

Manitou Passage

Gail Griffin

We boarded the idling bus in the dark, dragging the duffle bags we'd packed the night before. We had brushed our teeth and thrown cold water on our faces, but we were still buried in sleep, silent. Frank, the camp's ancient, irascible bus driver, cranked the bus doors shut and wrenched the gearshift into first. As we rolled down the lane toward the camp entrance, most of us sank back into sleep, heads against our duffle bags. It seemed to take hours to get to Leland, but even as we pulled up to the dock the air was just beginning to fade to the gray before dawn. By now we were mostly awake, stumbling off the bus, blinking and sniffing the fishy, watery air. We filed onto the boat, found seats, and began buckling on the bulky orange life jackets as our counselors instructed. Another long wait and the boat's engines ground to life. As we chugged out of the mouth of the Carp River, the wind off the big lake quickly swallowed the harbor smells, swallowed our voices and our breath. The water was beginning to shine in pale yellow-pink sunlight. Above us, bleating gulls floated and banked.

Within the ornately structured universe of Camp, our other lives in Cleveland Heights or Bloomfield Hills fell away like dreams. Camp rituals and nomenclature assumed an absolute reality. The week's calm order of classes, meals, songs, evening entertainments, and cabin life was broken by the occasional day or overnight expedition elsewhere around northwest Lower Michigan. We never knew and never wondered how these trips were scheduled; a list simply appeared in the Lodge. But we did understand the hierarchy. Little kids went to the Cherry Farms overnight, sleeping among someone's fruit trees on the Mission Peninsula, which bisects

Grand Traverse Bay. Slightly older girls went on “the Boardman”—a day trip by barge down the river of the same name, which curls through Grand Traverse County. The oldest and most accomplished canoers got tapped to go on “The Manistee”—a three-day canoe expedition down that more serious river. Between the Boardman and the Manistee was what we called “the Manitou,” an overnight on South Manitou Island.

So I must have been about twelve or thirteen at this first encounter with Lake Michigan. I had flown over it once, on my first airplane, to Chicago with my father the year before he died. I had seen the bay at Traverse City. But I confronted the great water called *Lac Dauphin* by the French, by the Ojibwa *Michigamme*, that morning as we left Leland, the wind in my face, the sun rising behind me, the boat lurching against the roiling water.

Was it on that trip that I first heard the legend of the Manitou Islands? I seem always to have known it; but then you can hardly escape it in northwestern Michigan, inscribed as it is on placemats, burned into shellacked slices of pine suitable for hanging, painted onto the walls of museums of local history, illustrated in children’s books. Supposedly of Ojibwa origin, it begins with a great fire in what is now Wisconsin driving a mother bear and her two cubs into the water to swim for the opposite shore. The mother bear crawled out on the other side and, looking behind her, saw her exhausted cubs sink below the waves. Gitche Manitou heard her howl of a prayer and turned the cubs into islands, one small and round, the other long and thin. Their mother, collapsed on the shore, was frozen in place, where she could always see them. Her great, long, sandy flanks, rising four hundred feet above the water, are now called Sleeping Bear. As of 1970, she is a national park, she and her lost babes.

From the first, I hated this story. It wasn’t quaint or magical, lyrical or inspirational; it was brutal and horrifying. To this day I avoid it. Tales of mothers separated from children, of

children left behind clawed at my stomach, churning up primal fear and grief. In my only recurring dream, I came home from school to find strangers in my house, my mother and brother having moved away. I had learned that elemental lesson--that people die, that they leave forever—at the age of nine. When my mother sat down next to me in the kitchen and told me my father was dead, I instantly knew an even worse truth: that she could die too. I could be left behind, with my big brother, flailing in the waves, as she disappeared.

I think she may have sent me to camp the first time, the summer after Dad died, to teach me that she could leave my sight for an entire month and yet return for me. Camp quickly provided a brilliant alternative to the complications and confusion of real life. It was isolated and at once secure and full of challenge, a deep green island in the north woods that had imprinted themselves deeply, on the mythic level, in my earliest summers at my father's hunting cabin near Grayling. There were horses and water, my two greatest passions. It was a world of girls. I moved under the pines, through the sunlight dappling the soft, powdery earth, and felt a belonging I had never known. I entered into the Camp rituals easily, with deep satisfaction. I also rose through the strata of achievement in swimming, in archery and riflery, in riding and canoeing. Early in my Camp career, I slept among the cherry trees and woke with cold dew covering my sleeping bag. In a subsequent summer, I floated down the Boardman in the deep afternoon chiaroscuro, watching the trees slide by above my head, iridescent dragonflies darting along the banks. And now, I was girl enough for The Manitou.

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It means *spirit* in Ojibwe. From the west shore of the Leelanau Peninsula, the islands float on the horizon, long and blue. Often they vanish into mist for days. On a bright July day, when they are “out,” they seem to be moving against the surging water. They lie only ten miles

out from Leland; I remember thinking that morning how close they looked. But as the boat plowed through the waves, the islands seemed not to come any closer but rather to recede.

Elusive, even deceptive. They are in fact the southernmost points of an archipelago stretching up to the straits called *Michilimackinac*, consisting of the exposed tips of a great limestone ridge buried by the melting glaciers that created the Lakes. When two coeval developments—the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 and the advent of steamships on the Lakes—collaborated to create a rapid water route from Chicago all the way to New York, the little Manitous rapidly became central players in the Great Lakes navigation saga. For, as I saw that morning as it finally pulled into focus, South Manitou Island is graced on its southeastern end with a crescent-shaped natural harbor—the only one between Chicago and Mackinaw, some three hundred miles of water. It curves into the lake like a hand—which, by 1840, extended rest and shelter, food and water, and access to the cordwood that fueled the ships' engines for the next leg of the journey. From Chicago to Buffalo a steamship would eat three hundred cords of wood.

For vessels not intending to stop, the Islands took on another kind of significance. When a ship's captain coming up from Chicago achieved Pointe Aux Becs Scies—"Sawbeak Point," phonetically collapsed over the years into "Point Betsie"—he had a decision to make, as he studied the blue shapes in the northern distance: west around them and out into the open lake, or east, hugging the shore, through what became known as the Manitou Passage. The latter saved him some sixty miles and the violent weather of the open lake. But the shorter route sent him into a perilous obstacle course of shoals and rocks and tricky winds of its own. At one point between South Manitou harbor and the town of Leland, the lake bottom rises to twenty feet below the surface. Called the Manitou Shoal, it was the undoing of innumerable ships attempting

the Passage. Over 150 wrecks lie on the lake floor of the Passage, some of them still visible; some, like the *Three Brothers*, broken up off South Manitou in 1911, disclosed suddenly, decades later, by the shifting of the island shore.

Not all of those sacrificed to the inscrutable Manitou waters were seamen. Some of the wrecks were smaller, starker. In 1878, a boatman took Aaron and Julia Sheridan and their infant child out from South Manitou for some pleasure sailing. As their two older children watched from the beach, the weather shifted and the winds came up. The sail swung the boom around, knocking Aaron, Julia, and the baby into the water. He disappeared instantly. Julia clutched her baby with one arm and the gunwale of the boat with the other, but soon was washed away. The next day, the boatman staggered up onto North Manitou. For days after, the locals watched the two Sheridan children walking the beach, wailing, waiting for the bodies to wash up: the Manitou Legend re-enacted, roles reversed.

It's hard to feel the danger and hauntedness of these waters on a bright summer morning. As the transit boat chugged over the Manitou Shoal, I was ecstatic, lost in the vast blue, the dazzle of sun on water. Maybe, off to the west, the long brown line of a freighter pulled toward Mackinac. I wasn't yet aware that my family's history is tied up with the Great Lakes. Even symbolically: the first white sailors on the Lakes appeared in a vessel called *The Griffin*. My paternal great-grandfather, William Griffin, a bushy-bearded Canadian of Welsh descent out of Montreal, was a captain on the Lakes. The details of his life seem to place him further east, along the St. Lawrence River, perhaps into Lake Ontario or Erie. But I like to wonder if he came this far, if he knew this lake too, if he spied the Manitous coming into view and chose the Passage, reading and memorizing its dangerous, complicated story. He seems to have come

from a large family that emigrated down from St. John's, Newfoundland, in the early nineteenth century, always settling in seaports. Were we a family of sailors? Are my own people among the spirits haunting these islands?

By 1839, when the Griffins were moving southwest, the Passage was already notorious enough that plans were underway for the construction of a light on the "perched dunes" of South Manitou, which rise from their limestone base over three hundred feet above the waves. The first light was replaced in 1872 by the one that still stands, 104 feet tall, a red and white tower worthy of Virginia Woolf. The morning that I stepped off the boat into the South Manitou dock, the light had only recently been abandoned by its last Coast Guard crew. At that point, in the early sixties, North Manitou, the larger island, was off limits, privately owned and sparsely inhabited, dark and mysterious across the three miles of water between the islands. Back to the east, the mainland was a dim bluegreen line broken by the white of Sleeping Bear. We hiked to our camping spot, set up camp according to counselors' instructions, and took off to explore the island—which is small, a mere three miles across, with ten miles of shore compared to North Manitou's twenty.

It was the first of a certain kind of experience I would have across northern Michigan in the course of my life—the sense of being in a place that *had once been*, a place abandoned to the quiet of a long dream, the silence behind and beyond the noise of life. A ghost place. The Upper Peninsula is full of them. We circled the lighthouse, tall and still and dark. Off the southwestern tip of the island we saw, rising eerily from the water, the top mast of the *Francisco Morazon*, run aground only a few years earlier off the southwestern tip of the island. We visited the cemeteries where the early settlers lie buried. The story persists that in one cholera epidemic, so frantic

were the healthy to get the bodies underground before the plague could devour the island that they buried some prematurely. It is said that the sound of their moans and their fingernails clawing their coffins can be heard in the wind at night.

There are calmer spirits too. Near the southwestern shore of the island is the Valley of the Giants, a stand of tremendous old-growth cedars. The rings inside some of these ancients tell a story that circles back to the time before Columbus. They sway and whisper in the wind; in the fullness of their time they fall, disintegrating into the sand within the sound of the water they have always known.

As the sun sank behind the island, I gathered firewood. I toasted Bisquick on a green stick, peeled away the black skin and ate the lukewarm dough. I speared the hotdog that had fallen into the fire and finished blackening and blistering it to taste. I washed it all down with the sweet grape or cherry potion called Bug Juice. I ran up into the brush, yanked down my shorts, and peed in the woods. When sun, after hanging low in the sky for hours, finally dropped into the water and the air went suddenly chill, I felt my sunburned skin. Around the fire I probably listened to some urban legend like The Hook. shivering and giggling maniacally to ward off the cold and my own fear. With such stories we both accommodate and hold at bay the spirits around us, the things that never were or that once were and are no more. I fell asleep listening to the primal rhythm of waves surging in, drawing back, a sound at once formidable and comforting. In the morning I ate sandy blueberry pancakes with more Bug Juice, rolled up my sleeping bag, and helped carry everything down to the dock to wait for the boat. Frank would be waiting beside the bus in Leland. We would drag our sunburned, sandy selves back into Camp, celebrities of the hour, surrounded briefly by the aura of Elsewhere.

I took one souvenir back with me—a skull, probably of a deer, that I had found bleaching on the beach on the far side of the island. Shreds of pale, desiccated wooly matter hung from its bones—brains, I was sure. It smelled acrid and dry. Some of the other girls and the counselors were grossed out, amazed that I wanted to take it. I carried it not only back to camp but back home, where my mother tolerated its presence provided that it lived in the garage. During the winter when I sniffed it, slid my fingers across its smooth bones and into its empty eye sockets, dislodging tenacious sand crystals, the sound of the water and the haunted silence of the island filled me.

My personal *memento mori*, an odd souvenir of summer camp. I wasn't a particularly morbid girl, though I have always felt a weird intimacy with death and a peacefulness in cemeteries. I think what I found on South Manitou was a place where life and death rocked into each other like crosscurrents, losing their boundaries. A "point of intersection of the timeless / With time," T. S. Eliot called it.<sup>1</sup> The haunted past of the island, the eternal present of summer, both collapsed into the whispered promise of the waves—*always, always*. Perhaps it was on the spirit island that I, standing on that charged cusp between girl and woman, first felt some inkling of that eternity lies at the quiet heart of constant change, the shifting of sand, cycles of decay and generation, the beat of great waters.

To this day, in the midst of Real Life, I have only to close my eyes and think myself there, by the waters off Sleeping Bear's shoulder, looking out on the Spirit Islands, and I am instantly at the heart of the mystery, the stasis in the motion, the changelessness within the constant change. In some way I too am lost in the Manitou Passage, caught in the shifty winds, the songs of the dead, where time is water.

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The sandy skull in the garage still hangs in my imagination. In my fifties, I struggled to learn to look steadily at that source of childhood terror, the loss of my mother, as she approached ninety. I asked her once if she feared death. I thought I probably knew the answer.

“Oh, no,” she replied quickly, firmly. “I might have some fear of the physical suffering, but death itself? No.”

“What do you think comes after? Anything?”

She thought momentarily. “I don’t know. I think . . . you merge into something . . . very *big*.”

“That’s funny,” I said, “that’s how I think of it too.” I paused. “If you can, when you’re gone, will you tell me there’s nothing to be afraid of?”

Her voice went soft. “I’m telling you *now*.”

Shortly afterward, I spent some days at a house on Lake Michigan, just where the shore curves from Point Betsie toward the mouth of the Platte River. The first night, I woke in darkness very suddenly, in that confusion and panic when you don’t know where you are. Then, from the open window, I heard it—the sound of the waves, thrashing onto the beach and dragging back. Instantly I knew a deep comfort, an engrossing safety and contentment that felt as old as childhood. I fell immediately back into a dense, peaceful sleep as profound as dark water. When I woke, the sun would be shattering to diamonds on the lake. In the far distance, the high dunes at South Manitou’s southern edge would be breasting the waves, as if the island were moving.

¹ “The Dry Salvages,” in *Four Quartets*.