.* Not anymore.

AFTER DINNER, seated around the campfire, Mark filled everyone in on his work.

“It sounds like a very glamorous life,” Connie said, and wondered if she might have sounded a little sarcastic.

“I guess it is. I get to travel, I meet interesting people, I’m making money. Pretty good money.” Mark put his hand on Sheila’s knee and rubbed it.

The great thing about Mark’s work was that he never knew what to

expect. He had a life of surprises. For instance, back in the spring, he had crossed paths in an airport – he couldn't even tell them which one, he did so much travelling – with an old pal of his, from university days. This guy, Cam, owned a white-water rafting company in Utah. He invited Mark to come down and take a trip on the river, be his guest. “It was early in the season, see.” Mark sipped his scotch, took a moment to savour it. “Too early for tourists.” He didn't know when he agreed to meet up with him that he was going on the test ride, to see if the river was ready for the public.

Connie looked up at the sky streaked with a dramatic sunset while Mark told about suiting up, then hopping on a raft large enough for twenty, but which carried only four on this day. There he was, swept along in a brisk moving river, more than brisk, really, but nothing too serious, not yet anyway, and Cam kept saying, just wait, just wait.

Connie knew the raft would spill.

“We came around a high cliff, and there was a stretch of rapids

that went on and on and on as far down the river as I could see. We hit a huge patch of standing waves. Boom! We flew, we were airborne! Cam was working that oar, trying to steer the thing, and then it was game over.”

“What do you mean, game over?” Linda sounded irritated.

“I mean, *game over*.” Mark turned to Keith. “The raft flipped.”

“I’ve been rafting when that’s happened,” Linda said.

“Not like this, you haven’t.” Mark turned to her.

“Let him tell his goddamn story,” Keith said.

“Didn’t know I needed permission to speak.”

“Next thing I knew, I was in the water. The waves just snapped my head back. My eyelids were opened by the force of the water. It was so cold I pissed myself. My helmet shifted when I hit. My head smashed against the boulders. I had absolutely no control. There was nothing I could do. At first, I tried to fight the river and then I gave up and let the river carry me. I floated with my feet pointed downstream,

steered clear of the rock faces. And all the time I was floating, and out of control, you know what I kept thinking? I kept thinking that if I survived this, I'd buy tech stocks. Take a chance. Weird, eh?"

Keith laughed. "You bullshitter."

"No, I'm serious."

"So, what happened after that?" Connie thought he must be close to the end of the story.

"About fifteen miles along, the water slowed enough so I could swim to the bank. It was all I could do to crawl out. I had no energy. I just lay on the bank and wondered how it was I managed to come out alive. In about a half hour, Cam came along in the raft. Bastard. He laughed like hell when he saw me." Mark looked up at the stars that had poked through the hood of night. "I was his goddamn guinea pig. I could have been killed. I should have sued his sorry ass. He's an idiot."

"He looked like he was made up of purple patches, more bruises than skin. I'm not kidding." Sheila rubbed Mark's shoulder.

Keith threw more wood on the fire then told Mark and Sheila his Quebec fishing story. “It’s not as exciting as yours,” he started, “but it’s kind of interesting.”

From Quebec the stories went to Chile, which Mark had visited during one of his business trips, then the conversation shifted to practical matters, the next day’s plans, the fishing expedition.

“I’m going to pass,” Dennis said. Mark and Keith looked at him.

“You’re coming,” Mark said. “Come on, man, we’re going to catch fish. Lots of fish.”

“I’m going to drive into town and buy some repair stuff for the trailer,” Dennis said. He’d been puttering around on it ever since they arrived, his big Lego construction set. Connie wouldn’t mind going fishing, but, along with Sheila and Linda, she hadn’t been asked. Didn’t matter. If she really wanted to go, she’d rent her own stuff and go for an afternoon. Nothing as ambitious as Keith and Mark had planned, a dawn to dusk excursion, fishing with a capital F.

NOISE OUTSIDE THE trailer at six awakened Connie. Voices spoke in low tones. Dennis snored lightly beside her. She pulled aside curtains to peek out the window and saw Mark and Keith, walking around Keith's camp site with their fishing gear. Linda stood on the steps of her trailer, her arms folded across her dressing gown. A large cooler sat at the bottom of the steps. Linda would have made enough provisions to last for days.

Dennis went to town for fix-it things. Connie, Sheila and Linda visited throughout the day as they prepared food, did up dishes, swept out their trailers. They walked to the camp office to see if there were any messages on the bulletin board from their families and to make a couple of calls home, but the phone was out of order. With their three trailers in a row, they were neighbours. They laughed about being *women folk*, banding together to do women chores and share their lives, form a sisterhood, while the *men folk* caught fish and repaired a shelter.

Linda said she'd had trouble falling back to sleep after the guys left and went for an afternoon nap. Sheila and Connie thought that sounded like a good idea and Sheila thought she might treat herself to a pedicure. In the fullest heat of the afternoon, Connie went to lie down and read. She listened to the wind, and beyond that to the water; its rush blended with the wind. The campground so still.

SHEILA AND LINDA joined Connie and Dennis for coffee, which Dennis had made after he came back from town. The caffeine cut through their nap drowsiness. They decided to go into town for dinner, since no one felt like cooking. Keith and Mark would have scoffed at such a plan. *Didn't we just leave the city? Isn't that what this is all about?*

Long after dark they returned and looked over at Keith and Linda's site. No fire. No Mark or Keith.

"The vehicles are here," Linda said.

“They’re probably down at the beach, doing something with the boat.” Sheila turned in the direction of the lake.

They grabbed flashlights and headed down the narrow paths carved through the trees and bushes, streams of darkness which led them to the water. Cottage lights flickered from distant islands, and behind them, campfires poked through the bush. Otherwise, pitch black.

“Fish must have been biting. Prepare to clean fish, girls,” Linda said.

Connie swept her flashlight over the lake, searchlight style. “No sign of them. We’d see a light if they were headed back in, wouldn’t we?”

“Not necessarily. They’d see the lights on shore and head for them in the dark. Keith knows the lake pretty well. Let’s go back to camp and have a fire. We might as well be comfortable while we wait.”

“Mark doesn’t know diddley-squat about the lake,” Sheila said.

Seated around the fire, they stared into the flames. Connie wanted to go to bed, to read, to have some time alone at the end of her day. The others wanted that, too. They’d all become quiet.

Dennis yawned. “All this fresh air.”

Every so often one of them asked where the other two could be, more out-loud musing than a real question.

“I’m going back to the beach to wait,” Linda said.

“We’ll all go,” Connie said. “Let’s take lawn chairs. I’m going to change into something warmer. There’s a chill in the air.”

Dennis went to make a thermos of coffee.

After they’d changed and regrouped, they headed once again to the water and set up their chairs along the narrow lip of beach.

“Do you see anything?” Sheila leaned forward as if that might help her see farther across the water.

“No. But that doesn’t mean anything,” Linda said. “It doesn’t mean they’re not out there.” Connie strained into darkness to listen for a whine to break through night’s silence.

Dennis and Sheila talked about trailer repairs and Linda told about her frustration with the dealership. “You need everything in

writing. Laid out in black and white. Right from the get-go.”

In a while they stopped talking, then their long lapses of silence gave way to the inevitable speculations about what might have happened. All along, they had avoided any discussion of unfavourable outcomes, but Keith and Mark had been gone too long, and now they had to allow for the possibility of disaster.

“What if they’re lost?”

“Keith knows the lake. I can’t see that happening.”

“Did they take maps?”

“I think so. At least, I’m pretty sure they did.”

“They might have had engine failure. Did Keith take his tools?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It was so early this morning when I saw them off, I couldn’t even see straight, never mind, know what they took.”

“Did they have lifejackets on board?”

“Keith is very strict about that.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Maybe they stayed out late and headed back after dark and hit a shoal.”

“They could have sunk the boat.”

“The water’s warm enough now they could last a long time. At least that works in their favour.”

“They’re both strong swimmers.”

“Not that strong.”

“Did they have oars with them, if the motor quit?”

“Yes.”

“They’ll be starving.”

“I doubt it. I made lots of food.”

Thank goodness for Linda’s habit of over-feeding.

“I bet they’re fine. I bet the fish were biting and they decided to stay and fish later.”

Silence.

“Or not.”

Connie knew they all had other ideas in mind, but no one said. In an hour or so it would be daylight. “I think we should go back to camp and make some coffee, give them until daylight to get back, and if they’re not here, we’ll go to phone someone.”

That job went to Connie and Dennis. Sheila and Linda felt certain it was unnecessary, but they finally saw the wisdom in taking every precaution. Since phone at the camp office was out of order, they’d head to the nearest one at Lakeland Outfitters, about ten miles up the highway. Sheila and Linda would hang back and wait.

At 4:30 they gave up their vigil.

Dennis lay down until the coffee perked and fell straight away to sleep. Connie would wake him when she was ready to go. She opened the blind on the window beside the table and watched light slowly drain into the new day.

DENNIS AND CONNIE walked Linda and Sheila down to the lake, a pewter platter heaped high with grey mist, before heading out to the phone.

At the outfitters, an employee approached them, his arms piled high with pool noodles which he dumped on the already heaped-high bargain table.

“We’re not quite open.” He squinted at them against the rising sun, his face already greasy from heat.

“Could we use your phone, please?” Connie asked. “It’s an emergency.”

“Sure, I guess that’s okay.” He stared at them with his mouth open, then he seemed to wake up. “Come on in.”

They started towards the counter at the far end of the store. Something made Connie look over to the side as she followed along behind the clerk. At first she didn’t see them, planted as they were, amidst the clutter. Keith and Mark sat on two wooden lawn chairs, enshrined in camping and cottage paraphernalia: bags of barbecue

charcoal, lighting fluid, galvanized buckets, mosquito coils, pots of citronella candles, fish landing gear, rubber boots, and sun flower lawn ornaments. Behind them, way up on the wall, peering down on them with a look of boredom, a scruffy moose head. They blended into the display like a pair of mannequins. They appeared to be sleeping. As she approached them, Keith opened his eyes and looked up at her.

“What kept you guys?”

Connie wanted to know straight away what had happened.

“Motor conked. We had to row.” Mark sounded disgusted. “As if I hadn’t had enough of that kind of thing already.” He got up and started towards the door. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Mark had never done well without sleep.

Dennis asked about the boat. Keith said there would be a recovery mission later, once everyone got rested.

In the van, Connie needed to say something, tell them how concerned they’d all been. She turned around to look at them. They looked out the

windows. “We were up all night waiting for you guys. We waited at the beach. We thought you’d either got lost, had an accident or had mechanical problems. We really didn’t want to think lost or hurt, but I’ve heard of people missing on that lake who’ve never been found.”

“Christ almighty.” Keith looked at her. “Do you think it was the first time I’ve ever been out on a lake fishing?” He turned back to the window, his eyebrows pinched tighter over the bridge of his nose, and scowled.

Connie was a child again, judged, waiting for permission to speak, ashamed of herself for saying something so utterly stupid, without knowing why it was such a terrible thing for her to say. Underneath a thin layer of regret and shame, she felt a simmering anger.

“Let’s just not talk about it now,” Mark said. “Later, when we’ve had some sleep.”

Without taking his eyes from the road Dennis reached over, took Connie’s hand and squeezed it. He didn’t ask them anything.

THE CAMP SITES so quiet. Everyone was sleeping, but Connie lay awake, bothered by the heat, alarmed by the sound of a baby crying somewhere in the distance, or was it the shriek of a blue jay? Without waking Dennis, she changed into her bathing suit, and went down to the lake. A number of families occupied the beach. Children dug in the sand a few feet away from parents sprawled across blankets. Connie set up her lawn chair, then went to the water's edge. She stepped in, stood for a long time facing out across the water, her gaze focused on the islands in the distance, wondering at their impossible arrangements and the complicated paths through them. So easy to get lost. What would it be like to be lost out there, each narrow passage deceptively similar, and only one or two that would take you the right way, deliver you safely to shore?

She waded in deeper; the sting of cold made her inhale sharply. She crossed her arms over her stomach and turned to watch children playing along the shore, so preoccupied with what they were doing nothing else existed. She walked farther out until the water came to

just beneath her breasts. She opened her hands wide, placed them on the surface, and made two circular patterns on the water, without making a splash.

All through the night, as they held their lakeside vigil, she had imagined so many outcomes for her brothers' fishing trip. Drowned, lost or badly hurt after smashing into some rocky outcrop, clinging to the wreckage, shivering with the cold that would eventually overtake them. She imagined herself telling the horrible news to their children, their relatives; she had felt a lump of sorrow in her throat, her eyes had stung with tears. She imagined the lost looks in the eyes of Sheila and Linda as their lives fell apart. She thought about funerals.

They had all been thinking about horrible possibilities and yet no one had said, as if saying might somehow make it so. How do you hear or imagine an incomplete story without anticipating the ending?

Connie stilled her hands on the water's surface, her fingers spread, palms down. She made a decision.

She turned and looked behind her.

Dennis waved to her from shore; then he started wading out, until he stood next to her. “You okay?”

“Yes,” she nodded.

“You haven’t told anyone,” he said. “We leave soon. When are you going to tell them?”

“I’ve decided not to.”

“No?”

“I’ve been waiting for the right moment. I kept thinking I had to tell them. I wondered how I would say it. Then I thought I’d wait for someone to ask me something more personal, something about my life, then I could just bring it up naturally.”

Dennis looked out across the water. “Okay.” He nodded, seemed to be thinking about what she’d said, weighing it in his mind. “Maybe I’d do the same.”

“Who knows? Maybe it will always be just my story. It’s my body,

with or without breasts. What difference will telling them make?”

She would stay unexceptional, squeeze every ounce out of her ordinary life as long as she could. Hers was a story in progress; no one would guess her ending.

About the Author



CATHARINE LEGGETT's short stories have appeared several times in *Event*, as well as in *The New Quarterly* and *The Antigonish Review*. Her story "Snowstorm" was broadcast on CBC radio. "Ruthie and the Big Blue Sky" won the Okanagan Award for short fiction and appeared in *Canadian Author Magazine*. At present, she is completing two novels and a collection of short stories. She lives in London, Ontario, with her husband and their two children.

