

# THE SUMMERHOUSE

---

The summerhouse perched on the side of the hill on the little island in the lake. It was an old log barn, and it had stood there since 1913, when it was moved over from the mainland. Local carpenters worked all summer converting it into a summerhouse for the family of a wealthy attorney. They added a second floor and a glassed porch, and built four bedrooms. A couple of carefree summers, a civil war, a world war, and a twenty-year stretch of peace later, it had settled in its surroundings so perfectly it was hard to see from the lake.

Every spring, servants came to set up the summerhouse for the season, and every fall, servants were the last to leave after preparing it for the winter. By then the owners had already returned to the city with their memories of summer fun. The house huddled up, shutters on windows, everything locked up and secured for the rule of snow. Only the crows kept it company during the fleeting winter days when the sun appeared over the southern horizon for a few pale hours.

Fortunes rose and fell, summer months turned into years and decades, and the attorney's family sold the island. The new owners enjoyed the little island for forty years, spending every free moment there, raising four children into adulthood, and then sitting out on the cliffs at the western end of the island to see the sun kiss the forest in the northwest and fade for a few hours.

But now it was November; the lake had a crystal clear frozen cover, and the ground sparkled with tiny diamonds of ice. It had been two months since the last family members visited the island, bolting up the place, stowing away garden chairs and hammocks, and turning boats over. The house knew well the routine by now, and it even looked patient as it bided its time.

On one particular evening, the local crows had gathered in one of the large pines by the house. Twenty strong, the assembly of birds settled their internal pecking order issues, cawed and fluttered about, and acted as crows do, until one of them saw something it had never seen before.

A luminous ball appeared, or rather, formed out of nowhere, at the foot of the porch stairs. The crows ceased their cawing and cocked their heads to see better. The ball of faint whitish light elongated itself and separated at the edges to form an apparition of an old man. When the crows could see the apparition in detail, one of them lost his nerve, and then the whole flock took off any which way in stark fear, a ball of black wings dissolving into single fleeing birds.

The apparition was that of the owner of the island. Only two weeks ago he'd been among the living, doing his daily tottering and pottering as was his custom. An aneurysm fell on his life like a butcher's cleaver, and nothing remained the same. For two weeks he'd been taking stock of his life, not as a man anymore, but as an apparition about to cross over outside of time and space. For a brief period, a mere thought brought him to any time and location in

his life. He still had access to the places and people he knew, but interaction was what he craved – and what he was denied.

Seeing his grieving widow at the crematorium nearly drove him mad, if that can happen to apparitions. He'd watched his ashes being interred in the holy church ground of his native town, and seen his name written in golden letters on a solemn granite slab. He'd tried to tell his family that he wasn't in that hole in the ground, but every time he stood close to one of them, they'd shudder and say, "Mom, you really need to get that radiator fixed."

He had to admit the Bible was right in one thing at least, when it referred to man's days as grass: *when the wind passeth over it it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.* A cold wind had blown by him, and he was that wind now. But as he now stood at the stairs of his loved summerhouse, he made his apparition look the way he was in his prime, two years before retiring from law, still full of life.

He floated to the top of the stairs and through the snow screen that kept the winter out from the porch. No need to walk; he felt the appropriate method of movement was a drifting at a solemn pace. The thought of entering the summerhouse for the last time, and yet first time as an apparition, appealed to him. He let himself fade through the door and into the hallway.

Inside it was dark, what with the shuttered windows and all electricity switched off, but it made no difference. He provided his own light, like that of a storm lantern, but with a wick without heat. As he passed the long mirror in the hallway, he paused to admire himself. Had it not been for the clothes, hung on pegs on the wall, showing through him, he'd have passed for a handsome man, or so he thought.

When he reached the living room, he noted everything was exactly where he'd instructed his oldest son to leave them. His wartime binoculars, its lenses out of whack and useful for one eye at a time only, hung in the reindeer horn as they had done for the past forty-four years. The Agatha Christies and Maigrets, read a thousand times, were neatly stacked on the corner table. His rainy day pastimes, the three-thousand-piece puzzles of classic paintings, were side by side on the top of the bookshelf, ready for easy access. He approved of all he saw; it will be nice to return in May and blow the dust of winter off the house, and turn the boats right side up, and take firewood to the sauna.

Only he was not coming back.

The thought stabbed him and killed him a second time. No, a third, the second was when he saw his wife shattered at the thought of widowhood at 87. Wait! What about seeing his two old friends at the funeral, when they realized they were the only ones left of a class of 34 vigorous young men? Or seeing all was not going to be well at the settling of the estate, among children who'd become estranged from one another and prepared for battle...

One dies many times, he thought, as he thought of himself settling on his wicker rocking chair in the corner of the room to face the northwest and the summer sunset. Now there'd be no sunset; the Sun had done its day and wouldn't be near that direction until June. But as he sat there, he let his thoughts wander and recreate past days.

A hollow image of a hearty fire appeared in the fireplace, emitting the ghost of light and heat. The long rustic dinner table was set all at once for eight people, and as the apparition watched, seven of his family friends appeared out of nowhere and sat down on the table, a transparent parade of lifeless visions. It was Midsummer 1969, and as the shutters melted away, the remembrance of the sunlight of that evening flooded the room with its faint red hue. Sounds he remembered, such as the banter, the laughter, the jokes and the impromptu speeches seemed to fill the air.

As quickly as the cavalcade had entered, it faded away and was transformed into the memory of the first grandchild's appearance on the island. The apparition, as the proud grandfather, wore a phantom of a smile on his transparent lips as memories flowed freely and became second-hand reality for a fleeting moment. The scenes followed in rapid succession, but with every new memory replayed, the apparition grew more restless. Was it really so? Did nothing remain but translucent holograms? Was there nothing he could touch here? Was there nothing for him to take with him as he left?

His thoughts turned to a German beer stein that had a tin lid and was engraved with images of voluptuous maidens serving Löwenbräu. This had been his favorite souvenir of all; he had brought it from Munich in 1958, and for many years it held a place of honor on a little shelf of its own, high on the wall facing the setting sun. The apparition yearned to hold the stein, to feel its heavy weight and the intricate figurines on it, as if to have his life back for just a moment. But his hands passed through the thick ceramic of the mug without moving it a bit on its shelf.

Then he collected all his energy and focused on lifting the stein. He tried to bring volume and strength to the transparent hands that cupped the mug, and after a while it seemed to work. The hands became more opaque and not so much of the stein shone through them. The apparition felt his energy drain on this futile effort, but nevertheless he concentrated all his mental force on the stein. Finally it rose off the shelf, a millimeter, then three, and finally a full centimeter off it.

When the apparition realized it was not his hands but his mind and thought holding the stein, he had to release its grip, exhausted and exasperated. The stein fell back on the shelf, but as it had moved slightly sideways too, the impact toppled it off the shelf. The apparition watched in horror as the stein travelled the two meters through the air and hit the log floor, shattering on impact and shedding its bits in a cloud of ceramic dust.

The apparition had one last look at the stein's tin lid. Then he left, in full knowledge of his last moment in this lifetime being at hand, and when he floated through the wall to the yard, he became aware of a bright needlepoint of blinding white light awaiting it. He succumbed to the light, was sucked into it, and within moments, there was nothing but the summerhouse, the dark pines, and a flock of wary crows in one of them.

The summerhouse huddled back into its long and lonely winter.

\*\*\*

And then in due course, spring arrived, bringing part-time immigrants.

“Oh no! Look what the mice have done!” shouted one of the family. “They’ve broken Dad’s stein!”

“Dropped it from the shelf? I’ll go set up the mousetraps. I knew I forgot something, I should have set them before the winter,” another answered.

The summerhouse knew better.