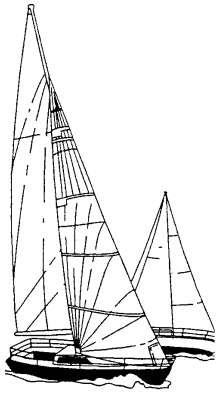

I need to tell you a story. No, I guess that's not entirely true. I do need to tell it, but this isn't a story. Not a story as you're accustomed to hearing it. A story should have a plot, same characters and character development, a few interesting twists building to a grand finale, then maybe a quiet little denouement to tie up all the loose threads, even leave room for a sequel. What I want to say isn't like that at all. Oh there are characters that move in and out of the picture. There are incidents of great and little importance, or no importance at all. But mostly it's about a place and a slice of time that has slipped away as all such things are bound to do. Call it descriptive narrative if you like. But a story? No. I guess not. Once in a while the memory of this place and these things slips up behind me unexpectedly, taps me on the shoulder and says "Hi". It's like turning around and suddenly coming face to face with an old friend that I hadn't even thought about in years. The intensity of that recognition often leaves me quite breathless, as if all of the air in the room has been sucked away- I'm sure my eyes glaze a little and my jaw sags just a bit. The sensation of being transported somewhere else, when just a moment ago I was right here, can be at once frightening and delightful; frightening because I don 't know haw it happened or why, but delightful because those times were just so good. Remembering them is a joy.

The place was Port Elgin Ontario and the time was 2 weeks at the end of July from around 1952 through 1988. This was summer vacation} the real summer vacation. All the rest was simply time leading up to it, from school's close near the end of June or time after slipping away to Labour Day. Put all those two-week slices together and you've got a little over a year in real time. But that's not the way it works. It's always summertime in Port Elgin, always the end of July, always carefree always young ... I think it all began with a response to a newspaper ad in the Toronto. Star. You never found the Globe and Mail or the Telegram in our house. Just the Star, Life Magazine and Reader's Digest; that great trilogy of modern post-war literature. I don 't know what prompted this search for a summer cottage. Mother used to tell stories about summers at Lake Scugog during the 30's and 40's, but I think that was only an infrequent thing. I have a box- full of bent, age-curled photographs of slightly familiar people rowing ponderous wooden boats or fishing from a dock or performing

mildly dangerous acrobatic stunts beside a branch-littered sandy beach. Most are inscribed with the word "Scugog" in pencil on the back. Legend has it that this was the scene of the catfish summers where a day's easy labour would fill the boat with the ugly creatures and Granddad would gut them, skin them and remove the bones in one easy motion. I still have a faded, brittle letter from my mother to her soldier husband somewhere in Europe in '45 that describes a slightly besotted weekend with a girl friend at some Scugog cottage to mark the end of a brutal, fearful war. My future Dad would soon be safely home. The cottages were borrowed or rented. Her family were never really "cottage people". I don't know what Dad's family did for summer fun. I never even had the privilege of meeting them and my Dad was not one to talk much about anything. So why Mum and Dad jumped at an obscure ad for a cottage on the shores of Lake Huron remains a mystery. It's not as if we hadn't been other places. In the four short years that I had been running around there was time spent Baysville, a trip to Algonquin, a weekend at our neighbor's cottage near Bolsover. At least there are little b&w Brownie-box-camera photos of a skinny kid that bears a haunting resemblance to the grownup I've became, feeding the deer, standing knee-deep in sand and surf and generally looking goofy and utterly happy and a bit bewildered.

It appears from the record and the recollections that we bounced around a bit in the summer before we landed for our extended engagement in Port Elgin. But Dad answered an ad so we packed the car (a light blue '52 Chevy I think) and motored off to the northwest for the first summer of many to come. What follows here is not a History of Port Elgin. Its probably ancient history to my kids who love the Beatles but no doubt with the same passion they have for dinosaurs ... Daddy's youth - Jurassic Park - same time frame. This is not history, simply remembrances, muddied by time and coloured by what I wanted it to be. Nostalgia at it's gushiest. A distance of forty years requires a mighty telescope to look back, but if you can stand it, I can stand it and I'm going to continue ... That first summer had to be '52 or maybe '53. It was to be a two-part vacation with a week at the beach followed by a week with Auntie Margaret (my father's only sister) and Uncle Dugald down around Chatham/Thamesville. That might have been the summer we stayed at Uncle Alec's farm (he was Uncle Dugald's brother). Now this was high adventure and sticks out in my mind more vividly than my first acquaintance with Port Elgin. Uncle Alec's farm was sort of Camelot, Shangri-La and the Alamo all rolled into one. The kitchen was big enough to play baseball in. The ceilings were high and echoey with the sound only embossed tin can give. The floor was a single piece of colourful-around-the-edges, worn-and-faded-in-the-middle linoleum that bulged here and there. There was a high-backed breakfast nook of some deeply carved and age-darkened wood that was like sitting in a church pew. After a while it hurt your behind. It was a room that inspired awe and a reverence for the generations of cooks and hungry mouths they fed. The whole house was bigger than life and a scale that could 't be accounted far by my five year old stature. Maybe that was the way houses of that era were built or perhaps it had something to do

with the fact that Uncle Dugald was a "Ferguson", one of the prominent founding families that gave their names to parks, streets and buildings of Thamesville and whose memorial stones littered the local cemetery. My mother occasionally commented that Auntie Margaret was coerced into marrying far status rather than true love, so an imposing farmhouse befitting a prominentfamily would not be out-of-keeping. I remember a dusty driving shed that housed spindly tractors, ploughs and wooden wagons that were relics of a by-gone era, even then. Uncle Dugald and Uncle Alec; these were, after all, old men, their tools and methods reflecting the training of their youth. And wonder of wonders; I was allowed to climb all over them (the machines; that is), sit a mile high on the iron seat of the Massey-Ferguson, strain with all my five year old might to raise and lower the plough blades, crack an imaginary whip over the backs of a team of imaginary horses. I stood between the soldier-straight rows of dusty corn, dwarfed by tassels swaying in the wind, tried to turn kernels of wheat into gum by chewing them til my jaws ached (I still don't believe that one) and hoed the weeds from row after row of beans for the sum of 50 cents, my first honest wages ... maybe my last. There is a little china figurine drifting around, oft broken and just as oft repaired, that I bought for my mother with that 50 cents. She cherished it far beyond its monetary worth.

But I digress, right? The subject of today's lesson was to be Port Elgin. Your patience please if I start to m1X lyrical, but I may not have the nerve to do this again, and after all, tins exercise is pure self-indulgence, isn't it? So if I wax, its because I want to and if its lyrical, so much the better ... We would have arrived on the shores of Lake Huron late on a Saturday morning. It was raining and felt like it may have been forty days and forty nights since the clouds last parted. The only thing more dank and miserable than wet cedar trees IS a wet dog and, my God, there were cedars everywhere. The cottage was planted on a heavily wooded lot about half way down the hill that separated town from beach. It was near the south and of town, on the south side of the street (Elgin Street?). The mossy roof leaked, it was dirty, it stank and there was no electricity. It seems the owner, a gentleman named McVea, believed no more in paying his bills than he did in keeping his tenants dry. "McVea the skunk" became a byword for anyone of unscrupulous nature and questionable ancestry. Mother wouldn't even let us unpack the car. We trooped into the Tourist Information building on the town's main street. I may have been crying at the time, which added a nice touch to our pathetic situation and emphasized the fact that "Something had to be done ". The Information Centre at that time was housed in a neat, white, frame building next to the Pro Hardware Store (last time I saw the site, it was a gravel parking lot). We learned that the previous tenant had been a single mother with several kids. The town had left the utilities on out of pity, but as soon as they were gone, the plug was pulled, figuratively and literally.

A benevolent God smiled on us that day. There was a one-week vacancy in a group of cottages owned by one Alec McLean of Market Street. It was one of three tidy cottages nestled together on a well-tended lot mid-way down the hill at the north end of town. Ours was at the front, facing the road. It was graciously shaded with cedars but there was no undergrowth. Cedars are a marvellous tree, aromatic with a heady scent that can invoke a host of memories, but mostly the reminder of my mother's old wood lined linen chest that housed her finest and most precious tablecloths, keepsakes and the occasional Christmas present, safe from prying young eyes. One thing I've noticed about cedars, they don't allow much competition. Whether it's because of their shoulder-to-shoulder way of occupying a patch of ground that filters all the sunlight, or something in the wrack and chaff they spread at their feet, they do take over a place and do not suffer intruders, big or small. Their roots were shallow and the soil sandy so it must have been an easy job to push some aside for a few cottages and a bit of yard. Most builders and owners had the intelligence to leave as many trees as possible. After all, it was free air conditioning and although we may live in what IS termed a temperate climate that simply means that the average is temperate. The extremes are extreme ... There was room for several cars to park in the shade but one spot was always reserved for Mr. McLean's old, late 40's, blue Ford convertible. It was the nearest thing he had to offspring and I think he called it "Betsy". It was one of my many (and less hormonal) adolescent daydreams to someday own that car. But that came to the same conclusion as most of those wild visions. One summer it was gone. Mr. Mclean would use the Ford for local runabouts; to the beach, uptown shopping, but never very far. Both Alec McLean and his Ford were a little too arthritic for long journeys. They both creaked. It got stored locally for the winter and I imagine its reappearance was part of the Annual Rites of Spring. It rumbled with age and in general, showed its disregard for the environment and the cost per barrel of crude oil. It was so unlike the family transport that my father drove. He was a salesman and had a new company car every three years or so. It was the most stripped down version of your basic traveling salesman vehicle but that new-car smell hardly had a chance to wear away before the next model came home to sit in the garage. Mr. McLean's Ford smelled old from the first day I saw it. Not decay, just age. It had rubber covered running boards that sagged dangerously if you chanced to put your weight on them and it sported little round pads on brake and clutch pedals that traveled down through the floor instead of being suspended from under the dash. It had wide whitewalls tires, simulated ivory interior trim and a pointed hood that stretched forever. One year it sported a white canvas top that gave it a whole new lease on life until it was innocently parked under the mulberry tree across the road when the fruit was in season. I don't think it was the berries themselves that did all the damage. It was the birds. When they were finished processing their mulberry meal, the result was devastating. Alec may have left the canvas as a lesson in humility or maybe the task was just impossible. In all those years I never once rode in that old blue Ford. Only in my dreams.

For the first few years the cottage was heated by what my father called a Quebec wood stove. Dad would get up each morning while the overnight chill still clung to the floor and light a fire of split logs gathered from the neat stacks under the cottage. The dusty scent of burning cedar was part of many morning and evening rituals. Occasionally, the summer heat lasted through the night and made the stove unnecessary. But when it was fired up it became the beating; breathing soul of that little frame building. The cast-iron centre plate was lifted with a wire-handled poker to reveal a shimmering orange hell that some years later I immediately recognized after reading Dante's Inferno. That blast of dry, searing heat would bring tears to your eyes each time another wooden sacrifice was offered. In those first years the front windows that gave over the eating area were simply screened with hinged shutters that had to be propped open for fresh air or a cool breeze off the lake as the temperature rose. Of course there was dust from the roadway as well, but then there was very little traffic. Market Street gave up its struggle to maintain its street" status about halfway up the hill. Here it turned south into a small single lane path completely over-arched with trees and then connected with the next street over. If you were on Market either you knew where you were going or you were lost. Nobody cruised Market Street just for fun and it was certainly no shortcut to anywhere in particular. Parents felt safe letting their kids play on Market. The little connecting lane was another world just around the comer. It was a very secretive place with its few cottages nestled far back in the woods. It was always much quieter in there, all the outside sounds muted by the dense underbrush. Cooler too. Of course the ever-present stream that criss-crossed the hillside was there passing under the lane by a metal culvert and supporting an extravagant growth of forget-me-nots. Much of the ground was covered by a thick carpet of delta-shaped dark green leaves that were spotted with pale pink dots. Some of this eventually found its way into our OJ.t7J garden at home beneath the kitchen window. It never prospered the way it did beside that lane. No doubt something to do with the shade or the soil or perhaps the folly of uprooting something from where it belongs.

The largest of the cottages on our property was in the middle of the lot and I suspect it predated the others by a good many years. This was where Alec and his wife Beryl always stayed for the summer. It had a musty, mossy air of age about it that suggested it had known better times when the cottagers didn't have to collect rent from part-time cottage folk to pay the taxes. Many such places did exist, being handed down through the generations. The family would attend on weekends starting with Victoria Day. Mother and the lads would be in residence from the end of June through to Labour Day. The great closing up ceremony of Thanksgiving. Season after season. But many were forced to succumb to financial necessity. Hasty little cabins were erected on many properties while the family retreat became a place of business. The new owners collected the rental cheques and changed the linen once a week. Some prospered and some were pathetic. Ours was of the former category. There was a small (one bedroom?) cottage to the side that used to be a garage, hence

the name it was commonly known by; 'The Garage: At the very back of the property was a sizeable shed that in later years was converted into a very small cott1Jge. At some point in those 35 years we stayed in every cottage. Each had its own atmosphere, its own mood. The front cottage where we spent most of our time was light and carefree. The Garage was narrow and sort of severe. The tiny shed at the back was fun, like living in a doll's house and as an added bonus, the creek babbled just behind the concrete block foundations, offering non-stop music for the entire 2 weeks. The big cottage was Mr. McLean's territory and the one summer we were allowed to rent there, I felt like an intruder. His presence brooded over the property when he wasn't there to brood in person. I should point out that Alec Mclean was an imposing man, especially to a runty lad like yours truly. He was a former police officer who looked like he would be more comfortable behind the precinct desk with a Billy in his back pocket. He liked to wear his shiny black boots and belt around the cottage as if being too comfortable were a sin. His laugh Jv.1S more like a growl and his jokes would never have been heard around our house. But I know now; and suspected even then, that he was a gentle teddy bear in dealing with respectable people. Heaven help the rest.

The front cottage, our cottage, was' called "Hideaway: Most of the cottages in that town seemed to have names, a tradition that was probably imported by the many Scottish immigrants that settled that area and later, embraced the town as a favoured resort. Names like "Casa Mac" and Wee "Hame" or "Bide-a-Wee" could be found posted over doorways. Ire-discovered this custom of giving houses names that reflected their locale or their history many years later in the highlands and lowlands of Scotland on one of my pilgrimages to the old sod. I had one uncle who would actually have mail delivered to his house if it was merely addressed "Cuff-About House, Leven, Fife". A marvelous postal system. Collectively, the McLean's cottages were called 'The Tartans" as evidenced by a blaze of red and green around the border of the sign and a wee black Scottie. But ours at the front was the only one to have a name of its own, "Hideaway". But we certainly didn't go there to hide. Almost everyone of any significance in our lives came to visit us during our stays at the cottage and many came back again and again to form their own relationships with the town. The Broderick's and Jane McCormick, some city neighbours who fell in love with the place. I remember Granddad and Auntie Mary Visiting for a day. Jack and Mary Coombs along with Mary's father, Mr. Bryerly, arrived one day in Jack's enormous Oldsmobile convertible. Jack always did everything in a big way but never forgot where he came from. My Sister Helen and her husband Bill and her various children as they came along always managed to show up for at least part of the two weeks. One summer when they lived in Sault Ste. Mane, they drove across Manitoulin Island then crossed Georgian Bay on the ferry to arrive at Port Elgin about midnight. Some heroic efforts were made to get there and take part in the summer rituals. Even after I was working regularly; if I couldn't get those two weeks vacation, I would leave directly from work on

Friday night, drive the 3 1/2 hours to arrive that evening; then return Sunday evening for work on Monday morning. There was a summer when Tom Stewart came to stay. Jon Martin drove up on his Ducati 160 motorcycle for a weekend. There were the Kitney's from Durham. The Stewarts from Michigan. Then there were the regulars, the one who rented at The Tartans about the same time we were there; The Barbers, (Fred and Madeleine. Fred came mostly for the church suppers that abounded each summer and his girth testified to that fact), and the Gillespies. There were others that we remembered long after they were part of history like a very elderly gentleman who, for many years, could be seen briskly walking the road to Burgoyne each morning, rain or shine. You could set your watch by him.

I recall one summer, maybe in my late teens, when it almost didn't happen. For some reason we couldn't get the cottage, but we completed our pilgrimage anyway and stayed 4 or 5 nights in a motel (I think Dad's money ran out). The summer Mother had her arterial surgery (83?), she and Dad went just for a week and I had no chance to be there. And of course that nightmare summer of 1989 and all the summers since ... Port Elgin was continuity. It was the rock on which the cycle of our year was founded. In spite of all the changes as the town evolved and devolved with industry and the economy, it was always there at the end of July, usually hot and sunny, sometimes wet but only for a short while. Dusty on the back roads through ripening fields of corn and oats and wheat, fragrant and still as a church deep in the woods just a few hundred feet from the cottage. Loud and painfully bright at the beach where the sun glanced off chrome, where the smell of suntan lotion battled with the aroma of fresh fried chips and vinegar and car exhaust; exotic, unimaginable wealth of the yachts docked in the harbour sporting their clever or silly names, top 40 blaring, gulls screaming, children laughing ... Sorry. It's easy for me to get a little delirious when I start talking about this time. Too easy to be transported to descriptive excess. I have to take a little "reality break" once in a while.

More about that tiny stream at the back of the McLean property. It was crystal dear and painfully cold, running in a bed of firm, dean sand and edged with large mossy stones. It was the perfect place to cool sweaty feet if you could stand the temperature shock, or keep an exceptional fish alive that had been caught back at the river, or to float a toy boat or just sit and watch the water pass by. Before passing the cottages, part of the stream had been captured to form a small pond on the adjoining property. It was no more than 15 feet across with a 3-foot island in the middle. You had to lean perilously over the split-rail fence to peer into the pond but your reward was often a glimpse of an old greenback bass that might have been caught that summer in the river or the harbour. There were many streams that issued from the steep slope that separated beach from town, but that little brook figured prominently in my memory of those summers. It appeared next crossing under the lane that

Joined Market Street to the 5-way intersection near the miniature golf course. Here it turned from a noisy chatter to a gentle murmur, spreading out through beds of forget-me-nots and passing between the multi'-coloured shades of Rainbow Cottages. Then it passed by the edge of Sunset Lodge and lost itself in the harbour.

The various Lodges of Port Elgin were institutions in themselves. They each had their loyal following and catered to a clientele that was different from cottage folk. Cedarbrook Lodge was definitely for the shuffleboard and bridge set. There must have been a requirement that said your hair was to be white, a shade of blue, or missing altogether in order to attend. Elgin Lodge at the top of the hill was still very refined, but more family oriented. There was a pool and badminton nets on the grounds but most of the cars in the lot were Cadillacs and Lincolns. Sunset Lodge, right at the harbour's edge, was more alive. It rambled along the water's edge, next to the boats and the bustle of the mini-golf course. They featured live bands at night on a patio where patrons in Bermuda shorts drank beer and joined in the sing-alongs. You wouldn't find these goings-on at Cedarbrook. The generation that favoured this sort of getaway faded with the years. Sunset Lodge burned down one year and little effort was made to replace it. Cedarbrook
was converted to permanent residences. Elgin Lodge continues, I think, but drastically changed from its original purpose as a symbol of elegant retreat. It's trying hard to be trendy these days. There was cedar lawn furniture everywhere in Port Elgin, Southampton and surrounding area. It was made and sold by the Indians of the Chippewa Reserve just north of Southampton. Thin cedar poles were bent and lashed together with strips of cedar bark. The furniture started off varnished a natural colour and then, as the seasons passed, they picked up different layers of colour. You could probably tell the age of any piece by scraping the paint and counting the layers. Our cottage had its allotment of cedar chairs on the concrete patio that grew successive layers with successive years.

There were things to be done in that two week period that became ritual; a church supper, berry picking; fishing at our spot on the Saugeen River, a walk up and down Southampton's main street, stand with your face to the wind at the end of the breakwater, ice cream at McKenzie's Dairy (before it fell to the Mac's Milk onslaught), chips from the shop at the beach, McGregor's Point, Dunblane Church est. 1857, beach carnival. It took maybe 3 or 4 years for new things to be incorporated into the ritual. Paint-by-numbers came to be associated with cottage life to pass away the days of rain and all the quiet nights. I think my sister may have one of those masterpieces hanging on a living room wall. Cribbage replaced that when I learned the game. I was good at it but my father was lucky. That made him better than good. Television intruded when it became portable, but not very much. We watched Armstrong's small step while we crowded around a b&w portable on the kitchen table.

The original casino was a cobwebbed, bug-infested, termite-ridden relic that sat on the beach next to the harbour. I'm sure it was haunted. It smelled of old soggy wood and probably held too many memories of first kisses and last chances. The dance floor could be opened to the patio that was strung with dim coloured lights where the slow dancers could retire for mare intimate snuggling. It was walled with coloured panels of plastic that allowed a dim shadow of the couples behind. Monday nights were for bingo and the children were allowed inside. Friday and Saturday nights were for dances where the teens and the older crowd practiced their mysterious rites to the sound of live bands echoing across the beach and up the hill. Late into the night, lying in my bed, I could hear the ominous sounds of cars and trucks, the hotrods and motorcycles as the dance came to an end and the couples roared off to continue the ritual somewhere else. The rumble of those engines was dangerous, reckless and powerful. It was exciting and primal, like an animal's wail in the middle of the night. The old casino burned down at some point. We returned one year to find a concrete block replacement. It was more resistant to fire and insects, more resistant to magic too. It eventually succumbed as well, to scandalously cheap construction methods, kickbacks and too much sand in the concrete. I stood outside one evening with Linda before we were married, listening for free to the sounds of Lighthouse. I once took Jennifer there on a Sunday afternoon to see Mr. Dress-Up. I played bingo there.

On the beach, next to the casino, was the miniature golf course. When it was at its decrepit worst, this enduring enterprise on the beach was at its best. The clubhouse was a claustrophobic frame building (no more than a good sized garden shed) that you passed through to pay your money, get your club, ball, scorecard and pencil, then step blinking and grateful onto the first tee. The putters had wooden shafts and dirty, pitted metal heads. The balls were usually cut (Dad called them "smileys") but the pencils were always sharp. Overhead were strings of naked light bulbs that came on with the darkness and allowed play until 11:00 or 12:00 beneath clouds of insects they attracted. There were curves and bumps and choices to be made between different holes that may leave you in good or difficult lies on the fairway. Hole #7 was the long one, maybe 40 feet, where you could open up a little. The eighteenth hole dropped your ball through a metal tube and into a locked box, marking the end of the game and last chance far a hole-in-one. When yours had dropped in, you could scramble up and over the edge of the green (not permitted, of course) to hear the others come rattling down to land with a thunk in the box. Into the clubhouse to return the club, then maybe a cold bottle of pop from the cooler, the kind chilled by cold water where you slid your choice along the metal racks and out through the gate at the end of the row. The vision may not be accurate, but it may have been an Orange Crush cooler and some of the bottles inside could have been dark brown glass with those distinctive ridges. Or it could just be nostalgia, rearing its ugly, persistent head again. Count up your score, payoff your wagers, then hurry to something else. But lock away the memory

and gently pull it out again in the dead of winter when the snow is deep in the backyard. I played that course with Cherie, Stacey and Patti, each in their turn as children. The course was modernized, tennis courts were added. I think there were new clubs and the fairways may now be concrete. The old course passed away peacefully.

The band shell is a relative newcomer, maybe only 20 years old. To our surprise, there was an article in the Toronto Star about this vacation jewel, Port Elgin, as if someone had just uncovered an amazing treasure. A sketch of the beach featured the band shell as the focal point. Yet, to this day, I don't ever recall it being used. The pipe bands that would come to play on a Sunday afternoon always marched or stood in the open space that served as parking lot when the beach was busy or carnival ground when some local group hosted an event. The bands came from Kincardine, Walkerton, Goodrich, Paisley and they may not have been good, but they were beautiful. The pipers and drummers would stand apart from each other to tune up and practice. Then as if by magic they would come together with precision to form a moving unity of sound and colour. For the most part, they played the familiar marches that I had grown up listening to at Fort York Armouries. They would march and sweat or stand and sweat, faces growing redder as the effort, the heat and the heavy wool uniforms took their toll. Some part may have been played by the beer that mysteriously found its way out of plastic coolers between the sets, but nobody seemed to begrudge them their refreshment. It was just part of the scene. When the music stopped, the audience seated in the comfort of their cars would sound their approval with their horns, raising a discordant blare across the beach that contrasted nicely with the harmonies we had heard a moment ago. During the lulls, a band member might circulate through the audience with a bonnet, taking up a collection to help defray expenses. I think they did pretty well considering the heritage of the town and that many of their listeners at that time must have been veterans who had marched to sound at some point in their military past. Dad always wanted to hear 'The Blue Bonnets' the TSR's regimental march, and if they didn't oblige, he would call out the request during their breaks. If it wasn't in their repertoire they would give it a go anyway.

If the beach was the heart of the lower town, the harbour was its soul. A safe, natural harbour, enhanced by an impressive break wall that arched out from the north side with one arm. Another ran straight out on the south, then branched into a T, one wall reaching out to almost touch the north arm, the other running south to protect the swimming beach. There was a natural segregation of age and wealth to certain parts of the lakefront, but everyone came to the harbour. They came to walk and talk, share an ice cream, gawk and gape at the boats, watch the sun settle into Lake Huron. The harbour was an unrestricted social club where it was perfectly acceptable to smile and greet

complete strangers with a friendly "Evening". Seniors mingled with young families who mingled with younger couples walking hand-in-hand. Dodges and Lincolns parked beside each other. The water, and even the texture of the harbour, could change with the weather. Calm, hot mornings that held the promise of a blazing summer day, would find the harbour drifting with a shadow just over the water's surface. A contrast of the cooler depths. Approaching storms would show themselves in an iron-grey surface that could be whipped into a fury at a moment's notice. Storms were that much more impressive viewed from the protective shelter of the harbour, their violence more shocking compared to the efforts to keep them at bay. Evenings would deepen the harbour's colour to match the sky and imperfectly reflect the moon and stars. There were legends of monster pike and muskie lurking in the depths and on one occasion, I saw one pulled to the surface on a stringer by the proud, breathless fisherman. I always thought those who dared to dive and swim in the harbour were fools or lunatics. The thought of even falling in still has the power to make me shudder. I mean, you had no idea what was lurking on the bottom and those years when the Great Lakes water level was really low, you could see the beckoning arms of seaweed waiting to entangle anyone crazy enough to come near. Very scary stuff for a six year old, or a twelve year old, or a thirty year old with a hyper imagination.

Years ago when gas was cheap and it was OK to flaunt your wealth, the rich came to Port Elgin in their floating summer resorts, mostly from Michigan, some from Ohio, or New York and once in a while (but always looking rather shabby next to their American cousins) from the RCYC in Toronto. Mahogany and chrome, ropes neatly coiled on the deck, white vinyl bumpers over the side to protect their spotless white hulls. They came from Detroit, Grosse Pointe, Cleveland and were on their way to Tobermory, the Soo and points beyond. There were kids on board who had bicycles and motor scooters

mounted on back to ride about wherever they docked They carried their world around with them like summertime gypsies. They were tanned and beautiful and privileged but I don't recall feeling envious. They were just part of the scenery, odd and curious like a strange fish or a spectacular sunset. At one time there were tour boats that operated out of Port Elgin, ancient vessels captained by ancient mariners who smoked pipes and wore navy blue skippers caps. One was called the Miramichi after the island off Southampton that was its destination. I doubt it was safe to go much beyond that. I imagine its bilge pump just barely keeping ahead of the leaks. For a price, you could slosh about on the waves and get a different perspective on the harbour and the shore. At least I think so; never did try it. The popularity of sail took much away from the harbour ... In the early years the north edge was an untended, swampy thing. There used to be an abandoned barge aground there, a massive rusting platform that kids would scramble over to explore and pretend. But it was unsightly and soon disappeared. Fishing used to be great off the north breakwater. You would walk out on the slightly slanted, inner surface but

anyone who was able walked on the narrower, 3-foot wide ridge as the waves crashed or gently slopped at your feet on the lake-ward side. Back in the days when there was a fishing industry on the lake, you could actually see schools of perch swimming in unison in the shallows among the rocks. Occasionally, as they turned, there was a glimpse of orange fading into yellow, confirming that here was a school of lake perch, real fighters for their size and tasty too. Drop in a line with a fat worm on the hook and bring home dinner, guaranteed. Over-fishing, lamprey eels and pollution put an end to all of that by the mid 60's but there was still the odd fish to catch on the lake or harbour side. I once found a little pocket of smallmouth bass in the harbour off the north shore. I would throw a cast out to the limit of my reel, then draw the spinner near the edge of some tall standing weeds. It was good fun for a couple of years. I must have left several hundred dollars worth of tackle among the rocks of the lake side of the wall. There was the added convenience of being able to walk there in about 10 minutes from the cottage on Market Street. It was also the best vantage point to watch the sunset, quiet and remote, away from the lights of the harbour that would diminish the glimmer of the first stars. There were rocks to throw and tiny green frogs to chase through the grass. The north shore became civilized with time. It was cleaned up. Landfill was trucked in. A public launching ramp was built. It became a place to throw a Frisbee or walk your dog. The shore was transformed and the fish were gone. One summer I took a panorama photo from the north shore, sweeping from east to west. Six pictures in all, each one just overlapping the other. When they were developed I matched and cut each print then taped them together to form a continuous image. It stayed on the wall in my father's basement until December 31st 1989 and the family home passed on into other hands. I have those pictures now. They're faded and the tape has dried and cracked.

The beach road to Southampton left town by the North Shore Park. I didn't get acquainted with this area at all until that summer I took Jennifer for a weekend visit. The miniature steam train that chugged through the park drew us like a magnet. It rattled off from a depot on the beach by the tennis courts, crossed the road with a great clanging of bells and hoot of steam, and laboured around the harbour's north shore to the cedar-dense park. It did a circuit of the park, stopped for a brief layover to load up on chips and pop from the refreshment stand, then returned, a roundtrip of about 20 minutes. In the time we are considering here, the train is a relative newcomer but it seemed to fall into place quite naturally. It looked like it belonged there. I still have the ticket stubs either from that year of from the next when both Jennifer and Arran came with me. The road north out of town twisted and turned next to the boulder-littered shore. The cottages were located on the east side of the road, away from the lake. The cottages themselves all seemed very large and excessive but they suffered in their Isolation from the water. To get to the water's edge, you had to cross the dusty road and when you saw the beach, you had to ask yourself, Why? There was no beach, simply wave-smoothed

boulders and sun-bleached driftwood. This was the natural shoreline for most of Lake Huron and the odd sandy beach was the exception. First stop was Miramichi Bay. As the lake levels rose and fell this bay would alternately become a water playground or a desert. I never envied these people, enduring the absence of a sand beach and never knowing from year to year where they would be mooring their boats. First glimpse of Chantry Island and its lighthouse meant that Southampton was near.

Southampton was the opposition, Port Elgin's competitor for the cottage trade. Its main street ran east to west, down to the lake but in a gentle slope, unlike the Port. It didn't have that natural division between cottage and town, fun and business. It seemed much older than Port Elgin and perhaps it was, being located as it was at the mouth of that natural trade and travel route, the Saugeen River. It was more run-down, seedy as if it had seen better days and was now past its prime. Perhaps this was true. Dollars flowed into Port Elgin with the development of the Bruce Nuclear Generating Station nearby, but they never flowed into neighbouring Southampton. But at least one trip here to walk the streets and shop the shops was required each year, another verse in the litany. For a couple of years it was compulsory as there wasn't anyone in Port Elgin supporting the bait business and the only source of dew worms was from the shed behind an enterprising household in the town up the highway. For many years, Southampton's major claims to fame were the hospital, the museum, the Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet and the Brewers Retail, none of which Port Elgin had. Maybe that's the way residents of the Port wanted it. Let the town up the way provide the services and the tacky, nouveau commerce. Port Elgin would retain its refined air of genteel dignity, profiting from the availability of fast food and faster beverages without falling prey to the litter of neon and styrofoam. It worked for a while. The Port took pride in itself, kept itself clean and painted while Southampton just grew older. But the lure was too great, or maybe it was a matter of survival. Pizza, burgers and beer found their way into the outskirts of town and left their mark. Except for the rare excursion to Owen Sound or the rarer trip to Sauble Beach, Southampton marked the northern boundary of our summer universe. Beyond the bridge over the Saugeen River was the local area Hudson Bay Post. Beyond that - the desolation of an Indian Reserve. Beyond that - nothing.

Port Elgin was another matter altogether. Uptown were the shops of Main Street, aka The Bluewater Highway, aka Goderich Street. But it was always just "Uptown". Everyone acknowledged that destination and someone went so far as to name a motel "The Uptown". Motels came and went, but the Uptown always seemed to prosper perhaps because of its location outside the town limits and its boast of an inground pool. The neon NO was usually lit before the VACANCY sign. There were shops uptown that endured forever and ever, like that gift shop on the east side (Cluley's ?) where we bought my sister a Dolton

figurine for one of the first birthdays she couldn't be with us. She was trapped at home with a new responsibility, work. The barbershop (Eby's) where my father had his hair cut for the sake of tradition rather than necessity. This was no stylist's but a real barber shop, striped pole men only, Argosy and GQ on the magazine rack, advertisements for Wild Root Creme Oil and Barbasol, linoleum and leather. This was a fraternity of brothers that all acknowledged. The Rexall Drug Store stood at one comer by the traffic lights. Here we bought endless books and sunglasses and insect repellent. This was where I bought my first copy of Tolkien and began a 25-year love affair with Middle Earth. There was a hardware store next to the Tourist Information Centre. This was the source for much of our fishing tackle over the years and was also the place to go for wooden toy boats with real electric motors, plastic beach toys and air mattresses. This was also the source for car models that held my interest for so many years. I still have one partly assembled model that my Sister's kids surprised me with one summer when we were all together. It is a customized Corvette Stingray. It came from that hardware store. Stedman's 5&10, an endless mountain of rubber sandals, tee shirts and candy none of which cost 5 or 10 cents. The monumental Town Library, the offices of the Port Elgin Times, the essential world famous Chinese Restaurant, Bettink's Shoe Store, the CO--OP grocery store, so crowded and dim unlike the bright Dominion Store we shopped at home. There was a rival grocery store directly across the street. It might have been an IGA before they moved to a new location up the street next to the (relatively) new movie theatre. At one time there was an old movie theatre at the south end of town, west Side. It was a wooden frame firetrap that vanished after a few years to be replaced by a parking lot and so it remains. Of course there was Miller's Electric. Dad knew Bill Miller from the days when he was on the road as appliance salesman for CGE. Miller's was one of his stops so when Port Elgin became a regular event so did a visit to Miller's store for a chat that bored the rest of us to tears. As the town grew, Miller's grew. The need for electrical supplies and contracting never seemed to let up. Someone was always willing to take a flyer on a new venture and whether it sailed or sank, the first thing they did was call on Bill Miller to install or upgrade the power supply. He eventually built himself a grand house on Market Street but there were dark rumours about his private life. Success had its price tag.

Uptown was an adventure. Too far to walk, so it always meant piling into the sun-baked car, then finding a parking space. Side streets were best for the shade of a maple. It was a sad day when parking meters spread off the main street and infested every branch for a block ... THE DAIRY. The capitals are intentional. THE DAIRY was McKenzie 's Dairy, home of the frosted mug of root beer and the marshmallow sundae. There was a real soda fountain with chrome-backed, red leatherette stools that could spin like a top. The counter snaked in an S about half the length of the store. They served Vernor's Ginger Ale that was drawn from a clear cooler perched on the counter-top. Vernor's was a nod to the tourists from Michigan who came each year with their

odd license plates and twangy accents. I had only encountered this exotic drink in Detroit on some distant Visit to see Uncle Dave and Auntie Carrie (relations on my mother's side). Vernors is common here in southern Ontario today having made a recent comeback. The Vernors symbol remains a bearded, smiling Tyroler dressed in green, yellow and brown and he still smiles with that knowing wink as if you both share a secret. The root beer was dispensed from a simulated wooden cooler on the far side of the counter. A supply of heavy glass mugs was kept in the freezer and brought out just before the foamy brown mixture was poured in. The glass would be frosty white, slowly dissolving into trails of condensation. It was considered sacrilege to use a straw. This brew was downed one-handed, elbow propped on the counter, blowing aside the foam. Marshmallow sundaes were heaven-sent for people like me who didn't like traditional concoctions of nuts and whipped cream. A marshmallow sundae arrived topped only with the fluffy white sauce and a single cherry. Presented in a traditional deep dish accompanied by a long handled spoon) served with ice water. The take-out counter was at the south end and opened on to the street for serving cones. To approach from the street, you had to climb a set of crumbly cement steps up to the sidewalk level and there was never room for more than 3 or 4 people. The rest had to wait their turn down in the dust and the weeds. The flavours weren't exotic, but they served their own products and they were richer and smoother than most. Every stroll uptown included THE DAIRY for a cone or a sit-down treat.

While we're on the subject of food, although not uptown, the Bluewater Tea Room should be noted. It sat at the harbour's edge and served mostly the boating crowd. It was part of the complex that served as harbour master's office, customs office, and fuel depot. I never paid it much attention until one year when Linda and I were dating and we were staying with my parents for a weekend, she discovered that they still sold Sealtest cherry custard Ice cream long after most stores ceased to carry it. Too expensive to make and not enough profit margin I guess. The Blue Water was a typical, tacky beach establishment; sunburned backs and sun bleached hair, bodies in damp bathing suits and feet in rubber thongs, Formica topped tables, curled linoleum on the floor gritty with sand, dead and dying flies on the windowsills. Whenever I try to imagine winter in Port Elgin the most shocking scene that always comes to mind is the Blue Water Tea Room, empty and battened down against the howling wind off the lake, darkened, piled to the windows with snow and facing the frozen harbour. Summer feels a million miles away.

The chip store on the beach was a concrete bunker of a building. They had amazing deep fryers bubbling all the time that looked like dangerous cauldrons of molten lava that might erupt. I don't think they changed the grease from spring until they doused them in the fall. All the workers appeared to be local kids hired for the summer and every hand was bandaged from encounters with

hot grease and utensils. Inside were 6 or 8 stools at a long counter, but most of the action was at the take-out. Three windows at the side gave access to the swimsuit crowd who didn't want to lose a moment's exposure by stepping into that cavernous, concrete vault. The screens would be pulled aside for a moment to push out the steaming orders or to accept payment and return the change, all in a vain and silly attempt to keep out the ever-present flies. To what purpose since the front door was left wide open? A large garage door at the rear accepted the truckloads of burlap-sacked potatoes and monstrous barrels of lard. A few towering willows on the north Side, a few benches, the inevitable wrack of Popsicle wrappers and cigarette butts and the scene is just about complete. The tiny Formica counters were awash in salt and vinegar and toothpicks. Some might wander in to peer at the menu hanging on the wall, maybe order a hamburger and a shake, but these were the uninitiated, newcomers to the ways of the beach. Those who were in tune with the spirit of the place came only for the chips. To this day every time I hear a gull cry I'm drawn back there to the chip store on the beach. The gulls were a wonder, especially to the little ones. Two and three year olds would give innocent chase to the thousands of white and grey gulls that hung around, knowing where their next meal lay. Despite the "DO NOT FEED THE GULLS" signs posted everywhere, humans paid them no more attention than did the birds. The noisy, white, flapping hordes were always overhead and underfoot waiting for a handout. Toss up a chip and a nearby bird would pluck it out of the air like a magician making quarters disappear. There was always some sympathy for the less aggressive females or the odd injured bird just trying to survive. When dinner was ready, Mum might send someone down to the chip store with a plastic bowl to get a few orders for the meal. I've had many marvelous chips over the years (even in London, England), but none can compare. The place took on a name in later years, GERRY'S, and went through some colour changes too. For a long, long time it remained. Then it changed. Then it went away, but I'll tell you more about that later.

There was a scrawny stand of cedars to the south and then the public washrooms and change rooms. The same concrete block architecture as Gerry's. We were never all-day beach people and so, never had many occasions to use the public facilities. Some families, or singles, would arrive at the beach by mid-morning; stake out their tent with towels and umbrellas, then spend the entire day alternately baking or swimming. I always thought this was such a pointless waste of a perfectly good day. A bit of sun and sand is fine, but there are so many other things that cry out to be savoured. However, these were the people that inhabited the public washrooms. At the farthest reach of the civilized beach, just before the untended no-man's land beyond, stood the Tuck Shop.

This was a strange place. Even the name sounded odd to my ears, never heard of a 'Tuck Shop' before. A rather friendly frame structure that looked more like a cottage than a business establishment, it was divided in two, the back devoted to plastic pails and boats and inflatable rings, birch bark canoes and tepees stamped with "SOUVENIR OF PORT ELGIN" and a rainbow array of T-shirts, hats and sunglasses. The front half was devoted to food. There were a few tables, a counter, the mandatory stools and a drift of comatose flies. The kitchen was open to view where the cook was on display in his white T-shirt and dirty hat. There was a covered porch out front facing the lake with (you guessed it) more cedar furniture that creaked and wobbled with too many years exposure to the elements. It was here that the concept of the "gourmet hotdog" was born. It was the second year I had my first car (I was maybe twenty and it was a '63 Mercury Comet, green and white). I took a Saturday in early May to drive to Port Elgin and back the same day. It was cold and windy so the fishing was a complete washout. I had time to sit and savour this place by myself, without the bustle and distraction of family and friends. For lunch, I stopped at the Tuck Shop and ordered a foot-long hotdog with the works. This was a bit out of character for someone like me who believed the only things that belonged on a hotdog were mustard and relish. It was about 16w long and topped with everything from chopped onions to diced carrots, slices of pickles to grated cheese. I ate it while sitting on the hood of my '63 Comet, looking over the waves rolling in on the sand. The "gourmet hotdog" was born there and then and every attempt to recreate it is an attempt to relive that day.

The swings on the beach were like no other swings. They were very high with extremely long chains that offered a majestic pendulum swing and at the crest of each upswing, I swear you could see the Michigan shore across the lake. Nobody sat facing the cottages behind. You sat with your face to the water and your teeth in the wind as it rushed past, cooling your sweat on the hottest of days. There was no better vantage point to watch the sun as it settled from a bloated, flattened orb on the water's edge into a thin line, then a dot, then nothing but a fading blush. At some point those wooden seats, worn smooth by thousands of bottoms over thousands of hours, were replaced by those flexible rubber straps that always hurt your behind and never let you feel the true pressure as gravity regained Its hold on the downswing then was forced to retreat again and again and again. The beach was firm golden sand and the water was very clear with a slight green tint. Georgian Bay water is blue or black but Lake Huron water is always green. Maybe it's the influence of those cedars again. Some summers it was possible to walk out 150 feet or more before the waves lapped at your chin, depending on the Great Lakes water level and how much you'd grown since last year. The water in the first shallow trough was bathwater warm. This is where the younger children played. Here was the domain of toy boats and inflatable rings, seaweed, candy wrappers and chip cartons. Parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles were there

to supervise, usually in trousers rolled to the knees. Walking out would take you over various shifting sandbars and alternating bands of cold and warm water. The uninitiated had to watch out for blue lips and red shoulders. Both of them could get you at any time. When the water was still you could see schools of tiny fish, most likely perch, darting this way and that ahead of you. There were some treasures to be found One year Dad found a six-inch, red granite boulder on the bottom. It was heavily flecked with black and buried in one side was a half-inch gold coloured nugget. It may or may not have been real. But reality had nothing to do with its fascination. It came home with us and stayed around the basement for many years. But like so many things that caught my fancy in those days, today its gone. Inflatable air mattresses had their day since I didn't properly learn to swim until I reached high school I had been frightened of deep water since a near drowning (at age 3?) at a GE picnic on Muscleman's Lake. The most desirable ones were those made of rubberized fabric, orange on one side, dark blue on the other. My sister and I had some memorable fights over that one. There were mattress rentals on the beach from bronzed and muscled entrepreneurs, the same guys who later converted their inventory to windsurfers. Further south, beyond the Tuck Shop and the fence posts that marked the supervised area, things got a little uncivilized. It was still public land but the beach narrowed and became unruly with thick clumps of saw grass that would catch between the toes and cut deep enough to draw blood There were patches of rock in the water and in some places the cottagers had piled the boulders high enough to moor their boats. The land arched out to one green point, maybe McGregor's, and on a clear day you could make out another beyond that on the horizon.

The road that skirted the bottom of the hill was bounded on the south by a street that climbed the hill and crested by the trailer park and on the north, by one that took you by Cedarbrook Lodge. There were two or three others in between and each had their own names and characters, Mill Street, Elgin, etc, but from my point of view they were simply routes to the beach. Some were better paved than others and I think one was even graced with a sidewalk. But that street that demarcated the private cottage lots from the public, communal area of the beach, it presented a face that everyone became familiar with. It began in the south out of nowhere in a parking lot beside the Tuck Shop. It ran for a short distance, about an eighth of a mile, then abruptly became something else at the 5-way intersection by the mini-golf. On one side was a line of motel-like cottage faces with names like The Glengarry. These were always occupied by families from Michigan where fathers in gaudy shorts tried to light charcoal in portable orange barbecues while they tossed back Canadian brew. They were either very thin or very fat and always had red, sweaty faces. Every available space between buildings was taken up with lawn chairs, inner tubes, cedars and kids. The opposite side towards the lake (a recently discovered map names it Harbour Street) dissolved into a small desert of sand and grass that could on a Friday or Saturday night, be transformed into that mystical, magical happening, the Beach Carnival. Beach Carnivals were preceded by an

afternoon of slowly mounting activity and tension. First to arrive at the site were a few trucks and station wagons bearing the equipment needed for the games of skill and chance. The wheels with their circle of spikes for the ball to roll about or the clicker stop, the table to hold the cakes and pies, the flags and bunting. Next came the eleCl17cal and the sound people, usually Miller's E/ecl17c, to ensure there was power for the bingo machine with its birdcage of ping-pong balls and for the PA system to call out the numbers. Just before dusk, the truck would arrive with the prizes that would unload into a mountain of dazzling, tawdry treasure in the middle of the bingo square. This was before the days of the lazy man 's cop-out, the cash prize. There were lawn chairs, air mattresses, toy boats and portable barbecues, enormous elecl17c fans and complete fishing rod kits, propane lanterns, swim fins and snorkels, huge striped umbrellas and net bags with beach toys enough to last a lifetime. What was mere money compared to this? Darkness brought on the overhead lights that illuminated this treasure trove, gleaming and glittering with promise for only a dime, or a quarter, or fifty cents. The price of paradise kept pace with inflation. You could double or 117'ple your 25 cent wager at the Crown and Anchor or the Derby Horse Race. Or lose it all. If nothing else, it was a valuable lesson in finance, fate and the wisdom of Mr. P. T. Barnum regarding fools and currency. Bingo was sometimes played, in those early days, on newsprint-thin sheets with the cards stamped on the paper. The called numbers were marked by placing a kernel of dried corn on the square with the silent prayer that no excited patron would jump up and send the whole mess flying. It was always wise to wait for the numbers to be verified. This system was thankfully replaced by those more modem, and certainly more re-useable, leatherette cards with the tiny black blinds to be drawn over the called numbers. Darkness and the first echoes of "UNDER THE B" was the signal to put on jackets if there was a breeze and wander down towards the lights and mounting excitement. When you are very small, the noise and hustle of that many adults performing their arcane rites can be frightening and exciting. You had to wiggle your way to the table's edge then find a number that wasn't being played but still looked promising. Your age was always a good bet or the year you were born. Stake It out then see how long It took for luck to smile on you or move on down the board to someone else's territory. Try the wheel for a homemade pie or cake that might still be warm from the oven. The really good carnivals had a fishpond where everyone was a winner, but having played it safe, you got far less than when the odds were long. Popcorn, cotton candy, taffy apples. By standing at the edge of the circle of light and noise, you could look over the darkened bay, with maybe a gentle breeze in your hair, to see the moon and stars dance on the water. Here was the edge, the dividing line between two worlds; one exciting and chaotic and all too brief. The other, dark and alien, stretching beyond sight. I always turned and ran back to the safety of the things I knew. I won a chaise lounge playing bingo that first year at Port Elgin. When faced with a choice from that mountain of extravagance, I chose something practical, something I thought my parents would approve. A few years later, I might have picked otherwise. But then, it seemed like the right thing to do. Things started to

unwind about 10 a 'clock. The only ones left were the die-hards trying to break even on the Crown & Anchor. Time to go home.

The next day, it was as if the whole affair had been a dream ... The north side of Market Street, opposite the cottage, was a wall of cedars. For the most part, the trees were too densely packed to allow passage for anything larger than a squirrel or chipmunk. A gentle breeze would set the trunks squeaking and groaning as they rubbed against each other. A storm would set them swaying to the point where they must surely break or tear loose 1i-om the weak and sandy soil. And sometimes they did, but not often. There were clearings in that wilderness, linked by trails that testified to the occasional explorer. It was possible to wander a great psychological distance from the present, far from civilization and find patches of open sandy dunes that felt untouched and untrammeled by any white man since Monsieur S. de Champlain passed this way some time ago. Logically, I knew that wasn't possible as evidenced by candy wrappers and fading tin cans that poked out of the sand. But it was easy to forget all that and to see a band of Indians slipping into the trees as you emerged into an opening. Here was to be found the most luxurious growth of scotch thistles I ever witnessed. Their purple crowns stood above my head and their needles were as long as my finger. Magnificently dangerous. There were small forests of milkweed that supported a population of monarch butterflies and bumblebees that droned from flower to flower in the heavy heat. Standing in these isolated pools of wildness, unplugged from the current of the familiar, it was possible to experience a mild epiphany, a transformation of sorts as you became acutely aware of small and otherwise insignificant things. Reality was over there somewhere, beyond the trees: telephone poles and garbage cans, fire hydrants and such. But here was a scene as it was three or thirty centuries ago. You wanted to whisper in its presence ... Finding your ~y back to Market Street was almost a relief. There was a house at the top of Market Street, north side. It was an ugly concrete block structure that might have been built around the time Port Elgin's finest flower of youth went off to fight the Hun and bleed in the mud of France. It was made with that kind of confidence, built to last. The doors and shutters were flaky red and the cement stairway that lead to the front door looked like the entrance to some historic monument. Looking back, a lot of the town's architecture was like that; monumental as if the builders still mourned with Victoria for her beloved Albert. Behind it stretched fields of tobacco that Bruce County was rightly famous for. They had a cornfield out back where they picked daily or even as you stood and waited. Port Elgin corn was as sweet and firm as any I've tasted. We bought it uptown, from roadside stands with hand-lettered signs, from kids selling door-to-door with their wagons piled high, but the com from that house at the top of the hill is the standard of excellence by which all others are judged. Com and tobacco were everywhere then. Great nodding fields of well-ordered corn alternating with dusty green rows of tobacco. Some of the corn still remains but scientific studies, changing habits and Ministry of Agriculture policy have left only

the aging; weathered, curing barns to mark where tobacco once flourished. The families that worked the land never seemed to recover from that blow as the fields were left to go fallow year after year. They seemed to lose a small bit of their pride and a large portion of their soul.

Over the years we managed to explore a fair piece of the Surrounding countryside. We ranged from Owen Sound up to Cape Croker on the Georgian Bay side, Walkerton to the east and south to Kincardin. But most of our time was spent in a rough semicircle defined by Southampton, Burgoyne and on the south, by a road leading off the highway and running arrow-straight to the lake, maybe about six or eight miles outside the Port. There were a few cottages hewn out of the bush by the lakeside and one of them was owned by Uncle Jack and Auntie Lizzie Stewart who called somewhere in Michigan home. Their actual connection with our family is somewhat vague, whether by blood or by virtue of their town of origin in the old country, who knows? The fact that your grandfather and my great-uncle came from the same insignificant coal mining village in Fife seems to have implied that we were now bonded and bound together as family in this new land. At least that's the impression I got as I was growing up and was introduced to a myriad of pseudo-aunts and semi:' uncles who all hailed from over 'ome. But I think that at one time, the Stewarts and the Thomsons exchanged regular Visits. Their cottage was one of the few that were carved out of the rocky shoreline.

There were some scrawny birch trees for shade and a patch of grass struggling in the shallow soil that was likely trucked in for that purpose. The lakefront was a wasteland of stone, worn smooth and treacherous by centuries of pounding waves and just waiting to gobble an unsuspecting ankle in the gaps between, give it a twist or maybe a snap. It was home to the bones of long-dead fish and the rare, but ever dangerous in song and legend, Massassauga rattlesnake. I saw one once and that was quite enough. The cottage was light and ally and pleasant enough in daylight with fair weather. At night or in the grip of a raging Great Lakes storm I imagine it was a different story altogether. It was isolated, lonely and at the mercy of elements that city folks didn't understand or spent their lives putting at bay. Civilization wasn't all that far away, just over the hill or down the road, but it felt, standing on that shore with the wind driving sand and foam into your face, that all you had ever know was swept away. Uncle Jack had a black and white cocker spaniel named Geordie. Now here was a remarkable old dog that had been taught a new trick. He would only accept food offered to him from your left hand. There had been a number of animal poisonings in their neighbourhood so Uncle Jack had decided to better Geordie's odds of survival by teaching him this trick. They had two sons as well as a dog, Bill and Douglas. I remember their cars more clearly than them and their choice of wheels reflected their attitudes. Douglas' was a sophisticated 58/59 Ford Sunliner with a retractable hardtop. It was red and white with acres of chrome and when that top arched up, folded and drew itself into the trunk, the world held its breath in amazement. At least I did.

The other was a mean and nasty 54/56 Ford with a dropped rear end, continental tire, teardrop fender skirts, purple dash lights and an exhaust note that could drop birds dead from the trees when he opened It up.

Bill called his car "Gunsmoke".

A bit closer to home was another dirt road running off the highway towards the lake. But it didn't quite make it. The dust and gravel faded into two packed ruts with a high ridge of weeds between that gave the underside of the car a proper brushing. It finally surrendered in a long abandoned farmyard. All that remained was a slowly filling stone basement and some scattered mounds of rubble. Every farm has its garden tended by wives and daughters that included tiger lilies, iris, sweet william, lilac. Here there were red currant bushes that had gone wild. In their untended exuberance, the berries dragged the branches to the ground with their numbers. We would scramble over the debris to pull off handfuls of currants and fill every container we had. We never set of to explore without a couple of pots and pans from the cottage. Mum and Dad would go at it until they were well scratched and mosquito bitten. I helped until I got bored, then wandered off to explore the underbrush or throw stones at some target. It was here that I really learned to drive. Dad was always willing to toss me the keys to the family sedan on these back roads and while they got their fill of berries, I pretended (while out of ear shot) that I was Mario Andretti taking the checkered at Indy. If only Dad knew. Maybe he did. He liked to tell the story of how he and Uncle Ed Martin, as kids, used to chase American tourists down Thamesville way in a stripped down Packard that was nothing more than a frame, engine, four wheels and a seat. Maybe he knew what I was doing. Some years, if the township neglected to spray defoliant along the country roads, there were raspberries. Fat, dusty raspberries right off the cane and into our mouth. Two for the pot, one for your mouth, four for the pot, two for your mouth, and so on. You had to watch out for the bugs. If a raspberry crunched, you were chewing bug. As far as I know, eating bugs with your raspberries has never been fatal, but it sort of spoils the carefree mood. Some years there was none while others there was enough left over after the jam bubbled on the stove and been put up in jars to top dished of ice cream for days. The jam jars had to be sterilized in boiling water, then a trip uptown for Certo and the boxes of white paraffin wax that looked and smelled like old candles. Crush the berries then sieve out part of the seeds and pulp. Put the mixture on to boil until the cloying aroma of summer at its most intense filled the cottage and drifted out to the porch. Later, after it had cooled some, pour it off into the assorted jam or pickle jars that had accumulated all year in a comer of the basement for just this occasion. Seal with the paraffin and allow to cool all winter long. There were jars of jam hiding in a cool dark comer of the cellar, waiting to be brought out in triumph and set on the kitchen table as a reminder of the sweat and insects and treacherous rocks we endured. The berry sites grew fewer and fewer each year as the county grew more efficient in their spraying program.

Safer, I suppose as drivers could better see approaching cars and tractors. But a new berry patch was always cause for excitement and a special effort to note the location for next year.

The next stop closer to town, coming at it from the south, was Gobel's Grove, a little community of older homes and long established cottages planted on the shore of Lake Huron just far enough away from Port Elgin to be acknowledged as a separate entity. It boasted the UAW Convention Centre and little else. I guess Gobel's was just a little too far away to walk to comfortably, so instead of making it part of the town, they decided to give it another name an leave it to its own devices. Administratively, Port Elgin has probably gobbled up Gobel's by now. On the southwest corner of the intersection leading to Gobel's was the Golf Course/Trailer Park/Airport complex. This busy enterprise must have been run by the original family that farmed the property because at the centre of everything was an enormous white barn trimmed in black and to one side, the original farmhouse. The barn was well maintained and served as clubhouse for the course and a centre for craft activities for the trailer park and surrounding community. I know they offered ceramics and weaving at various times for the products of all those busy hands were on display on the rough plastered wails as you went in to pay the green fees. The Tri-Par course was just challenging enough for me as the only practice I ever got was in the hydro field behind the house at 178. The physical boundaries of my practice course restricted any golfing skills I acquired to irons. Shots with a wood were out of the question behind our house. The range was too narrow and the risk of a hook or slice taking out a window or ripping off someone's ear was just too great. So I became a fair approach shot artist, but no more. The Tri-Par could be played with just three irons; a six, an eight and a putter. The two or three longer holes were a hit of a stretch but if you got good position off the tee, par was still within reach. The course was pretty well maintained. The greens were smooth, the traps were clean and the back nine had some interesting water hazards. Scores weren't too important, although there could have been a bottle of pop or an Ice cream on the line after eighteen holes. I might have topped my Dad once or twice. He wasn't great, but I was a lot worse. It was a great place for an afternoon too windy or cold for fishing or the beach. Here was where you graduated after mini-golf: a rite of passage where you learned to compete, win and lose with grace, learn rules of the game that applied to far more than golf. Maybe you heard your Dad swear for the first time because it was just the two of you and forgetting exactly who you were, he was treating you like an equal. Here, you didn't even have to tie to he equal. Just being there together put you on the same level. Today, you don t cut tattoos in your face or spend days in the desert without food and water or kill a lion. You play golf with your Dad. Some things change, some remain the same. Playing the Tri-Par offered the thrill of examining, at close range, the undercarriage of a Cessna that was bobbing and dipping over the 10th fairway during a student flyer's approach to the grass landing field That plus the risk of concussion by a stray ball from

three tees over gave the whole experience the sensation of running a gamut, so the rite-of-passage analogy isn't too far off the mark. Port Elgin boasted a go-cart track for a long time. Never tried it, but always wanted to. My parents never even suggested that we stop and look so I guess that indicated their opinion about any interest I might have in the matter. Going back a long time, I think Port Elgin even boasted a racetrack, a dirt oval for stockers to run on a Friday night or Saturday afternoon. As I recall, it was on the flats by the Saugeen River, just visible over the edge of the road from town to Burgoyne. It soon reverted back to cow pasture, but it must have been an exciting place for all the young locals to run their battered wrecks around the track, then get down to real racing in their heavy iron on the back roads after dark. Romanticizing again? Ya, I guess so. Too much James Dean and Thunder Road But it could have been like that. The roller rink was king for a time. There was an outdoor rink on the north side of town. It was planted on the edge of one of those abandoned tobacco fields. It had a real high-tech look, resembling an airport control tower. It had its brief day, then was forgotten when the new civic arena opened for indoor skating and rock concerts. Weeds forced their way through the concrete of the old rink and the plywood walls separated themselves into progressively thinner fans as the glue dried and the years passed. There was lawn bowling on the velvety greens next to the post office. I'm sure that if you were to investigate the well-to-do backstreets of any Southern Ontario town, you would discover the dignified serenity of a bowling green. Its a given, like a band-shell, or a field artillery piece next to the war memorial. Some small area would be devoted to this pastime that was the exclusive realm of the elderly whose hair matched the spotless white of their skirts and slacks. I never did quite understand the game. Not old enough yet I suppose. I spoke of war memorials and artillery pieces. By some strange fault of omission there was not a single weapon on display anywhere in Port Elgin, no bronze statues of young men raising their weapons and gazing ahead to a future they would never know. Any tour of small town southern Ontario would turn up some ordnance on the village green and a list of names, sons who went away and never came back. But not Port Elgin. There must have been a cairn and a plaque 'In Memory Of' somewhere, but I don't recall seeing it. This town should have surrendered its share of young men and their blood in 1914-1918, 1939-1945 and the Korean affair; but there was no gallantry in bronze and no field piece to mark it here ... Church away from home for us was Tolmie Presbyterian. I remember attending once or twice, but this was usually Dad's exclusive duty. I recall one sermon in particular that shocked my young, liberal sensitivities. The minister delivered a bitter warning about that young Catholic President to the south and promised dire consequences for the world if he should be allowed to rule 'neath the Pope's guiding hand. We sure didn't hear stuff like this at home. Dad would return at noon and report on who he had met what new acquaintances he'd made, who had died since last year. It gave us a breather to sit back and read a comic book or novel, clean the fishing reel, scan the marine bands on the old floor-model radio or just sit in the sun.

Despite the fact that we were on vacation to relax, it was still a pretty

frantic time. Opportunities for just sitting didn't come often. When I was quite young these quiet times had to be strictly enforced. No swimming for an hour after eating or you might get stomach cramps. Polio was still a real threat in the days before Mr. Jonas Salk and his marvelous, magic potion, and an afternoon nap was thought to help better the odds. I recall being made to lie down but I don't recall much resting; except by my parents, and maybe that was the real reason after all. The small patch of sloping lawn in front of the Hide-A-Way was the badminton/volleyball/lawn-dart court or site for anything else that was popular.

All of these activities had their heyday, but the one sport that could not be denied, the one that took precedence over all others, the primary reason for our being there, was fishing. Fishing was the axis around which all others revolved. Everything else was just marking time between fishing and more fishing. It wasn't scientific, it wasn't hi-tech but it was passionate and devoted. We approached our fishing with a sort of sincerity usually reserved for religious observances. I hope you get the impression that this was important, else I've been wasting my time, but in trying to analyze the part that this played in my life, I get bogged down in contradictions and extremes. Fishing was fun, it was relaxing; nerve-wracking; it was exciting; it was equal parts skill and luck, it was easy and it was hard. There must be some sort of genetic link in obsessions of this sort. I got it from my mother. Dad could take it or leave it, but when he joined in his usual run of luck would have him walk away with the record bass of the summer. If allowed, Mum would sit the whole day long by lake or river and be content with nothing to show for her efforts but sunburn and mosquito bites. It must go back to the Lake Scugog days of her youth and those stories of Granddad cleaning and skinning mountains of catfish. She inherited it from him and he must have got it from someone else in turn. We fished at every opportunity and in some ridiculous puddles of water that were home to nothing but frogs and snapping turtles. But we subscribed to a number of mottos; "You ever know until you try" and "You can't catch fish with a dry line". So we stopped at every bridge over every glimmer of water. The old Saugeen River bridge on the road to Burgoyne was a source for more thrills than simply fishing. It spanned the river valley for a length of about six hundred feet and stood maybe a hundred feet above the water. It was a one-lane structure made of equal parts steel, rust and bailing wire and arched across the valley on two concrete buttresses. It rattled and shook beneath your feet with every passing car and the occasional truck would give the impression that the whole mess was going to throw itself (and you as well) into the river in a palsied fit. Every trip out on that bridge was a calculated gamble, but beneath those buttresses there lurked fish, big ones, lots of them. It took a good heavy sinker, especially in a high wind, to carry your bait down to the water and then beneath the current that eddied around the steel-reinforced concrete. The steel was there to protect the bridge footings from the spring ice break-up. A quick thaw early in the season must have been an awesome sight and sound in

that river valley as thousands of tons of ice broke up and began the journey to Lake Huron. It's hard to imagine anything standing in its way. Which is probably why one summer was spent in detours while the re-enforced concrete replacement was erected. It didn't shake but the fish were gone. Most times it was impossible to tell if a fish was on or not. The current would drag your bait to the surface downstream where, with luck, there would be a smallmouth rock bass, sunfish or sucker. If not, let it swing back under the shadows and drift past the undercut ledges once more. The old, stagnant Mill Creek near town never produced anything the few times I tried, too much garbage and too much traffic. A stretch of the Saugeen that was approachable under the bridge on the road from Burgoyne to Southampton was just as unproductive, only carp and suckers. Denny's Dam up river from Southampton should have been ideal and, according to the stories, was a great salmon run in the spring. But for our kind of fishing, the sit and wait kind, it just didn't produce. Most of the river above the dam was inaccessible because of the undergrowth. Downstream was a fast moving torrent and beyond that, if you had the stamina and bug tolerance to get there, it was so fished out that empty bait containers and beer cans were the only signs of life. It was a nice place to visit but you wouldn't want to fish there. The fishing hole, our reason for being there, was a half-mile stretch of the Saugeen that ran along side a country road. At a shallow bend in the road, the river crept so near that by scrambling down a short, stony bank you could stand by a natural little pool that seemed home to an unlimited population of fish. There were big warm rocks to sit on and a little natural weed cover to lure the fish in close. And if the fish weren't biting, that was just fine. The river was wide and shallow at this point and so this deep, crescent-shaped backwater was a perfect lure for both fish and fishermen. The water was a muddy green that foamed in the rapids and formed a scum on the surface of the quiet pools and the fish liked that just fine too. You rarely caught fish where they were visible, at least not the kind you wanted to catch. Suckers, sure. They'd lie there out in the open, too lazy to move even if you bonked them on their stupid heads with a sinker. You could move up the river or down a bit but this one little twenty foot stretch was the most consistent source I've ever seen.

Telephone lines crossed the over at this point, a great sagging loop of wires that stretched from one leaning pole to another on the far side. They may have still been functional or maybe a throwback to another time, but the birds certainly loved them. Starlings and sparrows would line up in neat rows during the day. As dusk approached, they would give up their places to the bam swallows that would perch for a few minutes, then dart through the air, sometimes only inches over the water to snap up their insect meals. There was evidence on the banks of raccoon dinners, piles of glistening, empty clamshells and crayfish remains. The shells made dainty trays and the little pincers would still open and close if you squeezed them just right. There were birds of all sorts not to be found in the city. Herons and hawks, chickadees, warblers and magpies. Some would flop about play-acting a broken wing to lure you away from their clutch

of eggs in the grass. And everywhere, the brilliant unexpected flash of redwing blackbirds. Strange insects too, mantis' and walking sticks and butterflies that I had only seen under glass impaled by a pin. This was my classroom and most of what I know about the great outdoors, I learned here at the edge of the Saugeen River.

There was a farm close by on the other side of the river. Much of the house and some of the barn were hidden by trees but I heard the laughter and shouts of their children, deepening and changing with the years as they grew up and I grew up. The great black and white Holsteins they raised would come lumbering through the bush to drink at the water's edge or, if it was nearing dark} we heard their plaintive calls as they retuned to the barn for a final milking. During those days I envied that family~ living next to the river. But then} maybe they got used to 1'4 or took it for granted. Maybe they ignored it. In the days when I was young; we fished the old fashioned way~ waiting; more or less patient~ by the river bank with rods and bait casting reels loaded with open spools of black braided line. It was weighted down with large bell-shaped sinkers} a single hook baited with half of a fat, fresh dew worm that still squirmed from the recent trauma of being severed from its other half. It was possible to cast your line out a good 20 or thirty feet if the reel was cleaned and properly adjusted and you were skilled in slowing the spool with your thumb. This thumb action was critical to avoid the infamous birds nest that left no choice but to cut the mess off the reel. But the favoured technique was to simply pull off several arm-lengths of line onto the ground, then swing the last three feet in a pendulum arc that would carry the bait to the desired spot. Then sit quietly and wait for the first dip of the rod tip, or sudden racing of the reel. Smallmouth was the preferred catch, a big fat greenback with a hungry mouth and angry red eyes. The blind fury of his attack could knock the worm right up over the leader. A good-sized sucker or even a rock bass could provide some excitement, but nothing like a smallmouth. Each year seemed to bring something special out of that spot. One year it was a monstrous, orange finned, gaping mouthed carp that bent Dad's rod over double. Another year, I was spin casting into a wide pond just downstream from the usual spot, following the old "nothing ventured, nothing gained" principle. This spot looked promising for years but never produced anything. It should have been teeming. As I drew a silver #3 Mepps over the deepest spot, it stopped, paused for a moment, then began running off at right angles to me. The next 15 minutes put my 8 lb. test line through a rigorous fault test. One of the Saugeen River's legendary muskies called that murky pool home and accounted for the absence of smaller game. He ate it all. I felt like Spencer Tracey in "'The Old Man And The Sea" at his first glimpse of the shape passing by his boat. I had never seen a live fish that big outside of an aquarium. He was longer than my arm span and had a head bigger than my own. It was a blessing that he escaped before I had to release him. No way was I going to put my hand anywhere near that mouth and those teeth. He finally cruised into the shallows at my feet, probably

because he wanted to rather than through any efforts of mine, and as I reached down to try and snag him by the gills, he tossed his head, snapped the line and torpedoed off into his own murky domain. Even today, the adrenalin still flows.

The fact that I was now using spin-cast equipment did not mean that I had abandoned the old virtues, the old equipment and old methods. To this day, I usually pay a small tribute to the honourable rites of fishing by standing patiently at the river's edge with rod, reel and baited hook. But I had been seduced by the convenience and portability of hi-tech hardware. When I started to take weekend jaunts to a friend's cottage at Honey Harbour on Georgian Bay. I was amazed to discover that there were bass and northern pike cruising just off the end of their dock. Every cottage in that neck of the woods has at least a half dozen old fishing rods stacked in a dusty corner or under the foundations. Most are wrapped in snarls of monofilament line that have dropped off the spools of the open-faced reels. The very first time I picked one up, untangled the mess and figured out the complex process of holding the line with one index finger and tripping back the baler, then snapping the lure out over the water, someone smiled on me and blessed me. Within 15 minutes I had a string of our northerns, all over 24 inches. I have the pictures to prove it. They weren't the only ones hooked that day. Here was fishing you could take with you any time, no bait, minimum tackle, just your rod, reel and a couple of spinners that could fit in your pocket. And although you may not see the quantity produced 'with baited hook', the quality was impressive. Only fighters attacked the bobbing, spinning or flashing lures that came their way. The suckers, chubs and smaller fry didn't bother or, if the lure was sufficiently predatory in appearance, you could see them fleeing for their lives as it moved through the waters. At the ole Saugeen fishin' hole I would always try a few casts near where my parents fished, just to be sociable. Then I would wander dawn the river to a quarter mile stretch of gentle water and big stones. The combination was perfect for bass, big bass. On calm, sunny days when the sunlight was bouncing off the water's surface in painful flashes, the bass would sit in the shade of those rocks guarding their territory, maybe made more irritable by the heat and waiting to hit anything that dared came close by. Here was another advantage to spincasting; you could go to the fish instead of waiting for them to find you. It appealed to my predatory instinct. I always released them whenever I could so there are precious few photos of the proud fisherman holding his catch. You'll just have to take my word for it. Just to wander through the weeds along the bank was reward enough. The fish were just icing on the cake. There were always a few that got away. The water was shallow and I was no pro and a good bass could tail-walk on the surface to get enough slack to throw the hook. The walk back along the dusty road to my starting point beside the car seemed to take about three times longer than it should. Having worked my way down river then emerged from the head-high weeds, the car was a distant speck and the sun had noticeably shifted in the sky.

Walking along the riverbank, following my heart's desire, seemed to take me through same sort of relativistic warp. I guess I was just having too much fun to note the passing of time or distance. The long walk back took me by the dried, pancaked remains of turtles, frogs and assorted rodents. There were blue cornflowers to pick and the names on the old mailboxes of the farms to read once more. One of those names was H. Webster and this was one of those odd co-incidences in life that gives you pause to wonder. That was the name of the old gentleman who lived next door to us back in the city. For years I pictured that H. Webster of Port Elgin like that elderly, red-faced, pleasant, and most often inebriated, Harry Webster that I knew. I never did get to meet our neighbor's Port Elgin namesake but the odds are good that we passed each other at some time on that one-lane country road. There were hawks and crows and herons in the sky above; rabbits, raccoons and mice in the grass below and fish and turtles below the foamy water. This was about as back-to-nature as we wanted to get, but still not a bad education for a city boy. I had a good edge in woodsy skills over most of my friends back home and even today my wife and kids look to me to identify birdcalls and point out the poison ivy. If I've spent an inordinate number of words on this piece of countryside, it's because it holds a special place in my personal scrapbook. Other scenes changed, some beyond recognition and other relationships altered with time and perspective. But this stretch of river remained. It was fixed and unalterable except by time and the elements and that was, and is, its special allure. I've taken many pictures up and down the river at that point and the only significant changes have been in the camera and in me.

A less favoured spot, but one guaranteed to produce, was a tiny bridge over a wide spot in an otherwise undistinguished stream. This was "The Gowanlock" named by us for the proud declaration on a nearby barn, "KENNETH GOWANLOCK AND SONS". Gowanlocks had sprung up all over the place. It looked as if, as each son grew up and took to farming, Dad gave him a piece of the homestead or helped to buy up the neighbouring properties. And so, Gowanlock came to be the name of the fishing hole. It was a marvelous little piece of countryside, as representative of the land and its people as any. It was hidden in a valley off the main roads. The barns were well maintained and the houses all sprouted long, colourful lines of laundry drying in the wind showing a respect for large families and many helping hands. The fields were neat and orderly and rotated in their turn, corn, oats, hay and fallow. There was a one-room school in the midst of it all, a solid stone building that had been abandoned long ago and was now boarded up. A wooden plaque above the door declared this was an Arran Township School and further proved the heritage of those who came and claimed this land. My daughter, Arran, finally believed the story about the Scottish Isle after which she was named, when many years later, she saw those fading letters. Here was the essence of southern Ontario summer, dusty, alive with subtle sound yet still as death, full of expectant

life, heavy with the weight of a nearby thunderstorm. In the early days, we would make our way down stream to a deep and quiet pool by a fallen tree. There were always rock bass there. Later, we discovered it was easier and more productive to drop a line off the side of the one-lane, concrete bridge and let the bait dangle beside the undercut of the buttress. Something was bound to dart from within the shadows and try to make off with it. If the water level and temperature were just right, it would be a veteran smallmouth, packed with muscle and fury. Other times, it might be rock bass or sunfish. It was even home to the grandfather of all snapping turtles and I often watched his ponderous treks through the shadows with fear and wonder. This was where you took the kids when it was important to catch something, anything. The given names of all our family were scratched in the moss and lichen covering that bridge and some, I've no doubt, are still there. In a field next to a dense stand of trees, stood the remains of a squared timber shed. It was so small that it was hard to imagine it as being lived in but the evidence suggested it was once a home. The gaps between the rough beams were filled with plaster and I remember being mightily impressed by the dates on newspapers used to provide some insulation. It was a solemn reminder that people like us once struggled to live on this land and take from it all the things they needed.

Another glimpse of that struggle we found in a deserted cemetery, high on a diff over the Saugeen, upriver from Southampton. It was forlorn and full of weeds, the stones slowly eroding with the seasons and the occasional wooden railing marking off a grave site, popping apart as it alternately swelled and dried. Some of the graves had become sunken pits as coffin and contents returned to the elements from which they came. Most of the LAID TO REST dates were from the early to mid1800's and the more senior occupants hailed from places like Aberdeen or Inverness and so they brought their reminders of home to the new land, naming the new towns Paisley, Kincardine, Port Elgin and such. There were other stories of disease and disaster in those stones. Entire families were interred within months, a testimony to the power of disease and the impotence of medicine in those times. After a time, the cemetery was re-discovered, trimmed and clipped and the stones set upright. It was a more moving monument to its inhabitants the way we first discovered it, wild and solitary ... I learned a great deal more about this land and these people from the Bruce County Museum in Southampton; not history, but more what they thought of themselves and what they thought was necessary to preserve. These were a people who were convinced that everything they did was of vital importance, from the grandiose to the mundane. The museum was housed in what appeared to be an imposing two-storey secondary school, well off the main street, in the better part of town. Every room was packed with things in no particular order. The stuffed remains of the area's last golden eagle, blasted by buckshot into extinction sometime in the 1930's, stood next to the frayed WWI uniform and battle ribbons of a local resident. A gilt-edged family bible where births and deaths were carefully recorded sat next to a

pair of wire-rimmed glasses, high-topped boots and buttonhook. There were farm implements and double barreled shotguns, lace gloves and children's toys, butter churns and fragile, crumbling photographs showing self-conscious citizens in stiff, heroic poses or caught unawares, just being themselves. Is it possible that the whole Idea of a museum is a Victorian concept, where the trophies of Empire were tossed together with the common place in order to prove that one justified the other? That lace gloves and silk hats were just as important as tattered flags and Battle Honours or that elephant-tail fly swatters were reason enough to rule India? The Bruce County Museum, before its expansion and re-organization, offered that impression. It may have been chaotic and without any educational focus, but it sure impressed the hell out of me. It appealed to my 10year-old mind. Maybe it reflected the way a 10-year-old mind worked. Modern museums want to teach. This one just wanted to impress. Its somehow easier for me to picture the muddy crest of Vimy Ridge or the trenches of Verdun by being in the presence of a bullet-creased helmet or gasmask that passed through the smoke and blood to lie in this cabinet than to experience all the dioramas ever produced

The river mouth at Southampton was once home to a sizeable fishing fleet. The boats were all painted white with black trim like the clouds of seagulls that circled overhead whenever they sailed. I assume that lake perch was their main stock-in-trade for it was served in every restaurant up and down the Blue Water Highway. But the Ice-packed display cases in the shops beside the wharf also offered the hollow-eyed, glistening carcasses of lake trout and salmon for sale. But the industry fell prey to its own success and the overwhelming invasion of the lamprey eel. As the fish declined, the nets were left to rot on the drying racks and the boats rode lower and lower at their moorings each year. The waves, slapping against their sides seemed to stir up something foul deep in their hulls and you half expected to see something trying to break out through the softening wood. But for some reason, the smell of dead fish lingered on to haunt the waterfront.

Dunblane Presbyterian Church, est. 1857, must look now the way it did then. It sat secure, looking out over the Saugeen River valley near the old fishing hole. It was pristine white and the patch of ground, amid the rolling farmland, was neatly trimmed. An enormous elm offered some relief from the summer sun. Coming upon it after cresting the hill was a pleasant surprise, even a little startling. It was so picture post card perfect, you didn't expect to see something like this outside of a drug store counter or on a record cover. The only thing missing was a cemetery. Most churches in the area had a parcel of land nearby to plant the locals in and erect their monuments. But not Dunblane, nothing to detract from the severe beauty of the scene. Could it be a Calvinist, Knox-ian thing that allowed the Anglicans and the Catholics to surround themselves with their ancestors and their tributes but not the dour Scots? Inside, it was a little stuffy, but surprisingly cool. A few rows of painfully austere pews, a raised dais for the pulpit and table that held the bible, a small bellows organ off to one side. It was always unlocked and untended and visitors could write their

names and addresses in a guest book. There was a collection plate for donations where there seemed to be equal parts American and Canadian money. It was a system that seemed to work very well: “Welcome to this House. Respect this place and we will trust you and respect you in return." The curious who stumbled on this site came from allover North America and Europe and the comments reflected a common appreciation for Dunblane’s quiet beauty. I read once that there was only one special memorial service held there each year. At that rate the old church is only aging one week out of every fifty-two. It should stand there forever.

At the opposite end of the dignity spectrum, there was Ralph s Hi- Way Shoppette, the Rodney Dangerfield of consumerism. Ralph s was a cottage-country phenomenon, an effort to be all things to all people. Always crowded, always tacky, always expensive, it was always there when you needed it. It contained elements of the convenience store, the sporting goods store, dry goods and gift shop. It was inter-denominational and non-discriminatory. All you needed was money and an itch to spend. It was a real challenge to find something that Ralph s didn't have. The lower part (2 halves were separated by 2 or 3 steps) was devoted to a complete array of groceries, also fishing tackle, books with lurid titles bearing illustrations of breathless women with scantily clad, heaving bosoms, sports magazines, insect repellent and motor oil. Upstairs were toys, knickknacks, souvenirs, summer clothing postcards and incense. And come Sunday, when the rest of the town was respectfully closed drum-tight and sober, Ralph’s doors were wide open for business. There was no "Shirt and Shoes Required" nonsense at Ralph’s. The same roles applied here as at the beach, "Come As You Are, Come Often. Just don 't come Naked. " I loved Ralph’s ... As part of the same building and sharing the same parking lot was the Pioneer Bakery, a relative newcomer (only 15 to 20 years), and an upstart. It was successful and convenient and offered the usual array of country pies and city cakes. As you walked through the door the aromas from the ovens were an indecent assault on the senses and not just the sense of smell. Only in rural Ontario did you get this close to the baking process. Elsewhere, bread came to you from the delivery van (if you're old enough to remember), or from the antiseptic supermarket, or, if Mother was at work whipping something together, you were shooed out of the kitchen. At the Pioneer Bakery and hundreds of others like it the art of baking was tactile, visual, even visceral and very sensual. Every surface had a gentle blanket of flour and powdered sugar, Strawberry jam filling, dipping from the golden edge of a turnover, caught the eye, or glistening honey basted over a walnut twist. Plump, impossibly ripe cherries and thick whipped cream. If there wasn't a law against this sort of indulgence, there should have been. In the back, just barely seen through the door, were the giant mixing machines, slowly and deliberately churning away at the contents of their aluminium bowls. Overhead, the fans whirred to dissipate the heat and send aromas out over the town to lure the unwary.

The Pioneer bakery was good, but like I said, it was an upstart. The quintessential small town bakery was in Paisley. It was just one shop in a row of old brick buildings that lined the main street on the downhill run to the river bridge and there was little to distinguish it from all the others. Except for the cluster of cars outside and the steady stream of customers clutching brown paper bags and the heady smell of baking bread. On busy mornings there would be 2 or 3 young girls, usually blonde, usually pretty, in starched white floury aprons behind the counter supervised by a more matronly lady. Display cabinets lined three sides as you entered the door beneath the bell on a spring announcing your arrival. The cabinets were age-darkened oak and the glass fronts were curved to let you see the contents within and your super-imposed face and behind, the gently turning ceiling fans. Everything that came from this shop was ambrosia, but then the same could be said for other bakeries. This place was special because of what it signified. It was the last stop before Port Elgin. The last step in the mounting excitement before the apex of summer vacation. On the down side, it was also the last chance on our way home to pick up a reminder of another summer well spent. A taste to savour for a few days while our lives returned to normal. The Paisley Bakery did one thing better than all the rest: The Cinnamon Loaf. You had to take extreme care with a Paisley Bakery Cinnamon Loaf. The weight of a dull knife would cause it to collapse like a soufflé in a thunderstorm. Delicately sliced into inch-thick slabs, layered with McKenzie Dairy butter and followed by a cup of tea just before the eleven 0 'clock news. There can be nothing finer. We always bought one on the way up and another on the way back.

The trips to Port Elgin and the returns to Toronto each had their own ritual and ceremony. There was a week of preparation before the Saturday departure. The suitcases were brought out and dusted off: Fishing rods and reels were cleaned and fine-tuned and the tackle box emptied of junk and broken, rusty hooks. The swimming suits were tried on and if they still fit, were laid out, or shopping trips arranged to find new ones. A year's collected jars were packed in the hope of finding enough berries to fill them with jam. That last Friday night was restless and fitful. One in particular stands out, where my Dad and I went for our usual after dinner walk, down the hydro field to the edge of the Lambton Golf Course that our house backed on to. Had I mentioned that we were a great after-dinner walking family? It bordered on an obsession. As dusk settled in, we stopped for a moment by the 17th green and I stretched out on the soft, green bank that surrounded it under a canopy of oaks. There were bats darting mysteriously overhead picking off insects and crickets chirped in the grass and katydids sang in the trees. To this day, I can feel the pressing weight of summer, its presence and the expectation and anticipation of a season about to be fulfilled. The world balanced on its edge for one haunting moment just then. Despite the build-up, the prospect of two weeks of intense fun and sun about to begin, that place and time is where I run when I need to retreat. Savouring the anticipation for one long moment, realizing even

then that wanting something can be better than having it. God was in His Heaven; the Queen on Her throne and all was right with the world. I can't remember a Saturday departure morning that wasn't hot and sunny, but that may be just another case of selective memory washing the past with a broad nostalgic brush.

Departure time was ten o'clock and my father was a punctual man. The list of towns that we passed through read like a countdown to some momentous lift-off. Orangeville, Arthur, Teviotdale, Mildmay, Clifford, Harriston, Walkerton, Paisley, Burgoyne, Port Elgin. Twelve o'clock and lunchtime usually brought us through Clifford and the Famous 4 Aces Restaurant. When we first became annual regulars, the owners were a warm and gracious European couple who would greet their patrons at the door as old friends, usually by name. And of course we were friends, returning each year for a pleasant visit and a taste of their hospitality. For me, it was just a burger, fries and a piece of blueberry pie, but the place held a bubbly atmosphere that made all the flavours unique. Their logo of course, was four aces, spread in a fan and you knew Clifford was approaching when those cards started to appear in fields and on fence posts amid grazing cows and sheep. The signs, too, declared the restaurant was "famous" as did the serviettes and the matchbooks filling the bowl by the cash register. And judging by the line-ups at noon on a Saturday in mid-July, perhaps the boast was true. We were anxious to get there and eager to leave. Port Elgin was just an hour away. The bane of every summer excursion was construction. Either Dad never checked with the Department of Highways or he liked to play a game of Russian roulette with the road crews. We simply never knew when a stretch of highway was going to be blocked with yellow barricades and bulldozers to disrupt our pilgrimage and add 10 or 15 minutes to our arrival time. Fate could play a hand in other ways, like the time we stopped to let our cat, Sam, have a short run and it chose to spend the next two hours exploring a mosquito infested swamp while my father chased along behind. I don't believe Dad shed a tear the next winter when Sam was found stretched out to his full length and frozen stiff in a snow bank. Some towns had self-appointed titles: "Gateway To The Bruce" or “Town of the Maples" and they all declared when their summer-fest or fall-fest or winter-fest was to take place. You knew what service clubs had organizations in town and where to find the local Catholic/Anglican/United/Presbyterian Church. No Synagogues and no Mosques but that came as no surprise. The odd black horse-drawn carriage signifying a nearby Mennonite community was about as exotic as you would find around here. There wasn't much diversity to confuse Issues in this part of the world but there were some sound values and a deep sense of propriety and to my limited WASP sensibilities, it all felt pretty good.

Our arrival in town was the culmination of a year's anticipation, rivaled only by the approach of Christmas. Here we were at last, at the top end of a two-week slide, 14 days that appeared to stretch down and out forever. But once on the »<lY down, time picked up speed in a disconcerting way and there was no power on earth could slow it down. The first week went by in a mounting whirlwind and the second sped by like a runaway train. The days swept up and past like dry leaves down the gutter or the approach of old age. And it was over.

Packing up began on the last Friday when all the collected souvenirs and dirty laundry went back into the suitcases. Friday was time for all of the "lasts; a last walk by the harbour, a last game of miniature golf, a last ice cream at The Dairy, a last chance to imprint all of the memories that had to survive another year of seasons, school, birthdays, Christmas, winter snow, report cards, spring thaws and summer heat. Saturday was the last opportunity for a swim at the beach while Mother bundled the last of the bed sheets and swept the last of the beach sand out of the cottage. The return trip counted off the same litany of small town names but in reverse and although the mileage was the same, the passing time dissolved in a dream. I can't remember one significant thing about all those trips home.

Our arrival at 178 Eileen Ave. was another matter entirely. Pulling up the lane and into the drive under those lofty maples beside the house was like stepping into a different world. Two weeks of cozy, confined living could so change my perspective that all that had been familiar for all of my life was now tantalizingly alien. It looked OK, but it felt different like one of those surrealist German movies from the 1920's where the perspective is slightly askew. Out of the car and in through the side door (ours was a house that reserved the front door for formal company and salesmen; friends, family, and all those who knew better used the red side door that entered up a short stairway and into the kitchen which was the real centre of family life), into the kitchen that was immense and hollow. It was slightly musty at first with the pent-up heat of late July until the windows were opened to air the place, then light and airy and so big. Dash upstairs to dive on the old bed, visit the bathroom that could hold eight of the cottage cubbies, then off to visit friends to swap stories, exaggerations and downright lies about the past two weeks. It took about three days to readjust, unpack and slip back into the lazy summertime groove. There was still almost an entire month before that other rite of holiday closure, the CNE, marking the end of summer and the start of a new school year.

There was so much more to remember and to tell, but time caught up with the teller and the telling. This represents my third attempt to record my impressions of this place and this time. The first was at a point, approximately two years ago when I was about to make another pilgrimage to Port Elgin.

Many circumstances had changed, some dramatically, but I needed to see if what I remembered, and had come to believe about those times, still had the power to hold me and lift me up. I began to write what I thought was going to be a catalogue of things I wanted to do and see. As you can see, I sort of got carried away. The second kick at the can took place in December of '93. There was snow on the ground and the pilgrimage was almost a year and a half in the past. Mother and I and Jennifer and Arran (my two girls) had spent a long weekend in August of '92 in Port Elgin. The weather was horrid, the accommodations were appalling, the fishing was rotten and we had a moderately good time. I'm very sad to report that things are not the same. But then I guess you might have suspected that from the very beginning. Port Elgin has changed from the days when I was young and, I suspect, so have I. It was more than I imagined, yet less than I remembered. A delight and a disappointment, all at once. The Bruce County Museum was better than I recalled, new and improved. McGregor's Point was the same; sandy beach, wind sculpted trees, piles of rock, Lake Huron waves, gulls, desolate and deserted. The kids swam while I shivered on the beach and shook my head at their foolishness. Attempts had been made to improve the beach and the harbour at Port Elgin, but they only served to diminish it. Uptown, Goderich Street was like a foreign country. The years and the recession have stolen away the face of the town's main street. In one of those ironic twists that happen only in fantasy and real life, Southampton appears to be the one that retains that summertime aura, perhaps because it had so little to lose or gain in the first place. Gerry's, that Port Elgin landmark of salt and vinegar has picked itself up and moved to the beach at stodgy old Southampton within sight of Chantry Island. That surely says something positive about the future. Someday, perhaps the fishing boats will sail again...

This third attempt is the last, I promise. I don't know what prompted me to put myself through this once more, but I don't think I have it in me to do it again. So I picked up the story and re-examined it and surprised myself by finding more words to describe more pieces of the puzzle that separates then from now. I've spoken to people since this all began, people who were there and must know and they've pointed out many errors and omissions (e.g.: Alec McLean's Ford was really a '41. It has since been sold and repainted maroon and black; its original colours). I offer no apologies. I warned you from the beginning that this was self-indulgence, a wallow in nostalgia and a matter of pure and simple vanity. But if I have given you a taste for what it was like to be there, what things and what values brought me here and have made me John David Black, husband of Linda and father to Jennifer, Arran and Lauren, then I'm pleased. For those who were there, in that place and during that time, let this be a reminder. Those who were not, you missed something very special.

July 4, 94