

Praise for *Every Natural Fact*

“What makes this book such a marvel is the way the human and the non-human are kept in perfect balance: the psychological dance of a mother and son, with all its funny, touching, realistic two-steps, intersects with the desire to be opened up to the mystery and rapture of the natural sublime. It is a splendid fusion, as much about parenting and education and generation gaps as it is about patient observation of landscapes in flux. Jenkins’ polished literary style makes it, sentence by sentence, a joy to read.”

—Phillip Lopate, author of *Waterfront* and *At the End of the Day*

“Braiding together history, memoir, gentle parenting guidance, and superb nature writing, Jenkins’ prose illuminates the details of ordinary life.”

—Susan Cheever, author of *Home Before Dark* and *American Bloomsbury*

“Amy Lou Jenkins writes with complexity about the dance human beings do with nature, and with one another...She puts together pieces of history, natural history, and parenting to make a touching and memorable whole. The whole thing rings true.”

—Michael Finley, judge of the Ellis/Henderson Outdoor Writing Award

“Her vivid imagery mixes a naturalist’s precision with a spiritual seeker’s poetry.”

—Robert Wake, author and editor of Cambridge Book Review Press and co-judge for the X.J. Kennedy Award for Nonfiction

“Armed with a keen sense of geography, geology, and biology—as well as a delightful arsenal of regional folklore—Amy Lou Jenkins chronicles a series of Wisconsin nature walks with her adolescent son, determined to face her own foibles and learning to accept that DJ will eventually leave her loving nest. In her cogent, smart book she holds on to her boy even as she lets him go, and in the process discovers—through the natural world, through her faith, and through guides such as Muir and Leopold—her own strength and vulnerability as a mother.”

—Debra Gwartney, author of *Live Through This: A Mother’s Memoir of Runaway Daughters and Reclaimed Love* and co-editor of *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape*



EVERY NATURAL FACT
FIVE SEASONS OF OPEN-AIR PARENTING

AMY LOU JENKINS





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The journey to move my writing from the sideline to center field began while I was working as a nurse. The most common end-of-life advice bestowed implicitly and explicitly by the terminally ill was rooted in regret about abandoned hopes and dreams. My dying patients initiated this book. They made me consider what was essential about my work and my life.

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Finally, thanks to all who work to preserve, restore, and love every natural place.

Dedicated to Dylan—who walked with me.



BETWEEN LAND AND WATER



“Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact.”

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

In early spring I discovered a longing for unplugged time with my nearly eleven-year-old son—no phones, computers, iPods, or video-games. DJ and I began our open-air walks. While we walked the natural areas of Wisconsin, he grew toward manhood, and I grew into middle age. At the beginning, before we planned regular outings, I was uncharacteristically whiney, mired in apprehensions that fermented within a two-week bout of lousy weather. As the weather shifted inclinations, each walk took on its own disposition, so that the nature of the landscape and the day shaped the issues that came to dominate our time together: time that felt unhurried, essential, and sacred.



Those who dwell in northern climates share a measure of pride in our bravado toward winter. Like many who live where the audacity of winter throws blockades before spring, I come from sturdy stock—farmers, hard workers, and football fans who drink cold beer at outdoor stadiums during frigid January playoff games. I’m not a woman who ties a sequined cardigan over my shoulders lest a draft should offend me. My dad always told my sister Julie and me, “You girls are tough.” We believed him.

When I was single, a divorced mom, I shoveled deep snow from a long driveway with a bundled baby on my back, changed a tire in an ice storm, and repaired my furnace with a wrench in one hand and a home repair manual in the other while a wind-up swing tinked out a melody as it comforted my snow-suit clad Andrea. Today, life is softer for me. When the snow falls Paul, my husband of over 16 years, rises early to snow blow our drive before he heads off to work. I still shovel the light stuff. I'm not a wimp. Sometimes I clean my snow-covered windshield with my bare hands and wait until the temperature drops below twenty before I consider wearing a winter hat. I eagerly head outside in December to take pictures of tall grasses and trees when snow and ice decorate their dormancy. My Milwaukee neighbors and I bake apple and cherry pies from frozen fruit bought during summer jaunts to Wisconsin's Door County peninsula. When the snow cleanly blankets our hills and trees, the white slate provides a reprieve from outdoor chores, as it covers broken fences and the weeds we never got around to pulling. Wisconsin's beauty and opportunity for recreation draws scads of folks from Illinois, trailing snowmobiles instead of the boats they pulled in summer. They join us when winter woolies, sleds, and skis claim a prominence in our lives. We watch the crimson red of the cardinal deepen its shade against the stark snow and appreciate the junco's flash of black and white tail stripes as he excitedly migrates to share our winters. January's and February's nip both sting, but we accept it. In the middle of winter, we make peace with boots, gloves, and Polartec gear. We live in a community that expects the cold and knows how to dress for sledding parties followed by hot cocoa with marshmallows for the kids and the optional shot of peppermint schnapps for the grownups. We enjoy our fireplaces, hand-crocheted afghans, and baked chicken dinners, and as long as the oven's heated, we whip up batches of chocolate chip cookies and banana bread.

We enjoy winter, but about the middle of March, when the dirty snow matches the color of the sky, we pine for a lasting spring. When the tides of spring are segregated by sloppy gray days, I'm not the only one who feels a sluggish depression. Throughout the Midwest, April often gives us heavy clouds that seal out the sun and send cold, rough rains and hail. The rise

in barometric pressure presses our heads down and curls our spines into giant commas as we wait for the warmth and sunshine we believe we deserve by virtue of having endured over five months of winter. Last April, the season carried more asperity than most of us could stand up to. Our sun-deprived complexions and furnace-dried skin weathered within the gloom of a cabin fever that followed us outdoors when we stepped under the low ceiling of gray clouds. We don't usually like to admit any resentment toward Wisconsin, and we roll our eyes at our Arizona and Florida relatives when they call from their lanais with sunny weather reports and sickening good cheer about not missing the snow and ice. Beneath the tone of their happy voices, I hear a judgment that we who dwell in Wisconsin are moronic or underprivileged. Every other month, we brag about our state and don't tolerate any denigration cast upon our cherished heartland. In April, we stand down.

When the evening weather report called for sun and warmth, I realized that although Paul had to work, DJ and I had the day off. I leaned on the doorframe of our family room and told him, "Find your hiking boots and go to bed early. Tomorrow we're getting up at sunrise to search for something green or spring-like."

DJ looked up from his videogame, accepting my declaration with a cheery "Okay" that made me hyper-aware of my negative thoughts.



The sun didn't shine the next morning, but the haze carried more warmth than we'd felt for months. The temperature was expected to hit sixty-five degrees. A slight smile curled DJ's mouth as I gripped his shoulders while he feigned a walking sleep. I steered him toward the front passenger seat. Sitting next to the driver was still a novelty for him. Paul and I had made him wait until he weighed over ninety pounds before he could ride up front. He buckled his seatbelt, wadded his sweatshirt into a makeshift pillow, and leaned against the window.

A ball of fuzzy daylight illuminated the horizon as we left our neighborhood of pulled curtains and empty streets. Horicon Marsh, the largest

freshwater cattail marsh in the United States, covering more than 32,000 acres, was an hour's drive away. In our migration there, we joined millions of birds. Over 60 percent of avian species in North America have a presence in this hot spot of the Mississippi flyway zone. Almost every type of waterfowl using the corridor rest, nest, or live at Horicon Marsh. The ancient flyway has been imbedded in birds' and butterflies' migration patterns since the glaciers began to recede, leaving behind ridged hills called drumlins, small hollows called kettles, and thousands of larger depressions we know as lakes and marshes. The flyway is so old that naturalists studying the migration of monarch butterflies over Lake Superior can only explain a consistent and distinct detour they make over a wide section of lake as the pathway developed when a glacial iceberg presented an obstacle to their travels.

DJ's mouth hung open, and his head bobbed as he slept. When the car veered toward Highway 45, his head rolled and jerked him awake. He looked around at the brown fields and gray skies. "The sun's not out? Isn't it supposed to be a nice spring day today?"

Instead of offering him encouragement about how warm weather was right around the corner, I supplied an exaggeration of commiseration. I told him about how, in the eighties, before we had a roofed baseball stadium, the Brewers had to change the date of their home opener twice in one year because of April snow. And when I married my previous husband on April 2, the forecast called for a mild day. Hail, instead of rice, pelted the wedding party when we raced to our cars after the ceremony. About a third of the guests and one of the band members in the Lockwood Trio missed the reception on account of the ice storm. The duo lacked harmony, which was a harbinger of a dissonant marriage. I didn't share information with DJ, but it was difficult not to recall the control, the slaps, and the desperate unhappiness of being married to a man who believed he loved me, yet sought to control me using multiple forms of intimidation. The hitting was kind of gift, as it awakened me to his desperate need to dominate. As soon as I recognized the violence hovering around Andrea, I left.

DJ leaned away from me and pressed his head against his sweatshirt. He closed his eyes as if he were unwilling to add my wintry discontent to his own.

I spoke softly, more as a reminder to myself than to my wisely disengaged son. “Sorry, DJ.”

My son, my youngest child, sat in the passenger seat next to me reaching into his mouth, wiggling a loose incisor, and growing toward adolescence and manhood. Ever since he began to speak, he’s always been a chatterbox, blabbing in the car about his favorite Sponge Bob cartoon, sharing each unfiltered thought that came into his head, and recounting the details of all the moments we spent apart; but recently a more laconic side of his personality had emerged. Like his father, his default description of each day was “Fine.” He didn’t want to talk about the “health lecture” at school, but he listened in exasperated quietness as Paul and I reviewed the basics of sexual maturation. DJ avoided me the rest of that evening, hyper-aware of our differences. The subject of the distinctions between men and women had come up before.



When DJ was about five, we read the book *I’m Lost* by Elizabeth Crary. The book instructs, “When lost, go to a police officer, a store clerk, or a woman with children—a mommy.” Shortly after reading the book, a school program gave DJ the same advice, and later we saw a news segment that claimed that 77 percent of violent crime is attributable to men.

DJ took all this in and asked, “Are women nicer than men?”

I wouldn’t believe that my son was destined to be mean, yet I couldn’t say if I was being truthful about men in general when I answered “No.”

The theme of *I’m Lost* (and the subsequent discomfort) had lain dormant in my memory for years. That unease had reanimated during this spring’s cleaning bout when I placed the book into a Goodwill box. I was about to seal up the carton and put the thoughts away, but instead, I picked up the paperback and walked to DJ’s room. We reviewed a PG-13 version of the be-careful lesson once again.



The town of Horicon seemed to still be asleep except for a fast food restaurant. I tapped DJ's leg. "Do you want some food before we get to the marsh?"

DJ sat up, looked right and left, laid his head back down, and ignored my question. "It still looks lousy outside. Isn't April weather supposed to be nicer than March?"

The last few days of March had teased us and sent some fifty-degree days to make us sweat in our winter clothes. March used the heavy dampness of our own bodies to cajole us into abandoning our down-filled ski coats and putting away the warm hats that flattened our hair. We even moved the high-traction boots (which were certified to twenty below zero) to the back of the closet. Then, April knocked us on our keisters by dumping an ice storm onto our bare heads and slick new Easter shoes.

The ground was still with littered broken branches from the April storm when I'd stepped out of the front door in my blue terry bathrobe to retrieve the morning paper last week. I'd found myself wandering my suburban yard, searching for green spikes on bulbs. My bare fingers dug through the frosty leaf mulch trying to find signs of impending relief from brown and gray. The tips of daffodils and small bulges that promised a bloom offered a slight textual reward for my iced fingertips, but I needed more. Paul walked out looking for me or the paper and stared at his brown lawn while I squatted and poked in my frozen flowerbed.

"It'll be green soon." He tried to sound optimistic, but then he looked up to the dark sky, shivered, hugged his arms against his chest, and added, "If it doesn't snow."

I lifted my face to him. "I've had enough." My bones felt cold; I hadn't seen our neighbors since we were shoveling after the last snowstorm, and even then I only saw the middle of their faces as they complained from beneath their woolen scarves about the return of winter. I was tired of the weight of winter clothes and winter pounds. The trees had been bare for six months. Piled on top of all this dismay, my grown daughter Andrea had moved out and left me oh-so-second-fiddle to the man of her life, as it should be. It was time, but she left me outnumbered in my home. Paul and DJ reminded me of my minority status when we voted on Friday night

movies; they wanted an action flick, overruling my pick, a quirky independent film. When it came to where to go for dinner, they vetoed Thai food in favor of burgers. I stood my ground even without my daughter's vote and forbade the ash-colored paint that my son and husband suggested as a good color for the hallway.

When the daffodils finally broke their winter dormancy and pushed up inches of green spikes of promise, my guys inadvertently stepped on them and smashed the only tiny slashes of spring in the flower garden. I interpreted their destructive behavior as if it were emblematic of the degradation of our planet under the leadership of the world's paternalistic societies. They were sorry; I was sullen. In my climate-induced gloom, I began to ruminate.

A newspaper story, with photos of nurses in wedding gowns who protested hospital management, reminded me of my personal career injustices. A hospital conglomerate had recently decreased health benefits for nurses, citing that the women could use their husband's insurance. This isn't true in our household, as my husband's small business insurance is expensive and provides spotty coverage. We manage to get sick and injured in non-coverable ways. When I was a divorced mom and nurse, providing health insurance for my daughter, my lousy HMO benefits took almost a fourth of my take-home pay. In Wisconsin, almost 30 percent of all homes are single-parent households, and over 80 percent of these are headed by women. The national trends are similar. Problems concentrate in Milwaukee, where a third of all children live in poverty. Most poor children do not have an employed father. Medicaid covers many children's basic health needs, but those who live slightly above the official poverty level, because of earned income, don't qualify. Women still earn less than men for comparable jobs, seventy-seven cents on the dollar, and they bear a heavier burden when it comes to household work and child rearing. The differences between being a man and being a woman isn't just biologic, it's usually economic. A society that places women as helpmates and second-income wage earners engenders suffering for women and the children they support.

As I considered my daughter going off on her own, with plans for career, marriage, and children, I worried that her gender might affect her

economic future and therefore become a source of pain and suffering. The men in our lives bore no specific blame that I could pinpoint. Andrea's fiancé has given her years of loving boyfriend credibility, and my Paul rates as a sweetheart a large percentage of the time, but less than half of all marriages are successful in raising children in the original two-parent household. The general culture still blunts the potential of females with notions of women as helpmates. I knew from experience how tough life can be for a single mom. I was in a funk, missing my daughter and awfulizing that the worst of the past might predict her future.



DJ and I drove past the north-flowing Rock River that supplies the marsh and entered the parking lot with access to the National Wildlife Refuge. The road to the marsh boardwalk opened on April 15. Since it was April 14, we had to hike in.

I hoped if we witnessed a flurry of wildlife migrating back to our Wisconsin version of spring, it would improve my attitude. We started through a dormant brown prairie. DJ carried the backpack. Alongside the road, I spied the diminutive first petals of the common mullein. I knelt and touched its leaves. "Feel how soft and woolly they are."

DJ complied. "Yeah," he said, barely opening his mouth. "Soft. Woolly."

I looked at him while rubbing the foliage. "I'm going to teach you something that I know you will use at some time in your life, okay? The mullein can grow to over ten feet with a long club of yellow flowers that blooms all summer. They tend to grow in sunny spots at the edges of woods or swamps. These base leaves will grow to over a foot long. They're easy to spot. You won't find them in the woods. Listen up; here's the important part. If you think you're going to have to do a Number Two in the woods, take a few large leaves from the base of the mullein. It won't hurt the plant. They are softer than flannel, tougher than TP, and non-irritating. You've got to think ahead, because once you head into the woods for privacy, you won't find this plant."

DJ sneered. “Did you really have to tell me that?”

“I thought it was gross when Grandpa Ed taught me, but twenty years later while camping on an island in the Menomonee River, I was very happy he did. Feel this. Softer than Charmin!”

We walked on. The air carried a fresh green smell, like asparagus cooking. DJ began to sing:

“I have a magic toenail.

I keep it on my foot.

It’s always there to cheer me up

When things just go ker-plunk.”

When I asked him if he might get into nature mode, he sang more softly. “Look,” I told him, “if we are quiet and watchful, I know we’ll see something wonderful. We haven’t seen anyone on this trail, so the only people here to scare the wildlife are you and me. Let’s be quiet.”

He believed me, and we slowed our pace. I watched his freckled face as his dark blue eyes scanned the terrain. Prairie changed to marsh around a curve in our path. I stopped, grabbed his shoulder, stood behind him, and pressed my cheek to his dark brown hair. Trying to match his line of sight with my arm, I pointed to a five-foot tall bird ahead of us in a stand of bare scrub trees. “Sandhill crane,” I whispered.

DJ got out the binoculars and the *Peterson Field Guide*. “He’s as tall as me.” We were able to get within twenty feet. DJ hung the binoculars around his neck and looked back and forth from the picture in the book to the bird before us. We were still.

DJ whispered, “Gray with dark red around the eyes and head. Up to a seven-foot wingspread. Yup, it’s a sandhill.” He kept studying the bird, which now walked comfortably in our stillness as he pecked for food.

Sounds of the marsh grew louder. Crickets and leopard frogs buzzed and plucked. We saw a nearly fluorescent green water snake slither over the top of the thick, dark water. I noticed the tips of emerging vegetation. Cattails, marsh marigolds, arrowhead, and water lilies reached through the undulating watery mud toward the spring light. The muck bubbled and moved. In an instant, the sun came out. It must have been in a place like this, I thought, that Gerard Manley Hopkins conjured the lines:

“What is all this juice and this joy? A strain of the earth’s sweet being in the beginning.”

The exhalation of the swamp blew the gray lid off the spring day. We tied our sweatshirts around our waists, stood taller in the high sky, and continued on. Canada geese buzzed our heads as if we were approaching a landing strip. In the distance, they descended and dropped their feet before blending into a far woodland stand.

“What’s up there?” DJ asked.

“A lot of open water and a floating boardwalk through the marsh.”

DJ, who had taken the lead, stopped for a moment and looked back at me. “Let’s be real quiet. We’re the only ones here.”

We stepped onto the wooden planks and adjusted our footing to the boardwalk’s give and bounce in response to each of our steps. The ducks weren’t nesting yet, so they floated around and mingled as if circulating at a crowded cocktail party. DJ kept the bird guide at his chest, looking to the water and then to the book. “That one’s a redhead duck. What’s next to it?”

“A coot.”

“Oh, yeah, black with a white bill.”

DJ counted a flock of thirty-eight blue winged teals as they circled twice in front of us flashing chalky azure wing patches. On the second pass, they flew close enough for us to confirm their white facial stripes and stippled brown and white bodies as they turned toward us in formation. We kept our eyes skyward and turned a shuffling half circle to watch them land behind us. They settled in coupled pairs, immediately blending with a flock of feeding pintails. We laughed with silent puffs of breath as they dunked, bottoms-up for submergent vegetation. The pairs, all in their own time, took turns. First the male stood watch while the female flashed her tail feathers; then the female stayed upright while the male tipped over to feed.

DJ pointed to a pair of ducks that looked a lot like the redhead, except that the drake’s back was gray and his belly and sides were creamy white. “What are those?” he asked. But he paged through *Peterson’s* for the answer, rather than looking to me, so I stayed quiet.

Each duck had a better chance of survival when it had a mate looking out for it. The survival of every species, at the most basic biologic level, depends on coupling.



Looking back at my history of failed relationships, I realized that I've always been able to remember them in a way where I come off as the wronged-party—the good one. I had my justifications: a peeping Tom neighbor, a relative's roaming hands, hundreds of attempts to conquer me sexually with few attempts to know me. A male boss, no, there were more than one, made lascivious advances and punished my family-supporting career when I spoiled their fun.

Attention from husbands and boyfriends changed into a desire to possess and control me. That kind of love didn't satisfy; instead, it smothered me until I couldn't stand the burden of their overbearing company or until they moved on to another conquest. Eventually, I came to understand how I helped to establish those ill-fated relationships by deferring to those men. I let the volume in their voices overpower my inner voice, so that I couldn't even recognize my own thoughts. I thought that this was how a woman found love and security.

Historically, men have been the ones who fought for power, money, and resources. Perhaps I thought, long ago, that a man might grab some of those resources for me.

Between and after those ill-fated relationships, I'd put myself through college, bought my own home, and advanced from nurses' aide to director of a home health care agency. I gained professional skills that carried me beyond the parental advice I'd received that "Only ugly girls need college." I came to see that aggression steeped in egocentricity was hard to admire and impossible to live with—perhaps as difficult to weather as my passive-aggressive bouts of compliance followed by angry revolt. Once I'd been purged of most of my coquettish impulses (not only because I'd gotten smarter, but also because I just couldn't rely on youthful beauty because I was aging), Paul asked me out. He was a kind man—a doctor who

practiced in the inner city. I had respected him for years before we began our five-year courtship. Only when I was sure that I didn't need a man, when I owned my independence, was I able to bring a whole person to a marriage. That sounds so obvious, but I don't think I'm the only woman who didn't understand her own abilities while very young and attractive and while her esteem was fed by the men who were happy to pay to possess their prize. It was easy to imagine that those men who competed to care for me and who showed off their cars and muscles and wallets could offer me security. Instead of sharing power, I submitted to support roles where my voice and talents were silenced and bound. When my relationships weren't built on the shoulders of two strong people, they crumbled.

Paul and I do jockey for control of our lives within our marriage. I never played the demure dependent with him, so I didn't feed his inherent tendency to dominate. And certainly, he is a man without a lot of the insecurities that create a need to subjugate another. He would, however, assume an excessive share of power in our relationship if I let him. We don't live our lives with our heads jutting from an evenly spaced yoke; everything is not equal. I hoped that DJ's witness to our respectful juggling of power would serve his future relationships.

Paul often offers suggestions about how I should do things. I do listen. Then, I consider my needs, his needs, and the family's needs. This list can not be permanently ordered; sometimes I come first; sometimes my needs come last. This is my choice. But he does not govern me anymore than I govern him. Once I placed my own needs as a priority in the relationship, I found a marriage that lasted, and our son knew a childhood with an intact family—a gift we hadn't given Paul's previous children nor mine.

Paul used to say he'd like to go with me on nature hikes, canoe rides, and camping trips. He asked me to wait for him, but accommodating his work and on-call schedule usually meant the outing never happened. I resented his job while I waited and imagined the trilliums on the forest floor, cranes nesting in the marsh, barn swallows swooping and flashing their iridescent feathers in streaks of sunlight, and morning frost settling on cedars. Once I started as a den leader for Cub scouts (about the time DJ became old enough to easily travel to undeveloped settings), I began a

pattern of taking DJ to natural places. I learned to let Paul know he was welcome and then to pack up a backpack and DJ and go.



DJ pointed to a picture of a duck in the field guide. “See? The canvasback has a bigger and darker bill than the redhead.”

The drake’s ruddy red head signaled mating season. He’d stay with his mate for now, but these males are known to take off during early incubation and find a molting lake. The females incubate and protect the eggs while the males go away during their ugly time of the year and return well fed and energized to help parent the ducklings. We were close enough to notice the wedged shape of their bills and the red eyes that reflected up to us from the calm water. They didn’t dive for us, but these versatile ducks swim above and under water and are one of the fastest of all ducks on the wing. Suddenly the canvasbacks took off, beating their wings feverishly until they caught an air current which carried them out of sight.

Unfortunately for the canvasback, they are especially tasty. As a result, their population plummeted during the first third of the twentieth century. They rebounded a bit when commercial market hunting of ducks was outlawed, but loss of habitat and pollution-induced changes in marsh vegetation have kept their numbers low.

DJ thought the canvasbacks looked “tight.” Those of us who are too old to be tight might have used the word “cool” or “lovely.” He appreciated that the ducks always had this place to come to—a natural place. But Horicon hadn’t always been available to the wetland breeders who flourished here for over 15,000 years before European settlers took the land from the Sauk. Referring to a tourist newspaper and tapping my memory, I explained the history to DJ.

Men fought bloody battles to take this land away from a tribe who came from an ancestry of people who lived as part of the ecosystem that flourished without any attempt to master or control the wetlands. Chief Black Hawk was the final Sauk leader to try to hold on the only life he knew by warring with the settlers. When he resigned himself to leaving

his homeland in the 1830s, he said of the region, “Rock River was a beautiful county. I loved my towns, my cornfields, and the home of my people. I fought for it. It is now yours. Keep it as we did.”

By 1846, the settlers had dammed the Rock River and turned the marsh into a fifty-square-mile lake, considered at the time to be the largest human-made lake in the world. Canvasbacks wouldn't have nested here then; they need reeds like cattails to support their green eggs in a nest of flattened rushes. Farmers thought they could drain their marsh water into the lake, turning wetland to agricultural land. They found that the peat and moisture in the soil prohibited the growth of any root crops, and overall yields were low. Bass, pike, pickerel, bullhead, and musky were so prolific in the lake that farmers were said to dip baskets into the lake and pull up enough fish to feed their pigs. DJ snorted when I told him that the meat from these Horicon pigs wasn't marketable; the pork tasted fishy. In 1869, hunters with little to shoot at, conservationists, and women's groups all spoke up about the immorality of the losses in bird and duck populations. The dam came down. Horicon Marsh didn't reappear as expected because the natural flooding systems, rivulets, land contours, and vegetation had been destroyed. Low water levels and exposed peat led to fires and more destruction. In 1930, after the legislature passed the Horicon Marsh Wildlife Refuge Bill, the State began to buy back more of the farmland and rebuild the Rock River Dam. They partially flooded the area to approximate the conditions existing before the meddling began. This natural marsh now requires constant vigilance, including managing water levels and burning the prairie in an attempt to mimic conditions that once came naturally to the water and land.

Over the next two hours we inched across the half-mile-long boardwalk. DJ identified each bird species we saw: grebes, mergansers, great blue herons, and more. Above us, flocks flew in and out of our vision. We tried to count V-formations, but they converged and separated so we could only tell that there were more than twenty-two flocks in our sight at one time. Most were a series of dots, but some would fly close and land on the open water near us. While DJ counted Canada Geese, I did not have to remind myself that this male, my son, should not be held accountable for all the

paternalistic power gone awry in the bygone years of Horicon, the world, or my life. And if he is innocent, I conjectured, there must be others.

As soon as our feet crossed the threshold from boardwalk to trail, DJ announced, “I’m hungry.” Within a quarter mile he began the “Magic Toenail” song again, this time sharing that Alec from Scouts had taught him the song. When he approached the trunk of a large bur oak lying across the trail, he fell silent.

“Over or around?” I asked, but he took a running start and leapt over it before I finished the question. I turned my back to the three-foot-wide trunk and sat down. “I can’t jump as high as you can. Let me think about what to do.”

DJ handed me a bottle of water and unwrapped the first of two granola bars he held in his hand. He sat next to me, facing the way we would go, while I faced the way we’d come.



Sitting with my hungry son reminded me of the day we missed our fish fry. It was during a vacation near Minocqua—a week of hiking, swimming, reading, and playing cards in a rustic cabin in the up-north Wisconsin woods. After about six days of togetherness, I was itchy to be alone and suggested I skip the Scheer’s Lumberjack Show to browse antique stores. The lumberjack aficionados agreed, recognizing they would miss the drudgery of going antiquing with me. After I dropped them at the Scheer’s grandstands, I drove out of town a few miles and back, just to enjoy my independence at the wheel. The touristy antique shops seemed too clean. Green paint on the handle of the potato ricer wasn’t original, and the amber Globe fruit jar’s clasp delivered a shine that could not have matched its age. Still, I enjoyed the search. By the second store, a shellacked log cabin that smelled of Pine Sol, a pattern emerged. Wives walked slowly, eyes intent on the shelves long after their husbands had tired of browsing remnants of country living and up-north tchotchkes.

The men wore similar uniforms: polo shirts and pleated khaki shorts. Hands in pockets, they looked awkward, as if too big to stand comfort-

ably among cranberry glass, porcelain dolls, spindly-legged tables, and tea cups in the stuffed shops that played loon calls on CD (available, of course, for purchase). By the third store, I was in love with the uncomfortable patience of these men. If Paul had come, he would also have simulated interest and then resolved himself to waiting while I finished shopping for unnecessaries. I picked up Paul and DJ from the show with only a few dollars' worth of purchases but declared the shopping trip fun. The two-hour absence from my men and its revelations had sparked a renewed affection.

We cleaned up for dinner and were looking forward to the fish fry. On the way, the air stilled, and the clouds in the west grew heavy. From the lobby of The Pines Restaurant, we stole lusty glances into the dining room at the plates of golden-fried lake perch and walleye while the sky darkened and the wind rushed around the shiny log building and through the stands of straining trees. Thunder began to crack in the distance, and we heard the clouds dropping lakes of water on the roof and against the windows. Just as we were seated, the lights went out. The waitress carried a candle in a lantern over to us and said they would not be serving. She invited us to go down to the basement shelter until the storm passed. We should have been worried about the storm and the wind, but we were thinking of food.

The strong winds had diminished, but torrential rain drenched us as we hurried to the car by following a ray of light trembling from Paul's flashlight keychain. We couldn't find another restaurant. The storm had wiped out electricity everywhere. Lines of cars appeared at each road into the woods, and we didn't understand the traffic jams on all the back roads. We joined a stalled procession of cars on the road to our cabin and waited while trucks and cars got in line behind us and confirmed our decision to stay in line. The cars didn't move at all for about a half-hour, then we moved a quarter mile and stopped again. Men in khakis left their cars and walked ahead to check on the problem. Paul joined them. DJ and I stayed in the car and watched several ATVs roar by us on the shoulder of the road. We saw a pile of logs in a ditch and heard loud buzzing beyond our line of vision. Men with chainsaws hurried toward the action. DJ pressed his nose to the foggy car window and occasionally leaned

back to wipe the condensation with his sleeve. Freshly drenched from the rain, Paul returned with dirty hands and clothes, explaining that trees were down all over the road. Many of the locals kept chainsaws in their trunks, so several men raced ahead to help clear logs, then hurried back to their cars to move ahead. They worked in warm, intermittently heavy rain. Paul brought news with each trip back to the car. “That one wasn’t bad—a clump birch. The hickory was so big it crossed the road, grazed a house, and took out a shed.”

DJ ate the chocolate-covered raisins from my shopping bag and the Mentos mints from my purse. He asked several times to go out with his dad to cut and move the trees, but with all the rain, chainsaws, and men working, we held him back. Eventually, he fell asleep.

I asked Paul if I should come out and help, but he said there were so many men at each felled tree that they had enough for an assembly line. “Stay here with DJ,” he said, “and keep dry.”

At one of the barricades the road looped around, and I could see the men at work and hear them through the slightly open window. They held their heads down when the rain intensified and wiped sheets of water from their faces with their palms. I heard a man in khaki shorts ask, “Why don’t you take a break and let me cut with the chainsaw for a while?” He reached for the saw.

Another man held out his palm to stop him and cautioned, “He’s been driving around with that chainsaw in his trunk since last Christmas waiting for a night like this. He sure as hell is not going to turn it over to you.” Chainsaw envy, I thought.

When we finally returned to our cabin, it was after two in the morning, and we were famished. We still didn’t have electricity, but our flashlight led us to candles. Since it was our final night in the cabin, we only had a few leftovers. Paul dried off and got DJ into pajamas while I threw on my robe and began to mince onion, garlic, and a few slices of ham. I fried it up on the gas stove, adding eggs and a huge portion of leftover spaghetti noodles from the night Paul had cooked. He always makes too many noodles, but we were happy to have them this time. I grated the last of the fresh Parmesan over the top. We raised one can of beer, one

stem of wine, and one box of grape juice to toast our owl-light dinner.

“How’d you come up with this recipe?” Paul asked. “It’s great.”

DJ looked at the fried spaghetti with ham and eggs hesitantly, took a bite, and shook his head in an enthusiastic nod of approval.

I explained that fried spaghetti with ham and eggs was an Italian recipe I’d ordered in Florence at a restaurant where no one spoke English. I’d just pointed to the menu at something I could afford.

Paul complimented me with his mouth full. “I’m impressed.”

I was impressed with him too. In fact, I was kind of turned on by the competence and camaraderie of all those men working and heaving those fallen trees. If I’d been in a line of cars with only women, I wanted to believe we could have handled the chainsaws and moved the logs, but we might not have been driving around with anticipatory longing and heavy equipment in the backs of our trucks. We might have had to cut the trees into shorter lengths before we could move them off the road. We would have congratulated ourselves and might have enjoyed the power of the chainsaws in our hands. But the noise of the saws and ATVs may have given me a headache, and my thighs chafe when I walk in wet slacks. I didn’t think a group of my girlfriends could have made the best of a bad situation quite as well as those men did. They almost made it look fun. In truth, I didn’t see one woman out in that storm. There is something in most men, though, that makes them feel good about protecting their families and using their brawn. That night, I liked it. Not because I was helpless without their intervention, but because it seemed an arduously purchased gift of love and protection.

I don’t want to be told I can’t use the chainsaw or that I’m always responsible for dinner, but that night, I appreciated being excused from the heavy work and then making an impressive meal. When I looked back at this stereotyped setting—him clearing the road, DJ watching, me cooking—my pleasure in the reminiscence did bother me. I had to remind myself that choosing to cook dinner for my hardworking husband did not make me a traitor to the feminist cause. The National Organization for Women will not revoke my membership if I’m spotted in an apron (let’s not send them announcements, okay?). If men need to temper their ag-

gressive proclivities, then women need to step out of their penchant to subvert themselves and instead bring all their talents and influences into play. DJ saw his dad and other assiduous men working in the rain without a complaint. It rained; the logs were heavy. Families were hungry and tired, as were the men. They joked and stayed focused on the job. They did everything but sing “Hi, ho, hi ho, it’s off to work we go.” DJ learned a lot that night about being a man. And that night, I enjoyed the adventure in cooking for my family.

In a culture where strong women may not have an equal share of power but are not likely to be tortured or killed for their assertive reach for shared governance of all societies’ structures, I thought it an abdication of duty for women to remain submissive. Men can be harsher than women—even more dangerous. The asperity in their nature can lead to desecration, brutality, and war. But not that night. Their brutish force cleared the way for dozens of families to go home. My Paul seemed especially strong and tender as we both pushed through our exhaustion and found the energy to make love in a dark cabin in the north woods, just before a calm sunrise.



DJ finished his granola bars, but they didn’t do the trick. He was ready for town and more substantial food. By the time I swung my legs around the trunk of the tree, he was way ahead. Where prairie met woodland, I could hear the liquid gurgling of red-winged blackbirds mixing with the soprano whistle of a cardinal and the chatter of the wren. I stopped, listened, and thought of Shelley’s “To a Skylark”:

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow,
The world should listen then, as I am listening now.

I knew my freshly sunny attitude had come by way of a temporal injection of spring. If the benevolent change in the season had directed my

thoughts and memories away from enemizing the opposite sex, it seemed best to go with that renewal. My discontent (okay, hostility) would reappear, and I hoped that it would cycle back a bit more specifically directed to unjust acts rather than toward men in general. Since my son was growing toward manhood, I was compelled toward a reasoning compassion. DJ was about to complete grade school and enter the years of pulling away that I'd known with my daughter and still remembered from my own adolescence. I didn't want this change to happen behind the closed door of his bedroom.

DJ waited for me by pretending he'd fallen asleep leaning across the hood of the car. We bought sandwiches in the town of Mayfield and stopped at a small red barn just off Highway 22 to buy cheese curds. "Just made them this morning," the ruddy-faced man promised. He was in earnest, because they were still warm and squeaked against our teeth when we chewed them—a treat all our Arizona and Florida relatives had to do without.

DJ took a swig of root beer, letting it wash over a mouthful of cheese, and said, "We should do stuff like this more often."

I jumped on his suggestion. "Okay. Let's try for a trip once a month." I wanted to spend time with him in primary settings without civilized distractions—places where I believed life felt more original than virtual. When he was grown, I hoped we would both understand what it meant to become a man.

On the way home, when I suggested fried spaghetti for dinner, DJ asked if I would teach him to make it. While I told him I would, I noticed the chartreuse swells on the weeping whips of the willow and the lawns that had begun to green up in just one April day. DJ went back to wiggling his tooth. I knew we would eat fried spaghetti that night and share reminiscences of the big Wisconsin up-north storm, just as we do every time we repeat the menu. We would talk about the marsh and how difficult it had been for people to learn to live in partnership with all the complexities and dualities at the intersection of land and water. Contradictory elements converged: wet and dry, cold and warm, clouds and sunshine, masculine and feminine. Spring didn't just arrive in the reconditioned

marsh; it seemed to originate within the alchemy of opposites. It came with the force of high waters behind a breaking ice dam and replaced the season of gray with a flourish of life.

Near our neighborhood, we saw a line of fifteen, DJ counted them, bicyclers in sleek yellow and black. Bare-kneed children played in front yards, on sidewalks, and at the park. At a lengthy red light, we stopped in front of a small blue house with a big picture window framed in white trim. The sidewalk and steps to the front porch were littered with chalk drawings, balls, a small yellow two-wheeler lying on its side, and a pile of plastic action figures. Inside, a little boy in white briefs flew into the air in front of the picture window with his arms and legs in spread-eagle position. He was jumping on a couch, probably breaking a household rule. Again and again he flew into the framed view of the picture window, waving his outstretched arms as he jumped. We felt his joy and wanted to stay and watch, but when the light turned green, it was time to move on. We left him in midair.