

CHAPTER TWO

I Remember . . .

No one's life is really his own. It is chartered before one is born but the time does come when one is permitted to cast a vote. Then it is that the course can be altered. Before my election day was to arrive, there were to be many unhappy, fear-filled hours.

SOME JOKE—OR WAS IT?

Never had I seen anything so funny! The "old man," as the boys called Mr. Gerard, was down at the river bank trying to push his boat off the sandbar. The tide had gone out leaving the bow of the boat high and dry. The more he struggled and cursed the funnier it all seemed to me. Whereupon he took time out from his difficulties to note my glee. Up the bank he strode, mouth full of hair-raising oaths, turned me over his knee and gave me as sound a whipping as was ever administered by hand. Decidedly sobered and truly convinced I got what was coming to me, I beat a retreat to the house. I found that the boys were highly amused with the incident.

NEW HOUSE ON LAND

We now lived in a large house on the banks of the river. The raft and blue stone tanks were tied in

front of the house at the river bank. The raft served also as a boat dock. For a poor gill-net fisherman the big fourteen-room house was too ambitious an undertaking. The house was never completed; in fact we lived in only part of it. Gerards still made their main living from fishing but in common with most of the neighbors they kept a cow. Only one of our neighbors was a prosperous dairy farmer. Each night we could hear the chug, chug of their milking machine. The rest of the community eaked out an existence by mixed interests in farming, logging and fishing. With fish and game so plentiful it took little to live but it was hard to make that little.

NIGHTS ALONE OR ON THE RIVER

Childhood memories—what do they bring me? Even now a sense of fear and dread. The wail of a distant train blowing at a country crossing makes me think of nights alone in the big, empty house on the river. The Canadian National Railway tracks were fifty yards from our back door. When the train was still two miles away, the house would begin to shake and every window in it would rattle. When the engineer blew the whistle for the crossing, every one of the dogs would howl. We had housekeepers most of the time but there were times when I had to be left alone all night, since the men had to fish at night. Countless times I pleaded with my foster Father to take me on the boat with him rather than leave me in the big house alone. Through the hours of the night he would travel up and down the mist-laden river, casting his net again and again. Curled up in a blanket on the

open deck over the fish box, lay the sleeping form of his adopted child.

HOUSEKEEPERS, WHISKEY AND FITS

Sometimes I was boarded with the neighbors and sometimes we had housekeepers, some of whom were heavy on the bottle and none too careful of their language. There were good and pleasant memories of course: the joy of catching brook trout in a nearby stream, the expeditions to the marsh on cranberry hunts and the devotion of my own Cocker Spaniel puppy. But the good things are overclouded by recollections of an abusive, alcoholic foster Father and dreadful drunken brawls that filled my heart with terror.

True enough, the "old man" later on laid off the bottle almost entirely on account of the fits he began taking. When in one of them he would lose his equilibrium both physically and mentally. It is hard to say which I feared most, the drunkenness or the sickness.

PUPPIES FOR PLAYMATES

Most little girls play with dolls—I played with dogs, several of them. Fuzz, the three-legged terrier had skillfully nursed herself back to health after losing one leg when she was run over by a railroad train. They carried her off the railroad track to die. To everyone's surprise she gnawed the projecting leg bone smooth and licked the wound until it healed. Then there was Daisy, the Water Spaniel, who was such

a good bird dog, and a couple of lanky Blood Hounds that the boys had trained for tracking deer. Besides the regular adult dog population, which included a variety of mongrels, batches of puppies arrived regularly. Most of these were put in a sack weighted with a rock and thrown into the river when I was not looking.

These dogs were fed on big pots of fish cooked especially for them and on what was left of the deer and bear carcasses after the humans finished with them. At feeding time I stood guard demanding that each dog be given a fair share. In return for my concern all of the dogs followed me to school every morning. The teacher did not like dogs on the school ground so at a certain place in the three-mile journey through the woods I would turn and wave the dogs home. They did not always go home though and could be heard yelping through the woods, hot on the trail of a rabbit.

THINGS A BOY SHOULD KNOW

In the years before I turned thirteen, I had learned a lot of things: how to run a trap line—that was worth learning for one muskrat skin brought one dollar and a quarter; how to make a sling shot and shoot a bird off a tree; how to load and fire a rifle or a shotgun. Oh yes, not to neglect mechanical skills, the boys had taught me to run the gas boat. They also taught me to paddle the canoe noiselessly, Indian style.