



Jawbone Lake

Aaron Kreuter

It wasn't just ice that carved out the land around Jawbone Lake, but fire, bucking plates, unfathomable eons of geological time. But ice was the last great cataclysm, pulling back ten thousand years ago with scraping fingers and heaving boulders, lakes of impossible size draining through rivers of unimaginable force. After the ice, a creek ran down from the mountains, wending through brown and green forests of pine and beech and maple and oak. There were deer and wolf and fox and beaver and moose. There were passenger pigeons flocking in the millions. Everything was alive, alive, alive, riotous in birth and decay, slathered in leaf-shadow. And in this abundance lived the Haudenosaunee people. A village of one of the five nations stood in the valley the creek ran through. The people of the village hunted and foraged, grew corn and beans and squash, sent representatives to distant Oneida to take part in the decisions of the confederacy, lived long lives in their longhouses and on the land. The earth sometimes moves slowly; at other times, it moves quickly: the people of the village heard of Europeans, saw their goods and tools, many years before they met them. They were a powerful people, the Haudenosaunee, for nearly two centuries they held the balance of power between their new European neighbours and their ever-expanding domains. The Haudenosaunee taught the visitors many things, some of which they were not ready to learn. The Europeans and their colonies grew, shifted, advanced, retreated, warred with each other, and suddenly there was a new people, a new nation: the Americans. America. The Americans wanted the valley and all its lumber and meat and mineral; they wanted everything. So, they took it. They cut the trees. They killed the animals. They burned the corn fields. The people of the village were

starved, murdered, squeezed out. So they left the valley, some across the Niagara to what would become Canada, others to reserves; for now, their lives and their resistance moved elsewhere. Before the last group of villagers left, they stood at the lip of the valley and watched the clouds melt into an iron wall. One day, they knew, the wall would crumble. For now, though, the valley and its creek and its shrinking forests and animal life were draped in the flag America. On June 30, 1882—here we are, the time of dates—the creek that ran through the valley was dammed by the American Corps of Engineers. The power generated from the dammed water was needed to power the mill. The dam flooded the valley, creating a lake. The lake was enlarged through further damming two more times: on July 8, 1891, and on June 25, 1903, giving the lake its current dimensions. It was the mill owner's niece, Susanna Clarke, who first likened the lake's shape to that of the human jaw.

Jawbone Lake. For the first two decades of its existence, there were no permanent structures on its shores; it remained a simple by-product of industrial need. The shoreline ecosystem changed. Dead trees rotted underwater. Fishing camps popped up. The old growth was cut down. Cottages sprouted. In winter, ice blocks the size of houses were sawed out of the lake and either carted away or kept in the icehouse for summer use. Roads were hacked into the trees. The water turned turbines which generated electricity which powered the mills which processed the lumber which rode down the Erie Canal which gave men jobs and money to send their families to the lake for the summer where they would take the trains on weekends to join them. In the winter, human silence. A deer walking across the frozen lake. A rabbit killed by a wolf.

Was there ever not a lake here?

When Magdalen Smith was born in 1946, her parents owned a half acre on the southeast side of the lake, in Hackman Grove, named after the farm that used to abut the lake, one of eight “groves” that made up the lake community. The Smiths had a small trailer: a kitchen and sitting area in its nose, a narrow hallway with two tiny bedrooms and a bathroom branching off it. When Magda was a teenager, her father sold the trailer and built a cabin, sourcing and bringing in the wood himself. She spent July and August of every year of her life until she was eighteen there, happy summers of swimming and socials and regattas and biking and community breakfasts at

the old Hackman farmhouse. All of her friends and her friends' parents were like her and her parents; their lives revolved around the factories, the church, the kitchen table, and, in the summer, the lake. When Magda's mother died of a heart attack in 1965, it was as if Magda popped awake from a dream. Everywhere she looked she saw decadence, boredom, complacency. She had to get out of upstate New York, and fast. She said goodbye to her absent father and hitched to San Francisco, was swept up in a new river of freedom and music and protest and experimentation and people, people, people of all kinds. The world—apparently—was a startling and expansive place, and she wanted all of it, a dam releasing untold quantities of water. She was a part of something larger than herself, the country was changing, and on the other shore was nothing but promise, hope, goodness in all its forms.

That first exhilarating year in the Bay area was the high point, the crest. She fell in love with a sound engineer named Wrigley; they met at an Acid Experiment, both of them outfitted in beads and deerskin clothes, his body visibly vibrating, tuned into a frequency only Magda possessed the receptors for. Three weeks later, Wrigley moved into Magda's apartment, turning the spare bedroom into a recording studio. They spent most of their time in Magda's bed, which was just a mattress on the floor, or doing drugs and recording songs, Wrigley putting massive amounts of echo and reverb on Magda's voice. Wrigley spoke constantly about sonic vibrations, a habit Magda found endearing; soon enough, she was noticing how the maple at the end of their street sounded differently than the pine trees by the water. They both badly wanted babies, but after six months of trying, Magda was still not pregnant, and neither had enough money for fertility treatment. As Wrigley announced during their one and only (and final) fight, her vibrations were just off. Wrigley packed up his sound equipment, his Quicksilver Messenger Service poster, and left in the middle of the night. First her mother, and now him. That was the abrupt end of Magda's ability to hear the secret vibrations of things, places, people. The following decades a series of failed relationships, failed careers, failed hopes and desires. Eventually, Magda's inability to get pregnant and searing pain during her periods sent her to seek medical attention; she would spend her thirties in and out of hospital. She visited home rarely, the lake even less. Not an easy life, not quite—she told herself—a hard life: more like a slow closing, the visible light spectrum shrinking down to a hard little nub.

Magda's father died in the early eighties. After the sparsely attended funeral — mostly friends from the factory who had managed to outlive him — Magda visited the lake. Seeing its once familiar blue rippled water, something hard turned over inside her. She moved back east; with the inheritance money, she tore down the old cabin, built a modern, two-level camp. She rented a studio apartment in Albany, worked as a bank teller, spent the summers on Jawbone, easing every year a little further into her bitterness, her envy, her near-solitude. After losing her job in the 2011 recession, Magda retired, broke her lease, and moved full-time to the lake. The only year-round resident. She knew what people said about her: she was flighty, she was bitchy, she was nosy, she talked too much, had both a west coast laziness and an east coast elitiness. Well, so be it. She still had her friends on the lake — Helen, also alone, a widower, Ralph and Sandy the next grove over — people whose parents were there in the early days, people whose grandparents could remember the last time the ditch wall was seen, before the water level was permanently raised, people who had a true connection to Jawbone Lake and wanted to see it maintained, unlike some of the new residents, who didn't care for the history of the lake, for the soul of the place, who just wanted to suck the life out of it, pollute the clean waters with their fancy boats and move on. Like leaches. Like parasites.

No, Magda did not care for most of her neighbours. At this point of her life, she didn't care for much. The one thing Magda loved unconditionally was the lake; it was the sole thing that kept her afloat. Her time away seemed a decades-long blunder she was going to spend the rest of her life rectifying. The solitude of the winter, the spicy reek of fall, the wet glow of spring, the frenzied bustle of summer, though the noise of children playing and laughing often sent her spiralling into afternoons of depression; some days she'd hide in her house full of pity and loathing until the evening bugs came out and she'd walk the quiet trails between groves. Yes, she loved living on the lake, but money was tight, and getting tighter. After the property taxes and heating bills, some weeks she'd survive off hot lemon water and cans of beans. She was getting desperate. Helen knew somebody willing to buy Magda's camp, at a decent enough price, but selling it would be the end of her life as she knew it; she might as well be dead. There must be something else. Watching television one night, some run-of-the-mill sitcom

she appreciated for the white noise more than anything else, she heard somebody mention Airbnb. She looked it up on her ancient, coughing-and-beeping computer. Here was something she could do to make some extra money! She would move into the basement, which, in a fortuitous bolt of foresight, already had its own entrance, kitchen, and bathroom. She had Helen help her take photos and set up the listing. There was six weeks til summer. The high season.

The first guests were a quiet couple, retirees. They woke up before dawn and were gone on their bikes the whole day. A lovely couple. They stayed a week. The second guests rented it for the weekend to throw a graduation party. Magda lay in her bed, listening to the sounds of revelry above her, disgusted, ready to take her listing down. Cleaning up the next morning, she filled three garbage bags with beer cans. The third guests were a family from Canada, young parents with two young kids, as well as the young woman's middle-aged parents. They were renting for a week.

The young couple arrived first, in a shiny black SUV with a bumper of stickers. Magda strode down the lawn to greet them; they looked surprised to find her there. The woman, whose name was Beth, had thick black hair, the infant strapped to her chest. The man, Jeremy, was tall and lanky, with thinning hair and intelligent brown eyes. Magda gave them and the toddler—who was only interested in her sticker book—the grand tour. She explained how the lake worked, how Hackman Grove didn't have a shared beach, but right down the hill there Magda had a small piece of lakefront, a small dock, how she'd be downstairs if they needed anything. She showed them: the first bedroom, which had a queen-sized bed, light switches, a window with a complicated latch; the second bedroom, its airbed, the light switches, the blankets in the closet; the third bedroom; the linen closet; both bathrooms; the sunroom, a great place to eat their meals; the screened-in porch, a few holes patched with duct tape. She demonstrated how the windows worked, how the doors locked, how to turn on the shower faucet, the sink faucet. In the kitchen, she opened every drawer, she showed them the fridge, with some food and beer leftover from the graduation party. She explained each pot and pan, its providence, its use. Here's the coffee maker. You fill it with water here, make sure it has the right amount of beans here, change the filters, which are in the drawer right here. The filters can go in the compost. Here's the microwave. Here's the toaster oven. Here's

the corn cob plates. Here's the elastics, some batteries, some clothespins. Here's the baking sheet. Be careful with this one, it's been in the family since the great war. The baby was crying, hitting her mother in the chest. The toddler was who knows where. The young couple kept giving each other meaningful glances. Magda walked with Jeremy—the wife staying at the house with the children—down to the lake. “This is your only access to the water. It's pretty weedy for the first twenty feet or so, but opens up soon after. Feel free to take out the peddle boat.”

“Is it true the lake is manmade?” Jeremy asked, surveying the choppy water with interest, a pacifier forgotten in his hand.

Magda's eyes lit up. “Yes, indeed! It was dammed in the 1880s to power the mill. My family has been on it for almost a century. You should have seen the roads back then. If it rained, you hightailed it home, or you'd be stuck here for a while.”

Jeremy looked out over the lake. “Crazy to think,” he said. “This world's a real trip, eh.” Magda flinched; did people still talk like it was the sixties? Beth was calling Jeremy from the porch. Jeremy made an apologetic face and ran back up the hill.

An hour later, when the grandparents arrived, Magda came back up the lawn and gave the whole tour again. The bedrooms, the light switches, the drawers. “Oh! One thing I forgot to show the others was that in this room there's the modem, and the phone. It's one phonenumber for the whole house. Feel free to use it.” Magda looked at the two Canadians. They were around her age; the mother had the same thick black hair as the daughter, the father a big nose and eyes that saw and assigned value to everything. “You folks are Jewish, aren't you?” The father gave a dark look before saying yes. The mother looked like somebody had stabbed her. What was the big deal? Magda knew plenty of Jewish people back west. Why be so ashamed of your lineage? “Mom, will you come help me unpack the baby's things?” Magda saw herself out.

That night, Magda went upstairs. She had forgotten to tell them about the blinds. She walked right into the sunroom while the Canadian family was loudly eating dinner. The grandfather flinched. “I just wanted to let you know that if you lower the blinds at this time of day, it'll keep the sun from heating the place up.”

“Okay, thanks.” They looked at her, expectant. Magda noticed the toddler was eating baby food straight from a jar.

“Is it true that you all own the lake?” Jeremy asked. Beth shot him a look.

“Yes, the Jawbone Lake Association owns the lake, which is very rare. Everybody pays a yearly fee to test the water quality. The lake, as you can imagine, is very dear to us.”

“This world’s a real trip, eh Ella?” Jeremy said, tickling his daughter, who squealed with laughter.

Beth’s father sighed loudly.

Instead of leaving, Magda went to the back bedroom to make sure the phone was set up properly. She had tried to call Helen this afternoon and the line was dead. Sure enough, somebody had unplugged the cord from the jack. Jeremy and Beth’s clothes were strewn about the room, as well as an obscene amount of baby paraphernalia. The bed was unmade, the closet doors open; the basinet was the only piece of calm in the room. Magda stopped. She could hear the Canadians talking about her. “Why does she think she can just waltz in here unannounced?” “This is our cabin for the week, not a bed and breakfast!” “Mama, what’s a bed and breakfast?” “I don’t know, she’s not that bad.” “Jeremy!” Magda scoffed and went downstairs, shutting the front door loudly enough for them to hear.

The week rolled on. The Canadians seemed to be having a good time. The whole family went on long walks on the roads and trails between this grove and the next. Magda watched Beth excitedly point out a bald eagle to the toddler, who put out her hands and ran around her smiling mother, calling out “you make me happy!” repeatedly. Magda tried to give them space, but accidentally walked right in through the front door a couple of times and had to go into the back bedroom more than once to replug the phone jack. At night, she sat at her computer, one window open to her Airbnb calendar, another to her bank account. If the summer kept up like this, she was going to be alright. She would make it through the winter, and then some.

It would be worth the hassle.

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Magda pulled into the driveway after a visit to town for potting soil, to find Ralph and Sandy waiting for her on the lawn. Ralph's arms were crossed, his wispy white hair dishevelled. "Your, *guests*, are over at *our* beach," he said. Helen had told Magda that some of the lake people were unhappy with Magda, and they could go to hell, but people in her grove were definitely not supposed to use a different grove's beach; that was a camp association rule, strictly enforced—hadn't Magda made it clear to them? And with the July Fourth weekend coming up, Ralph and Sandy were already jittery about unwanted visitors flooding the lake.

"Oh, dear. I'll go retrieve them." Magda left her bags of soil in her truck and walked over to the MacConnell Grove beach at a brisk pace. When she got there, the Canadians were already packing up; both Jeremy and Beth's dad were laden with beach bags, towels, a cooler. The hot air was thick with tension, the lingering tautness of confrontation. The other families, all of whom Magda knew, were carefully avoiding eye contact. Only a young boy was crying that his new friend had to leave.

"I told you that your only access to the water is from my property," Magda said, walking beside the family back towards their cabin, trying to sound calm, the tall trees throwing shadows.

"Did you? It must have gotten lost in the shuffle," Beth's father said.

"The beach is nicer over there!" the toddler stated emphatically. Probably mimicking her parents.

"Why do you have it set up that the phone in our room has to be plugged in for the phone to work at all?" Beth asked. "It's woken the baby at least two times."

"That's just how it's always been, my dear," Magda said. Magda noticed that the toddler's mouth and face were filthy. If Beth was so unhappy about the ringing phone, why not just change rooms?

"Do you want a wipe for your child's face?"

Beth glared at her.

"What a trip," Jeremy said, laughing nervously.

That night, Magda stood outside the front door, listening to the Canadians talking as they played cards in the sunroom.

"Can you believe those old people ratted us out to Magda?"

"Just as Ella was making a friend."

“Fucking Nazis. Why can’t we just enjoy the water!”

“Imagine what would have happened if we were Black.”

“Or Muslim.”

“Are you going to defend them, too, Jeremy?”

“Me? No. That was ugly. I’ve never felt so unwanted. Talk about gated communities.”

“Europe 1935 in upstate New York.”

“We should have known after seeing all those confederate flags on the drive here. Didn’t I say, sweetie, ‘confederate flags, here in upstate New York?’”

“This world’s a real trip, isn’t it,” Beth said sarcastically.

From outside the door, a noise.

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Magda exited the basement to find Jeremy sitting on the dock, drinking a beer. He was alone. She went over to join him. As Magda had told Helen on Helen’s porch yesterday, Jeremy was the first young person in a long time Magda felt comfortable talking to. He was of a different time. *Hubba hubba* Helen barked, sipping her tea. (Beth—well, Beth was just like many mothers Magda had known, haughty and entitled, both too self-absorbed and too unaware at one and the same time. No, Jeremy was too good for her. Something she did not mention to Helen.)

“There’s a picture of you in our room from San Fran from what looks like the sixties,” Jeremy said after smiling hello.

“Yes. I was there.”

“I can’t even imagine what that must have been like.” He took a swig of his beer, the brown bottle catching the summer sun. He had a strong jaw, Magda noticed. He fit in perfectly on the lake.

“It was a very special time. We really felt like we were on the verge of something new. It ended up, of course, just being more of the same.”

“What a trip.” Jeremy laughed to himself, like he had just had a great idea. “Hey. Do you still partake in the psychedelic experience?”

Magda scoffed, meaner than she had intended. “I haven’t done anything like that in a long, long time. Sometimes when I’m up here in the winter, the only human for miles, I remember what it was like back then.”

“I always carry an emergency supply of hallucinogens,” Jeremy said, shifting the beer bottle from one hand to another. “A holdover from my pre-parental days, I suppose. But hey, you never know when the mood will strike.”

“You crossed the border with it?”

“Oh yeah, it’s hidden away in our kitchen supplies. Never been a problem.”

“I can’t have children,” Magda heard herself saying. “I had a hysterectomy when I was thirty-five.”

Jeremy watched her face, worry creasing his eyes.

“I am sorry to hear that.”

For once, Magda didn’t have anything to say.

“When my parents first arrived here,” she said eventually, pointing across the lake to the northwest, “there was only one road, which ended at the Roberts’. Old man Roberts would boat you out to your camp for a nickel.”

Jeremy didn’t say anything, took a drink.

“I was reading about the Indigenous inhabitants of the area,” he said after a while. “The Haudenosaunee. They were violently pushed off this land. Do you have any stories about that?” It came out nonchalant and chatty enough, but Magda sensed an edge to Jeremy’s voice.

“That was before my time, I’m afraid.”

“I fucking hate settler colonialism so much,” Jeremy announced. Magda had no idea what he was talking about, but he seemed passionate enough about it. Sonic vibrations.

That night, Magda stayed clear of the upstairs. She didn’t need to hear Jeremy telling the family the new gossip about the barren lady who was renting them the cabin. She dug up an old cassette tape, Quicksilver Messenger Service, and popped it in the stereo.

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It was the family's last night there. Magda had a phone meeting the next morning with the bank, to ask for more time with a payment, and wanted to make sure the phone was plugged in. She went upstairs. Jeremy was in the back bedroom putting the baby to sleep; the rest of the family were sitting on the couches, Beth dressed up in a black dress and earrings, her lips painted red, the toddler sleeping with her head in Beth's lap. Magda politely said she needed to make sure the phone was working. As the words passed her lips, Magda felt something in the room break. It was as if she had sprayed the family with a firehose. Beth jumped up, shocking the toddler awake, who started crying. Beth's eyes were slits, her mouth a snarl. She commenced to whisper-yell at Magda. "My *baby* is trying to *sleep in there*. You cannot go in. We have reservations tonight. Our first night just the two of us in who knows how long. I don't fucking care what important call you have to make, you should have thought of that before leaving a *freaking phone system from the forties* in a bedroom that is not even yours right now!"

Well, she never. Magda stared, her mouth ajar, before turning on her heel and walking out.

The family packed up and left in the early morning. Magda, during her clean of the place — there was a week before the next guests would arrive — found a small bag of dried mushrooms on the dresser, next to the photo of her in Golden Gate Park. "FOR MAGDA, FOR NEXT WINTER," Jeremy had written on a piece of masking tape slanted across the bag. Magda put the mushrooms in her night table drawer in her downstairs bedroom.

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Halfway through that first summer of being an Airbnb host, Magda looked at the reviews for the first time.

"The place is beautiful, but the host is a nuisance."

"The fridge was full of half-eaten food."

"She literally showed us EVERY SINGLE drawer, and they were filled with string, matchbooks, who knows what other kind of shit. Clean your place lady!"

“The listing does not at all make clear that the host will be on the property. And, oh boy, is she ever *on* the property.”

“The air conditioning broke, and Magda came into the place uninvited ten times a day while it was being fixed, which it never was. I doubt the AC ever actually worked.”

“It was like entering an Alice Munro story down there. A sad, lonely woman trying her hand at running an income property.”

“It’s been weeks and I still expect Magda to come bounding into my apartment at all hours to explain how the breaker works.”

“WOULD NOT RECOMMEND.”

In her long life, this was far from the worst rejection Magda had received. Still, it stung. It fucking stung. She puffed up with loathing. People these days! What did they expect? She wasn’t a bloody hotelier! These city folks just aren’t used to the rhythms of life out here, the hospitality. The *community*. Even in the dead of winter Magda doesn’t lock her door!

People these days.

She took down her listing.

#

It wasn’t for a few winters until Magda ate Jeremy’s magic mushrooms. She had started renting the upstairs house on a full-season basis, to Helen’s niece and nephew. It was just enough money to survive through the winter. Most summer evenings she would sit in the screened-in-porch with Helen and her lodgers, discussing the fallen nature of the world, the sad state of national affairs, the immigration crisis at the border, everybody and their grievances agitating for attention. When she first moved to Jawbone Lake, Magda would be the only one there for the four months of winter, maybe the occasional ice-fisher, but that, too, was beginning to change. Ever since catching a documentary on the building of the Erie Canal in the last days of autumn—363 miles from the Hudson to Lake Erie dug out with shovels, spades, and pickaxes, forever remaking upstate New York and opening the interior for American settlement—she had been thinking about the lake’s past. The thousands of tree stumps that surely still crowded the bottom of

the lake, grave markers for the forgotten dead, everybody who had lived on the lake, made it what it was, all forgotten. New thoughts. Hard thoughts. End of life thoughts. She was cleaning out her bedroom drawers when she found the mushrooms. "FOR MAGDA, FOR NEXT WINTER." Might as well; perhaps it would snap her out of her morbidity. She brewed them into her chamomile tea and drank it early one February morning. She bundled up, strapped on her snowshoes, and walked out onto the frozen lake.

It was a crisp, cold day. When she had left the sky was silvery blue, but as she approached the middle of the lake it started to snow. She stopped, her snowshoes biting into the ice, the snow coming down hard and bountiful. She closed her eyes. She was floating. She was coming up. What did they used to call it? *Turning on*. She was turning on. Yes, she was definitely on. The frozen floor of the lake was rising, rising, rising. She raised her own head toward the sky, put her hands up, let the snow fall on her. She was a child again, aglow with wonder. She saw it clearly, felt it in her aching bones: the certain pulse of freeze and unfreeze, the blinks of nocturnal eyes, the horrors that had been committed under this frozen bowl that she was standing on, that she had spent her whole life avoiding. To think, a stupid cement dam was all that was keeping the world together. What a trip. Her eyes still closed, the snow wet on her face, that's when she saw it: the dam breaking, finally giving in to all that pounding pressure, the lake rushing through, rushing out, the lake closing, like a healing wound, like an eye going to sleep, like a baby's fontanelle, until there was nothing there, nothing but the original stream, until the forests came back, the trees, the animals, everything.

She came rushing back to the always-eroding present. The trees iced in snow. The cabins devoid of life. The ice, which had come in mere weeks ago. The falling snow laying a blanket of newness in every direction. Her eyes open now, her snowshoes clinging to the hard, unforgiving surface of the planet, she feels what it must have been like. The ice coming in. The lake holding its breath. That exact moment where the waves cease, and there is solidity. There is calm.



AARON KREUTER'S most recent book, the short story collection *Rubble Children*, came out in summer 2024 with University of Alberta Press. A novel, *Lake Burntshore*, is forthcoming from ECW Press in April 2025.