



## Sentimental Lady

By Alex MacKenzie

**A year after** my parents had ended a loveless but not entirely unhappy marriage of 14 years, my mother took the summer holidays into her own hands. Until then, this had been my father's territory. His family had a cottage an hour north of our home in Montreal and for my brother, sister and I, this had been our default destination for at least three weeks every summer. Days here were typically spent floating in the water, eating tuna and mayonnaise sandwiches at the boathouse, picking blueberries in the mid-day heat, killing mosquitoes and black flies, and peeling thin layers off our burnt skin.

But the prior summer the feeling up north had shifted, and Mom figured that a change to the shape of summer would be best for all of us. We didn't have much money and she was in the midst of going back to school to get a teaching degree. But the question remained as to what exactly to do with three kids to convince them that life is still liveable after your parents break up, that summers up north didn't need to be the only indelible memory we looked back on, that we could hold our own. She resolutely cobbled together a version of the family summer that put her in debt for the better part of those next two winters.

The first trip was to Lake George in upstate New York. There had long been a brassy campaign on Montreal AM radio produced by the tourist bureau of New York State literally singing the praises of their rolling hills and blue water. Until then the showtune chorus simply rang out "I... love New York", matching the black-and-red on white t-shirts, billboards, and bumper stickers. But that past winter they had tagged "and-the-Lake-George-region" on the end. The new version was awkward at best, and no longer rang clear and simple but rushed to the finish.

Desperate.

There was a sense of strained and imposed fun, a half-hearted rising to the occasion, and finally a giving in. And so we resigned ourselves to some other lake, in some other place, for some other version of summer.

Lake George is a nice place, if you can afford to stay at the pretty end of the lake. We couldn't. And Mom didn't drive, so this was a bus trip with a lot of dragging suitcases, dumping them in a generic motel, and trying to think what to do besides endless clompings on the hot sidewalks, poking our heads into generic tourist stands, and exploring dumpy, sad beaches at the ends of oily half-paved roads. The television held a brief glimmer of novelty for us and we begged to stay in most mornings to watch the cartoons on cable. But what we really needed was to get a little further from our motel and find the polished side of the town. And soon.

A week in, we read about a free outdoor rock concert at the central bandstand by the water, about a mile up the road. With tension building in the cramped room, my brother and I decided it would be best to duck out early. We'd stake out a spot for the blanket, and my sister and mother would join us later.

We arrived just as the sky was going gray. The lights came up and a meager crowd sprawled out on the grass. A few people in lawnchairs dotted the park, and we all turned to gaze up as the group made their way to the stage. I had never seen a band before in my short life, and as the group began to play songs that I could sing along to, it dawned on me that this particular collection of musicians was, in fact, Fleetwood Mac. I was awestruck. The music filled the park, and I had a tremendous feeling of relief and achievement. We had somehow broken the odds and come out on top, hitting on a time and place where songs that we knew and liked were being played for us, for all our troubles. The drama of the night only grew as the sky darkened and the stage glowed brighter, floating in front of us while the hot day cooled down.

By the time we started the walk back to the motel, it was chilly out and my sister was wrapped in the blanket and dragging it behind her on the road. At Mom's recommendation, my brother and I raced ahead to warm up and ended sitting breathless on the front stoop, listening to the din of crickets and waiting for the key to get inside.

At that time, the idea of a cover band was completely foreign to me. Only many years later would it even cross my mind that this group might not have been Fleetwood Mac. The likelihood they would have played for free in a small park in Lake George to a paltry crowd was pretty slim.

But it didn't matter. This was, for me, the real thing - as real as I needed it to be.

---

The following summer, Niagara Falls drew my mother's attention with this evocative radio jingle: "Marineland and Gamefarm, come see it all..." And so we huffed it to the Berri Metro for a 13 hour plus bus ride from Montreal to Niagara Falls. Another motel greeted us, this one damp year-round from the mist off the thundering water mere feet away. The dull roar made for fitful sleep. The cable TV cartoons, familiar from the year before, kept us inside for the better part of the mornings. Motel living cut us some slack from the rules of home in this way, but we eventually made our way out. As the primary tourist traps ran out—or priced us out of the market—we encountered the same daily struggles for meaning and direction as the summer before.

The trek down through the tunnels and on to the Maid of the Mist are a very distant memory now, but as we made our way beyond the falls and over to the dry area of town, we came upon the Houdini House. Was it a sideshow in an amusement park, or on the actual streets of Niagara Falls? I can't dredge up a single memory of the inside of the exhibit. But the automated "Barker" outside got our attention immediately. A styrofoam head was centred in the darkly tiled enclosure extending out from the shop, the ticket booth to a long-defunct cinema. Below the glass and out of sight, a film projector beamed a black and white image up and across to the head. The footage was of an actor playing Houdini - his face appearing stretched across the styrofoam, enticing us into the show with a synchronized muddy voice track: "I am Houdini, the greatest escape artist who ever lived. Enter now, and see the treasures and records of my incredible feats of daring, drama and magic". This went on for about a minute, at which point the actor dropped his head forward. The loop went black for a split second, and the joining splice jumped through the film gate. The head popped onto the styrofoam in a flash, upright once again and staring at us with beady eyes for a few moments before beginning to speak. I circled around to the right and could see the face bleeding off the edge of the head, eyebrow blurring above where an ear should have been. I circled to the other side and saw the same.

The content was not what captivated us, but the mechanism and shape that it took. That dead moment where the actor sat motionless before beginning his speech was what held the most promise - the pause where Houdini the man, Houdini the actor, the actor *playing* Houdini, and the foam head playing a real head all seemed to become one single, distinct force.

That night in the motel, listening to the perpetual thunder, two summers merged. I dreamed of my family. Their faces were flattened, their ears facing out instead of to the sides with hair creating a thick ring around their heads. They floated free of any bodies, a grotesque

animated mobile illuminated in the dark and bouncing around to the music of Fleetwood Mac, each smiling gleefully like they knew a secret I never could.

**Returning home** after these trips was always a relief. To be back in our own house, the rules of life in place, the familiar again familiar. But along with this came a palpable sense of doom, of not knowing how to spend the long hours that stretched out in front of us once the routine distractions became rote and the heat of the day refused to subside.

As August set in, my mother was out most days at summer courses, eager to finish her degree and start earning a living as a teacher. Dad was often away on business and so we rarely visited him at his new place on the other side of Montreal Island. My older brother was given some general instruction to keep an eye on my sister and I, but we were pretty much left to our own devices, and he to his.

Much of our time seemed to be spent gazing into the open refrigerator, building snacks and a pile of dishes. We would move downstairs into the much cooler family room with our loaded sandwiches, crackers, chips, cheese-whiz, peanut butter and gherkin pickles, and then return again to the kitchen for a plastic jug full of kool-aid.

Normally reserved for occasional evenings and weekend cartoons, the television now took on a central role. An immersion into every stripe of daytime soap opera, local gameshow, and French-Canadian talkshow became a part of daily life for those four weeks.

My mother never cared much for television, and her classwork at the time on educational models only confirmed her distrust. As a compromise, she had very purposefully bought a tiny black and white set. Access without glitz. Every one of our neighbours had large Baroque wooden floor models that flattened the pile carpet and took up the better part of a wall. With our tiny, colourless screen, she thought TV's allure would surely wane, its magic weaken. Of course, cable was out of the question. Next door, the Walkers had more channels than they knew what to do with. A long wire ran from the back of their TV set to the couch across the room, leading to a control box that had over 40 buttons across the top and a multitude of stickers above each of these buttons to remind you of what channel you could be pressing.

At our house we managed one channel in English and 2 in French, each a little on the fuzzy side. Somehow we made it work. Taking shelter in shoddy scripts, familiar tropes and general mediocrity, we embraced the overlit stages on the small gray screen. This was easy company, and there was no burden of expectation.

The days passed, and passed. Over dinner we dully reported that we had done "nothing" all day, retreated to our rooms and ignored calls of bedtime and lights out.

And then there was Saturday.

After these hollow weekdays, Saturday morning cartoons felt like an entirely different way into TV. Sweet cereal was permitted on this morning only, and we indulged until the roofs of our mouths went raw.

But this comic-book world was strangely unanimated. How could a site of such endless potential fall so short? We held these cartoons in such high esteem, waited for them all week long, but there was no way to inhabit them, no way inside. These characters were bound by endless cycling backgrounds, forever trapped in a static, airless world. The loneliness of the two-dimensional drawings and their repeating circumstance was failure. In a place where it seemed anything could happen, nothing ever did.

Sugar highs, bad sleep patterns, and weeks of static excess all imploded.

We were running out of time.

The weeks dissolved, and the combination of Mom's absence and the tension of the looming school year began to put an urgency into the waning days of summer. Half-cocked plans for treehouses, camping trips and skateboard ramps came and went.

The patterns we'd worn ourselves into had taken hold.

It was all too late.

(originally entitled "Summer Love", published in a slightly different form and written for the catalogue accompanying "Faking It", an art installation by Amy Lockhart at the Pitt Gallery in July of 2006.)