

Double Life = Local + Cottager

By Lori Knowles

I live a double life. Local + Cottager. Two worlds, very different. In winter I'm "in town." In summer I'm "at the lake." It's a state I've occupied for more years than I like to count and still I feel suspended, like I'm neither here nor there, part of neither world. I'm never sure how to define myself.

Remember the book *Two Solitudes*? Hugh MacLennan's 1945 novel, once a staple in 101 Canadian Lit. The lead character struggles to reconcile his French and English roots. I didn't get it then but now I do. My life is like that. Living as both local and cottager in Muskoka feels like living in two solitudes. Loving both, I want these two communities to respect and admire one another. I want people to play nice. And just when I think it'll work, it's mid-July, a sticky 31 degrees, and traffic on main street is as gridlocked as rush hour at King and Bay. A Tesla tailgates an F150 (or vice versa), expletives are thrown, and POOF! Any Kumbaya moments are gone.

As a child, I was raised on a local street lined with maple trees and red brick. Like any close neighbourhood, we knew the owner of the Five and Dime. We knew which houses to hit on Halloween for homemade fudge. In winter, we'd slide down snowbanks higher than an elephant's eye. And at night, after coming inside when the streetlights came on, we'd flip a dial between two TV channels... that is, if the rabbit ears were adjusted just so.

But in summer I'd disappear to a different world. To a beach where a south wind made the birches sway and the lake's waves lulled



Photograph: Peter Gilbert

me to sleep. Hide and Seek. Fireflies. Bonfires with sparks snapping like fireworks. My cottage friends came from everywhere: Toronto, New York, Pittsburgh, Tel Aviv. One family owned a Ditchburn. Another owned an entire island. One uppity friend's father added a "III" to his name. "You mean, as in Richard III of England?" I asked. My friend rolled her eyes. "Yes, like that."

Those summers were always difficult to let go of. On the last day of August I'd stand on a dirt road watching cottage families hightail it back to "the city" for first day of school – me left behind. Tears would come. I'd look at my mum. "I know," she'd say. "I've never liked Labour Day either."

Years and years later I introduced my husband to Muskoka. My husband, a city boy, who learned to drive in '70s Toronto on

The Danforth, where people drove like Steve McQueen in a Hollywood chase. "DON'T," I warned him, "whatever you do, DO NOT beep your horn when another driver wrongs you on a small-town street. Chances are you'll run into that person for the next three days at the gas station, at the Mike's Milk, or at the drug mart."

Through the years, our children have been treated to the same double life, the same odd balance between local and cottager. "Wait," one cocky summer kid asked my 14 year old as she described Grade 9 at BMLSS, "do they even have schools in Muskoka?" Another sprite, one who lives steps from Central Park, claimed there's no way he could live "up north." When asked why not, he offered one dirty word – "Snow" – then described his own kind of hell. His divorced parents live together in the same New York

brownstone because it's just too costly to live apart.

After hearing that, I had a thought. Defining myself as local or as cottager isn't the point. I'm never going to live solidly on either side. The point is to reach out, talk, get to know one another, understand and play nice. It's like when I spot a celebrity at the grocery store or an NHL hockey player at the local dump. We all eat, we all have garbage, and we all love Muskoka. Double life? Two solitudes? POOF!

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