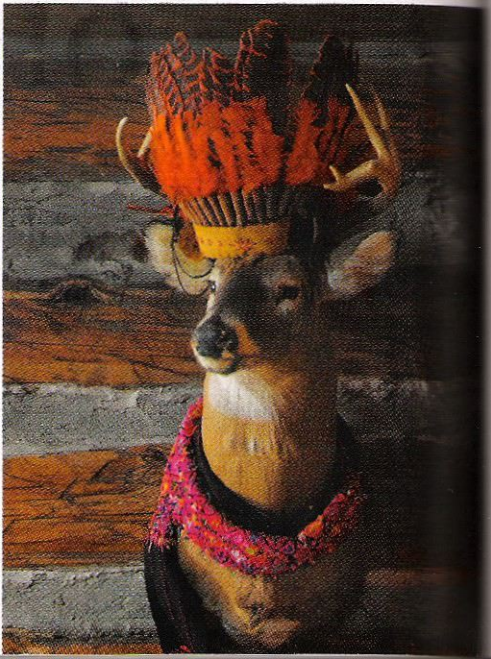
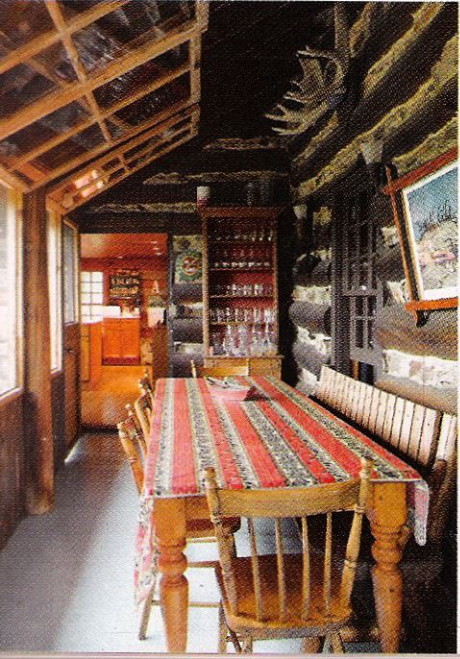
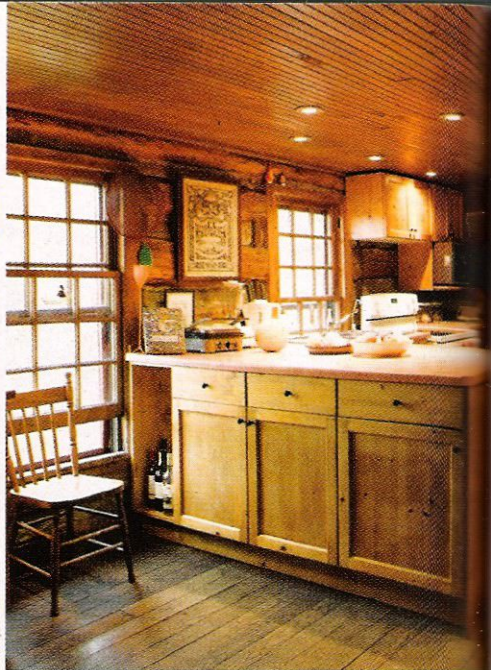


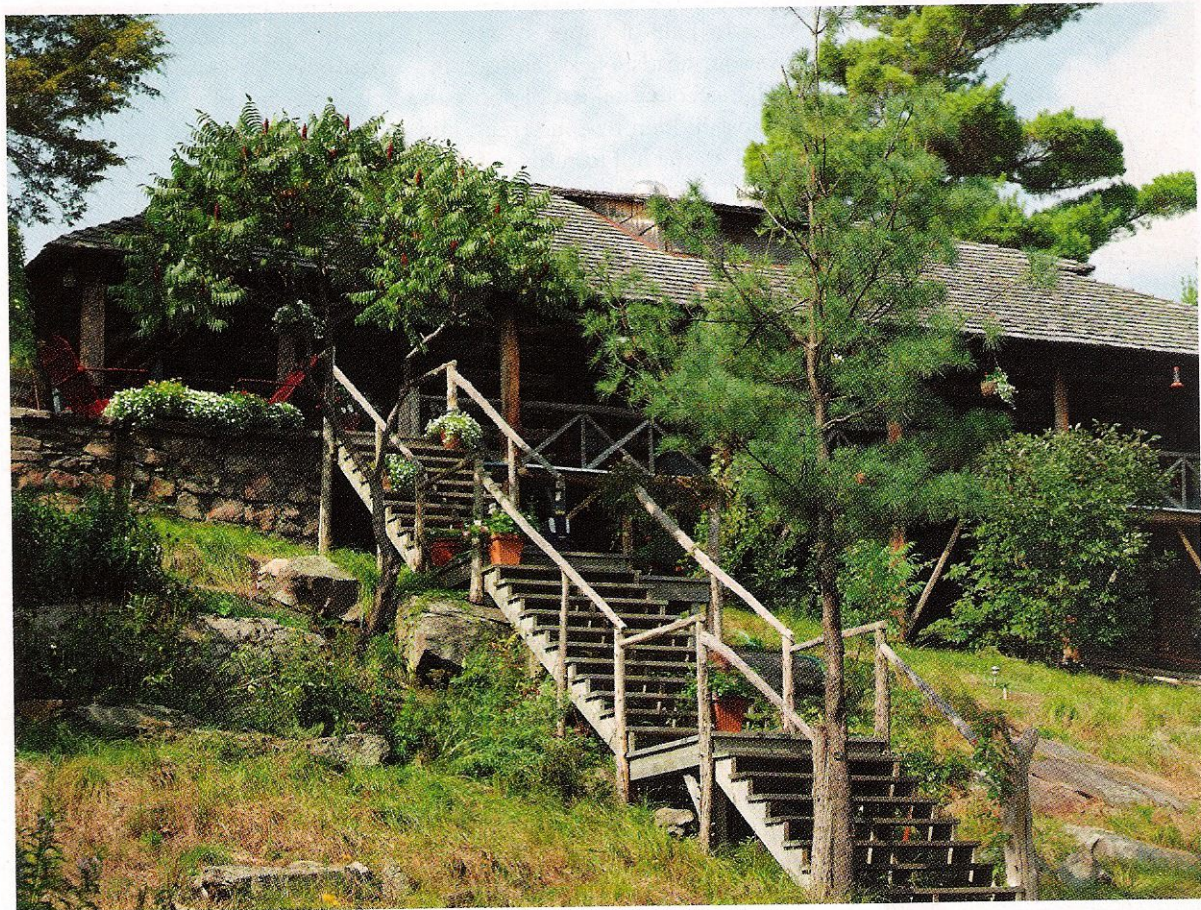


# The boys of summer

How I enticed my teenaged sons to  
rebuild a log cabin in dire need of love

BY CHARLOTTE GRAY PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREJ KOPAC





Ever since I arrived in Canada from England 28 years ago, I've noticed that houses are where people do the serious business of living, and cottages are where families have fun. Cottage anecdotes and memories are always suffused with laughter and nostalgia for long, lazy sunlit days. Maybe it's hokey (I've certainly seen cataclysmic cottage meltdowns), but when our three sons entered their teens, my husband, George Anderson, and I decided to look for a cottage of our own. We wanted a place that our noisy teenagers, as they morphed into independent adults, could take for granted as their own retreat, a permanent entry point to the great Canadian tradition of summer togetherness. A cottage

would present new opportunities for family time at a moment when the boys were about to leave home for universities elsewhere.

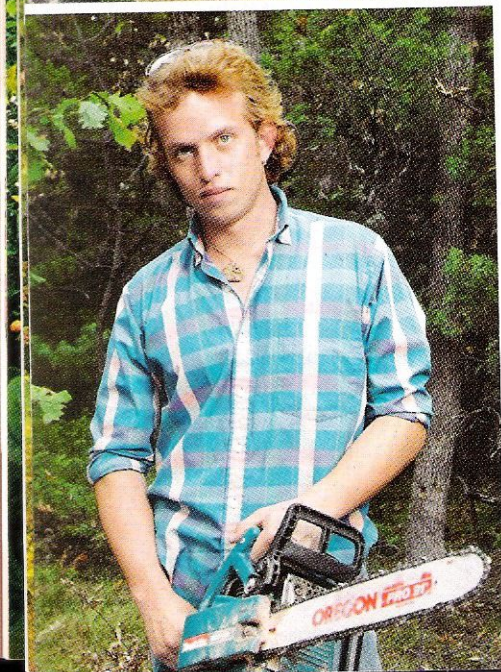
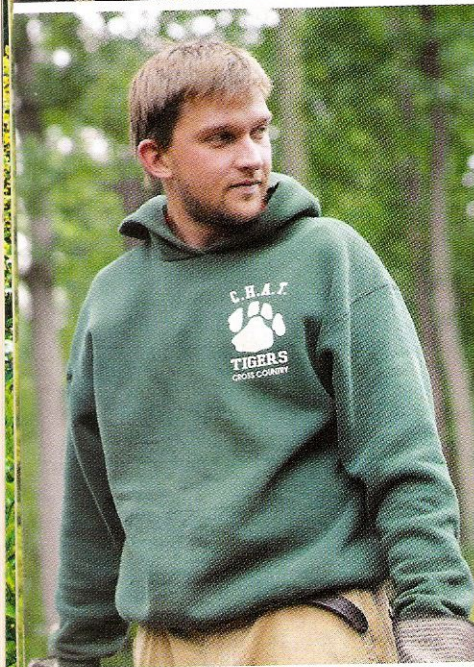
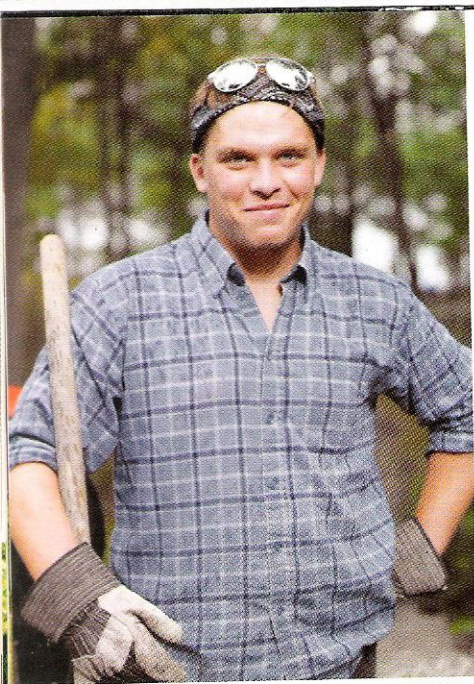
So in 2000, George and I set out to find a cottage while the boys were off at summer camp, paddling down northern Ontario rivers. Our three sons have much in common: They share a love of the wilderness, a great sense of humour and a wonderful appetite for life. But their personalities are so different that strangers often don't believe they're related, and there are regular rumbles between them. Alex, then 19, is the least extroverted and always happy to bury his head in a book. Nick, then 17, is boisterous and energetic and usually surrounded by friends laughing as he mimics

the comedian du jour. Oliver, then 14, is musical and easygoing; he likes to get up late and immediately put on a CD or pick up his guitar. We needed somewhere with space for each of them, not to mention George and his penchant for renovation, me and my need for a summer writing place, and our dog, Willie, and his passion for chasing squirrels. By the time the boys arrived home, we had a surprise for them. "Guess what!" I announced. "We've bought an island!"

At first, they were startled. Nick said, "How dare you buy it without us?" But a week later, when we took possession of Powhatan Lodge on Pine Island, they were sold in a nanosecond. As we drew up to the boat dock, Alex gasped >

Opposite page, centre: Charlotte, at her cottage writing desk.

This page: A dramatic staircase leads up to the cottage from the swimming dock.



when a pair of ospreys swooped over our heads. Nick glimpsed the lodge's cedar-shake roof above us, almost hidden by pine trees, and raced up the hill towards it. Oliver asked for the fourth time, "You mean, the whole thing is ours?" Then he set off to explore the overgrown, neglected island.

The lodge itself was a century-old Adirondack-style fishing lodge built of huge logs, wrapped round by a wide veranda and badly in need of attention. It is perched high on a massive shoulder of Canadian Shield granite that rears up out of Newboro Lake, 110 kilometres southwest of Ottawa. Pine Island is one of dozens of islands on Newboro Lake, but it is hidden away in a remote area with few other cottages in sight. Only the loons and a few bass fishermen disturbed its tranquility – until we arrived.

Looking back over the past seven summers, I had no idea how much work was going to be involved. The lodge was elegant but uncomfortable: It needed an indoor toilet (you had to scramble down a rocky slope to a separate bathroom), a modern kitchen (it still featured its original knee-high sink) and a fireplace that produced heat rather than clouds of smoke. And although Pine Island was a glorious hunk of Tom Thomson landscape, it was wild. There was nowhere to swim, and all food and furniture had to be hauled up a treacherous, stony path. The most immediate problem, however, was that if you stood on the lodge's wonderful veranda, all you could see was a wall of trees. The island had been logged when the lodge was built in 1907, but since then, oaks, ironwoods, beech, maples, red cedars and magnificent white pines had grown unchecked.

George knew there was a lot to

do, but he relished the challenge. And once our sons realized that the challenge involved really great stuff (chainsaws, a garden-utility vehicle, a power washer), serious building projects and unlimited supplies of beer, they threw themselves into it. So did their friends. On our inaugural Pine Island weekend, the chainsaws never stopped. Roar . . . "Timber!" . . . Crash. Roar . . . "Timber!" . . . Crash. Within a few days, we could actually see the lake from the lodge.

Our summers quickly developed a special rhythm. In May and June, one or two of the boys stayed on the island, along with a couple of friends, working on projects. We paid their friends who came to work, particularly Alex's friend Andrew Skidmore, who boasts not just enthusiasm, but also advanced carpentry skills. George discussed with the workforce what needed doing, and the guys got on with it during weekdays while George and I worked in Ottawa. The boys would leave for camp in early July, and George and I would move into the lodge until Labour Day. We carried on with weekend visits through to October, when either two or three boys rejoined us for the Thanksgiving rituals: stuffing ourselves with turkey and closing up the cottage.

Unsupervised, our sons have acquired many impressive skills. They have all become proficient carpenters, painters and chainsaw operators. They can mix cement, level roads and build stone walls and steps. Each son developed his favourite kind of project. Alex, and Andrew, enjoyed construction. Their first achievement was to clear some waterfront and build a swimming dock with an elaborate deck behind it. Nick has a good eye for landscaping: He is our man

This page: Charlotte's three sons (from top), Oliver, Alex and Nick.

Opposite page: The cottage's main room is dominated by an impressive stone fireplace, a gathering place for the family.



with a chainsaw, and he has shaped and filled several flower beds. Oliver likes making furniture: He created a rustic bench, and with his gang he erected a lych-gate over the path to the swimming dock. Each of them now looks around the island with a proprietor's eye, noting how their creations are surviving in the Canadian climate.

It wasn't simply our sons' muscles that made Pine Island a perfect fit for our family. It was also their wholehearted interest in the island's wild-life, which easily replaced their favourite city distractions: computer games, *Family Guy* and MSN-ing their friends. Concerns that the island had neither a telephone land line nor a television proved unfounded. In the city, they usually went in different directions with their buddies. At the lake, they spent time together, working or

fishing, birdwatching or just sitting around a campfire. The rules were always different at Pine Island. It didn't matter if they partied late or their music was loud; there were no neighbours to complain, and no danger of anybody driving after too many beers. So I relaxed, and enjoyed them enjoying their friends and their freedom. Transitional issues that parents often face as their offspring become adults (the double-bed question, the alcohol-consumption challenge) never really came up. We trusted them. As they worked together, they got to know each other in new ways and learned to tolerate each other's idiosyncrasies, whether it's Alex's messiness, Nick's early wake-up calls or Oliver's taste in music. You can always find some privacy on the island.

The most ambitious project, planned by Andrew and Alex and com-

pleted over three summers by the whole team of sons, friends and relatives, was an exquisite little sauna cabin. The boys collaborated as they built stone foundations, framed the building, built a brick firewall, installed the wood-burning stove and shingled the roof. The completed sauna lengthened our swimming season by two months, as we hopped into a frigid lake in early May or late September, then retreated into the sauna's warmth.

But tragedy struck last Labour Day. George woke at 5:30 a.m. to hear, above the noise of a torrential rainstorm, a strange crackling sound. He stepped out onto the porch, then let out a horrified wail: "The sauna is in flames!" One hundred metres away, our beautiful sauna blazed away in the darkness, the leaping fire illuminating the >



The sauna, lovingly built, was destroyed by fire last year.

surrounding pine trees. Within 40 minutes, what had taken three years to build was a pile of ashes and charred two-by-fours. We all stood there in the pouring rain, devastated by the disaster.

"We will rebuild," George announced firmly. Our collective efforts at the island have given our family a strong sense of group purpose and resilience. We could handle this loss, though it was a particular blow for Alex and Andrew. Recriminations were pointless; there was no obvious cause of the fire.

Since 2000, there has been non-stop activity during our summers on Pine Island. Besides the physical action, we've experienced the delicate renegotiation of family roles as the kids grow up. I've seen my own role evolve from protective parent to affectionate observer. (Along, of course, with the stuff I don't want to let go of, namely being chief meal provider.) I've watched my sons re-evaluate themselves and gain new insights into

each other as they worked together in a family enterprise. I've been impressed by my husband's ability to step back as he encouraged his sons to take charge.

Our cottage has become deeply woven into the tapestry of our family life. Will Alex, Nick and Oliver ever live in the same city, or even the same country? And if they do, will they (and any future partners) stay in close touch with each other? I'm not sure, but I am sure that Pine Island will continue to provide family glue. It occupies an important mental space for all of us. In the summer, we laugh at the same jokes together and share the same enthusiasms. During the bitter winter months, when the island is out of reach, we each nurse private cottage fantasies. George's involve imaginative plantings; our sons are talking about a new tool shed. And mine? I day-dream about the front-row seat I have secured, from which to watch three young men I love continue their journey through life. •