



## *Winter*

I prefer winter and fall, when you feel the bone structure of the landscape—the loneliness of it, the dead feeling of winter. Something waits beneath it, the whole story doesn't show.

—Andrew Wyeth

Even during the summers in Maple Springs, at the height of the tourist season, it is so quiet that if you walk at night after ten o'clock, you can sometimes hear people snoring through their window screens. The water gently laps the shore; it is rhythmic and soothing and lulls us to sleep. But in the winter, it is so quiet you can sometimes hear the snow fall. Not just during a storm, when the snow is hard and icy, but during those beautiful snows where the soft, fat flakes drift gently down. If I listen carefully, I can hear them land on the snow-covered ground with a tiny pat.

Last year, Jeff and I spent our first winter at the lake as full-time residents, living in our townhouse, working on our new house, and waiting for spring. We were settling in, even though we were still very unsettled. We bided our time, moving forward

slowly and with purpose, trying to pay attention. The path that brought us here was bumpy, but we let the lake work its magic on us as it's done for years. We let the lake restore us as we restored a neglected old house.

We bought the house at the end of the summer. Built in 1916, it's an old craftsman-style, just off the lake. It's a cottage, although it has a full basement. Around here, people call their houses cottages, although technically a cottage doesn't have a foundation or central heat, and can be lived in only seasonally. Our cottage was so overgrown and unremarkable that when we heard it was for sale I could not place it, although I'd walked or driven past it hundreds, maybe thousands, of times. Untrimmed spirea, forsythia, and other weedy shrubs hid the fence, a gate, a sidewalk; a hedge of yews grew up over the entire porch. Inside, it had every ugly finish invented: awful paneling, Masonite, and that plastic wall covering usually seen only in mobile homes. Filthy carpeting covered the floors, and shelving, stacked with boxes, hid the beauty of the porches and marred many of the rooms. Doors led nowhere; sidewalks were covered over by gardens mulched with newspaper, magazines, and discarded Bibles.

Old houses seem to take two paths. If the original owners took care of the house, if they showed enough love and weren't imperiled by disaster, the house was passed down to like-minded owners. But if the original owners abused the house, it was passed on to other house abusers. The house next door was occupied by successive long stretches of loving owners, and still has the original wainscoting and pristine plaster walls. Ours suffered from short, sometimes long, bursts of neglectors. There was at least one foreclosure. The house was hideous, but had potential, potential that we unearthed inch by cruddy inch.

They call it the Mitchell house. A family by a different name lived in it for the last thirty years, and another family before that, but it's still the Mitchell house in the neighborhood vernacular. Many of the locals have vivid memories of the house in times past: the window seat, the plum trees that grew along the fence line, the French doors that separated the living room from the dining room, now long gone. Almost every new visitor, those snoopy people who wondered what the hell we were doing in there, added a nugget of house history to what we already knew. Storied, that's what the house is.

An enclosed porch runs across the entire front of the house. We think that half of the porch was originally open, so entry was onto an open but covered porch, then onto the enclosed side of the porch to the front door. That door opens into a large room, long and wide, for both living and dining, with a window seat at one end and a colorful flagstone fireplace at the other. There is a parlor off this room, through French doors. At one time it served as a beauty parlor, and though we'll use it as a den, we'll always call it the beauty parlor. The fireplace had been neglected along with everything else. The cost of fixing it to burn wood was prohibitive, so we had a gas stove installed. The stove looks like it belongs and efficiently heats the main level—I didn't want to mess with all the wood anyway. The hearth is concrete, with a lovely old patina that my fireplace guy says is just dirt, but I like it and have mixed feelings about trying to scrub it off. An outline of a maple leaf is pressed into each corner, and they're what ultimately sold me. Maple leaves from ancient trees that grew or might still be growing in Maple Springs are permanently etched into my hearth. Leaves from trees that may have been here since the Civil War, or before. My urge to claim them was sharp and strong.

The work on the house was painstakingly slow, and we tried to do as much of it ourselves as we could. Jeff is an excellent carpenter, and has a wide range of other construction skills, so he was able to replace the wiring and a lot of the plumbing himself. He knocked down walls, moved doorways, framed in bathrooms and ceilings, added insulation. I painted and supervised. We'd remodeled together before, and things generally went pretty smoothly. They got testy only if I thought Jeff was infringing on the decorative aspects of the house or trying to tell me how I'd use my new kitchen. He got irritated at me if he thought I was intruding into construction territory, or if something I wanted would require too much work. Things went surprisingly well, actually, given what we'd been through. Our mojo is slowly returning; our planets are settling back into their celestial paths.

We got knocked off course when, in the span of a year, we lost both of our mothers and Jeff's business. I'd been primary caregiver for Jeff's mother for several years, and it was difficult watching her physical and mental decline. She had frequent emergencies, and just when I would begin to feel like I could move forward with my own life, another hospitalization or event would happen. I felt like a character in *High Anxiety*, that silly Mel Brooks movie, stretched taut and thin. Just when I felt ready to snap, I got the call that my own mother, considerably younger than Jeff's and until then active and healthy, was gravely ill. My mother, the wrong mother, died, the economy tanked, Jeff shut his business down, and then his mother died. For Jeff, losing the business was perhaps the worst death of all. We wandered around stunned like zombies. Individually and collectively we were almost in too much pain to move. Each of us was so depleted, we had nothing to give, but each of us was beyond comfort anyway. Watching each other suffer

was almost unbearable. We were each in our own sad world, and wanted to jump off, fly away.

During that awful time, we came to the lake to rest and recharge ourselves as often as we could. We moved through a thick fog until we decided to relocate permanently to Chautauqua Lake, to try to put our lives back together, certain to be in a place we loved, and certain of nothing else.

The summer was lovely, but somehow we needed the winter. During winter, the color of the lake is stripped of its vibrancy. The view through the townhouse windows was all whites, grays, and watery blues: gray tree trunks running to black, dark gray hills on the opposite shore, and white-gray skies. Dock stanchions and sections were stacked on the lakefront amid the scattered boatlifts, and the bare trees stood out in bas-relief, in stark contrast yet enveloped by the white and the gray. We walked this muted landscape, resting our weary hearts and minds, holding still and gathering strength, waiting for our future to be revealed.

We'd seen the lake freeze before. One year, at Christmas, we went to bed with the waves and wind roiling and racketing; by morning, the lake was frozen and still. We felt a hush as water and air movement ceased. The birds gathered like tribes on top of the solid blackness they had swum and fished in just the day before, the blue-gray ice crystals transformed into still black water.

I've watched other bodies of water freeze, with the ice forming at the shoreline and working its way out, but this lake freezes differently. Here, when the conditions are right, the top layer of water suddenly reaches the right temperature and the whole surface freezes as the crystals merge to form a solid sheet of ice. The expanse of frozen stillness was astonishing. It was suddenly so quiet I could hear the ruffle of a bird's feathers in the neighbor's tree,

the pat pat pat of gentle snowfall, and my own heartbeat.

Those of us who are lucky bury our parents. It's just part of life, and while it is difficult, most of us muddle through. For us, it wasn't the events themselves that were so difficult, although they were. It was perhaps because they happened within such a short time span that we lost our bearings. I call it our fifty-car pile-up, and it did feel like that. We just kept getting knocked down and down and down.

But the swing of the sledgehammer, the noise of the hammer drill, the smell of freshly sawn wood, even the swirling plaster dust began to heal us. We started tentatively, each of us secretly knowing that the longer it took to finish the house, the longer we could delay coming to terms with our uncertain future. We knew we'd have to get back on our feet, but didn't know how. We're still unsure, but somehow the future is here.

Our first winter as residents was spectacular in its harshness. The lake froze before Christmas, and it froze rough. The freezing didn't wait for the waves and wind to calm, but captured them in their full force, waves in motion set in ice. We had over seventeen feet of snowfall—a lot of snow by any standard—although we recently learned that's about the average around here. The snow, light and fluffy when it fell, heavy when it began to melt, crushed the windshield on our boat and shattered the glass on my patio table.

But we were strengthened by the quietness of winter, and by the eagles. They visit the lakefront occasionally to fish near the mouths of creeks and streams, then retreat to the woodsy hills beyond our sightline. We were strengthened by the trumpeter swans who flew through on their way south. They were regal on the lake, and electric in their whiteness against the white sky while in flight. The lake was still frozen and the ground covered with

snow when the birds started singing their spring songs, their nesting songs, even as we sang ours.

The pull of the lake is strong. It's an old song that runs ancient and deep through me. I listened and waited for spring.