

WRITER'S BLOCK
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This is no story crusted with artificial symbolism and jolted by a surprise ending. This is my life, specifically, how I dealt with writer's block and more.

I think I was destined to write and I almost know why. In the ninth grade *Pride and Prejudice* not only made me want to be Elizabeth Barrett, it gave me the first inkling that I wanted to be a great writer. Then I read *Wuthering Heights*! It made me pine to be a writer and pine even more ardently for my own Heathcliff.

We read *Pride and Prejudice* in our High School AP Lit course. Of course, all the boys made a great show of despising it. Most of the girls loved it, especially the ugly or flat-chested girls, who dreamed ceaselessly of it. I was one of those who dreamed. We out-of-favor girls argued about our favorite heroine, which tended to rotate between Elizabeth Barrett and Jane Eyre, while I alone wished myself to be a less arrogant and more enlightened version of Catherine Earnshaw. What an unending, passionate life of love Catherine would have had if she had not been so foolishly imperious! No way would I have cast off my darling Heathcliff!

My real romance life offered no chance to spurn a Heathcliff. A single, devastating comment when I was a sophomore set me back years. Hoping that I was in some measure attractive, although I have always known that I am not pretty, I overheard the Lothario on whom I had a crush and meekly trailed around say to some of his cronies, "Prissy has a good body but what a skull face!" Not one of his stupid, nasty, giggling, cowardly toadies, who hid behind his legs like babies, contradicted him. So I retreated and was consigned to the nunnery of rejected girls, who were jealously glad of my title.

So, High School passed me by without a prom and nary a date. (I did gloat in the privilege of refusing dates to two horrid boys.) Then, given my love of classic novels (and not just Romances) I majored in Literature in college. Every free moment I wrote short stories of romance laced with intrigue, and submitted them to magazines and journals. Not one bite! I read and reread any of the rejections that gave a hint of a reason for my failures. Ultimately I tired of torturing myself. With the consummate ego that characterizes many writers I thought myself to be far better than my poor reviews implied. I vowed that some day those foolish editors would regret their ignorance.

As college graduation approached, I awoke abruptly to consider my step out into life. I rejected going to graduate school. Why should I? Neither Jane Austin nor the Brontë sisters even went to college. I also didn't want to teach for I saw how all my teachers and professors who claimed they had yearned to be writers had sooner or later given up their dreams. I wanted only to write.

My rejection portfolio combined with economic reality guaranteed there was no way I could imagine jump-starting as a self-supporting author. So I searched for literary jobs that would allow creative time after hours. Copy editors were the rage then so I became one. Correcting

other writers' commas and colons was my daily fare. There was one good side effect to my dull job; it helped improve my technical skills.

I continued restricting my writing to short stories. In addition to the mountains of time constructing novels consumes, they require great organizational ability, and a breadth of character knowledge I didn't have. I have always been introspective, likely linked to my social ineptness, but in a strangely impersonal manner. I could never really feel in my gut what made other people tick. My insights into others were cold lights, devoid of the warmth that imparts life, love and soul to flesh. Why? Probably because my own life was at best a cold light.

For example, there was Elena, who became my good friend at work. Elena could have been a great heroine in a short story. But I couldn't write about Elena because I could not get into her heart. I did quickly assess Elena as a lively, sincere, intelligent young woman, strangely lacking any ambition to be a writer. But the only way I could gain a glimmering of the real Elena was by watching others react to her. Women seemed to regard her as the fount of human kindness. And to see men around her impregnated the miracle of creation. Elena was not beautiful, but in some baffling way, radiated or exuded a sultry, reproductive quality that drew men to her like flies. I asked her what she did to attract men so and she seemed to have no idea. It was as if she were filled with Love Potion #8. Perhaps she lacked ambition to write because she lived so fully. Why write romances if you live them?

But *I* didn't. So, in an attempt to improve my writing (and meet my Heathcliff) I joined the local writers club and became active in critique groups. Immediately, it was obvious I would meet no Heathcliff there; almost all the members were older women, and the few men were either ancient or odd. Most of the members were intelligent, some quite so, and although egotistical, kindly disposed. Some of them were pretty accomplished; still they wrote almost nothing that grabbed me. They reeled off a tiresome profusion of horror stories, tales involving magicians, superheroes, vampires, witches, sorcerers, extraterrestrials, and various other impossibilities, too often larded (by the women writers, that is) with misandrous tales of masculine abuse. Jane Austen and the Brontës never needed to resort to such absurd devices, but then again, they had passion. Even the memory of passion seemed to have passed from the ladies of the writers club, and what's worse, without their noticing it. So, they obsessed on polishing their mediocre fare as if a few better chosen words or tricks were what kept them from being masterpieces.

To be fair, none of the ladies were turned on by my 'masterpieces'. You have to write something that gets people in their gut and I couldn't find the real magic. Why should I? My empty personal life drained ever deeper.

It wasn't for lack of effort – at first at least. For a year I often went bar hopping with Elena. But though we arrived together, we seldom left together. Elena was concerned with my manless existence. She got several of her men of the month to set me up, but after an unbroken string of dismal failures I asked her to stop trying and then even stopped joining her on these outings.

After two years of a downward social spiral that began in the cellar, writer's block struck me, abruptly and hard. I had nothing to write because I had nothing to say. I had nothing to say because I had no life. I had, in effect morphed into the "Old Ladies Club", struggling senselessly

with syntax and artifice when I should have been swirling breathlessly through rapids of romance. But this skull face had not only closed her heart to romance, she had almost closed it to the dream of romance.

I was so far gone it was almost as if I wanted a man more to find something to write about than to find love. Emily Brontë had had no man in her life but she had burning passion. I began to doubt I had a fraction of her passion dormant in my cold core. Emily had no opportunities in that bottled-up era. I had no excuses. With the millions, yea billions of men out there hunting, why had none found me? Of course, it's hard to find a mole in its winter nest. But I had circulated for a while at least. I simply didn't know what to do.

I couldn't see being part of the *You've Got Mail* scene. I wanted to meet men in the flesh, not after an interminable string of emails and phony photos. So, where do you go to meet men? Certainly not the writers clubs, nor the art museums, nor the ballroom dance classes! No, you go where men can be men. You go outdoors. I thought of a vacation at a horse ranch but that smacked too much of a Harlequin Romance or a Hallmark movie.

I mentioned my thought of an outdoor, man-hunting vacation to Elena. She didn't have to think long. "I know just the place – for the outdoor part anyway – the Adirondack Loj. It's heaven on Earth, in the heart of the Adirondack Mountains with a small, beautiful lake. The mountains and views are awesome! But forget the men! You might see a few cute in-shape guys cycle through the place, but even though most of the people are real interesting they all seem weird – even the kids. So, give the man hunt a break and just let yourself be!"

The idea grabbed me. My parents had taken me to some resort in the Adirondacks once as a nine-year old. I didn't remember much about the setting but I did recall that I loved that vacation. So I agreed and Elena made the arrangements.

The day after the July 4th weekend we headed north out of Manhattan and up the NY Thruway. At Albany you switch to the Northway. It's a hum drum highway up to Lake George. Then it starts gaining altitude and becomes beautiful and exciting. Fifty miles later, you turn west onto Route 73 and enter the High Peaks region of the Adirondacks.

Suddenly the scenery turned awesome. My heart started beating as if it were a romance. The territory looked somehow familiar. Giant Mountain towered on the right and almost immediately after on the left came Chapel Pond, a small, glistening blue glacial lake, where we stopped for a picnic lunch.

Westerners may not think very much of the Adirondack Mountains but let me assure you that the highest peaks are majestic. The tallest is Mount Marcy, whose summit is much lower than valley floors in the Rockies, but don't let it fool you. A mountain's height above sea level is not as important as the rise from its base, which for Marcy is more than 3000 feet. Marcy's trails are not technical, but they're not for wimps. They get steep and are so clotted with rocks and roots that the going is exhausting. But there is compensation. Surprise openings in the forest give fantastic views of cliffs, narrow valleys and deep blue lakes carved by Nature's great sculptor,

the ice sheets of the Ice Ages. And the great, green forest that clothes all but the highest summits turns blazing colors during the fall foliage and white in winter.

When we arrived at the Loj I got a weird déjà vu feeling I knew the place. We drove right up to the entrance to unload our luggage. The Loj was to our right but the lake, Heart Lake, with its small beach was directly ahead. "I do know this place!" I almost sprinted to the edge of the water.

Looking at the tiny roped-in swim area my memories flooded back. This was where we had vacationed when I was nine and this was where I had my first and only great, sweet, precocious, fruitless love.

I looked at the exact spot that I had waded out past the ropes of the swim area. As a 9-year old I didn't yet know how to swim but the slope was so slight I felt safe. Suddenly it dropped off and I floundered in water over my head. An instant later I was hauled up and rescued by a young man. With the gentlest voice, he looked straight at me and said, "If you are going to the deep water you better learn to swim." I looked up at him. He smiled with such kindness and humor, but without recrimination, and he was so handsome that I fell in love with him as he held me. I had never felt anything like that before, so pure, so intense, so true. He carried me the short distance back to the shallows, put me down, winked at me, then turned and swam away, crossing the lake as fast and light as a water strider.

Breakfast and dinner are served family style at the Loj. (For lunch you're on your own.) When we lined up for dinner that night I raced to stand right behind my new love. He was with his family and had an arm around a girlfriend but I was so oddly oblivious to her that it did not deter me. I felt that since I loved him so, he just had to love me. When the triangle dinner bell was rung and we filed in, his girlfriend sat to his right and I completed the love triangle, squeezing in to his left. My parents and sister followed my lead gracefully without comment.

Conversation is lively during meals at the Loj. Neighbors introduce themselves. You find out which mountains they have climbed and trails they have hiked, but more important, you learn where they come from, where they've been, and what they do because so many are interesting people. I think the average IQ is over 140. But of course, they are there to hike and climb. Many rate themselves according to a standard known as the Forty-Sixers, people who have climbed all 46 peaks of the Adirondacks with summits at least 4000 feet above sea level. A select few have even done all 46 peaks in winter. Like Elena noted, many of them are nuts.

That night my misadventure and rescue in the lake was one of the main subjects of conversation. My hero, my love, made me and my parents a wonderful offer. "If you want and are still here the day after tomorrow, I can teach you how to swim. Tomorrow I'm climbing Mt. Marcy." I looked at my parents and they approved. As dinner went on I found myself leaning against him. I began to fantasize that he was my husband. His pretty girlfriend didn't like my presence, but I didn't care.

After dinner, many people retired to the great room. To the right of the huge fireplace was an old upright piano. My love sat down, his girlfriend to his left. There was not enough room for me so

I stood on his right. He played beautifully for a few minutes. He was so romantic. I loved him more than ever. Then he and his girlfriend headed outside. I went to follow but my father smoothly blocked the way and insisted gently that I play some games in the great room.

The next day passed slowly without him. It's odd. I would dwell on our love for a while and then forget him for some time as I played. But I was the first to sense him return from his climb shortly before dinner. When the dinner triangle rang he must have still been in the shower. I wanted so much to sit next to him that I told my parents I had to change, and managed to delay until he showed up. I raced in right after him and sat down at his side. His girlfriend was gone. He must have met her there and she was part of another family. I leaned against him and was so relaxed, I fell asleep right in the middle of dinner.

The next day he lounged around at the lake and I followed him like a puppy dog. I reminded him of his offer to teach me to swim. He checked with my parents and they gave the OK. How he held me during that lesson! And, freed from fear by love, and craving his approval, how fast I learned! The only problem was I learned too fast, so the lesson ended much too soon. Seeing that I could swim, he told me to practice in the shallow water and walked over to report to my father on the lawn.

I quickly felt I had practiced enough, so I left the lake and joined them. I think they were talking about baseball, which my father always talked about. My father wrapped the large beach towel around me and my wet suit. This gave me the sudden impulse to show my love my body. I threw down the towel, took off my bathing suit and stood there on display stark naked. I was used to changing on the beach, but as I was normally quite shy, I had always kept the beach towel carefully wrapped around me, helped by a family cordon. My father was clearly flustered by my sudden nudity and fumbled awkwardly to retrieve the towel and cover me. But I saw with great pride that my love had looked me over and he laughed with the purest laugh I had ever heard. I loved that laugh. It is strange; I have lost all memory of his face and name, but that unique laugh I would recognize anywhere.

Then things happened too fast. My love's family called him. He disappeared, came back dressed a few minutes later, and too quickly said good bye. I offered my address but he declined, got in the car and disappeared from my life. My last few abandoned days at Heart Lake I was intermittently heartbroken.

Now, 15 years later, as I stood gazing at the lake and reminiscing, two visions – one cynical and one idealistic – bubbled up from my unconscious. The first was dismissive; he probably laughed at the awkward sequence, even though at the time he made me feel both so proud and shy that I couldn't help smiling foolishly at him. But so much sweeter and wistful was my literary vision that he was Dante and I, Beatrice. After all, Dante met Beatrice Portinari for only a moment when she was only 8 and he, only 9, yet he was smitten for life. That love too was never consummated, for each wed another. What did poor Beatrice feel? We'll never know, for she died terribly young at, 24, my age. Only in death did she become the immortal woman who inspired his poetry and led him by virtue of love to salvation in the *Divine Comedy*.

Oh, how I wished I could retrieve the purity of that immature, sterile love of the 9-year version of myself, and the freedom and internal wisdom to allow myself to feel it, no matter how ridiculous. And at that instant I gained a glimpse into Elena's nature. I like most people was a love censor; Elena was, so to speak, for a free press.

So here I was, back at the Adirondak Loj, 15 mostly jaded years later! I walked slowly to the lodge office. Elena had already registered for our four nights. The last two nights we had a private double room but the first two nights, the best that was available was one of the small bunk rooms for 4 people. Fortunately, no one else had registered yet for that room so odds were strong that we had it to ourselves, at least the first night. We chose both bottom bunks, packed our stuff below, changed into our suits and headed out to the lake.

I was amazed at how warm the water was. We were into the second week of a heat wave that turned the normally chilly lake into a bathtub. What a wonderful way to unwind, floating free for more than an hour.

In the minutes before the dinner triangle was rung I sized up the guests. Elena had been right. There were no prospects for love, only a mix of very young, middle aged, and old. At dinner two groups of old people surrounded us at the table, and the conversation focused on which hike to take. It helped us to decide on the relatively short but real steep climb up Algonquin Peak.

After dinner we lounged in the Great Room. A post-adolescent girl sat down at the old piano and clunked away with an embarrassing lack of skill, continuing long enough so that Elena and I quietly fled out to the warm evening and down to the beach.

We stayed some little while, watching the sun set and the sky grow star dark. But, at the Loj, aside from exhaustion, it's lights out at 10:00 PM. So, we returned to the Loj and went to bed with the bunk room all to ourselves.

Guess what! I had just about fallen asleep when the door smashed opened and two men, obviously friends judging from their repartee, clanged into the room. They must have phoned in to register at the last minute. That was doubly obnoxious, for I had grown secure in my illusion that we had the room to ourselves.

Despite my repeatedly hissing at them over the next twenty or so minutes to turn off the light (which they did) and be quiet (which they didn't), the men rumbled about with genial clumsiness for some time, going back and forth to the bathroom like a relay team. I was so galled I finally screamed at them, telling them how crude and obnoxious they were. That did the trick, but almost immediately after they settled in bed one of them began to snore, so that it took me a long time to fall asleep. As I smoldered in my bunk it occurred to me that not only did they not smell like bears; oddly, the room actually seemed to smell nice. But in my rotten frame of mind I just knew that after a day's hike they would really stink up the room.

The next morning I awoke to a recital. The same guy was snoring in fits and starts while the other was silently unconscious. Elena and I snuck out of the room. I didn't want to have to face either of them.

They slept through breakfast and through all our subsequent rumblings back in the room as we prepared for our climb up Algonquin Peak. We knew to take lots of water and thought we took more than enough. But it was already warm when we started. We reached the summit about 1:00 PM. The air was so hazy the view was bleached out. How disappointing after all that effort. On the way down it got so hot and humid that we sweated profusely and drank like fish. Too soon we ran out of trail mix, then water. I was flat exhausted. As we leveled off with little more than a mile to go I began to feel real nauseous and cold despite the heat. I reached the point I couldn't move and slumped down on a large rock at the side of the trail. Elena was OK and tried to comfort me but didn't know what more to do.

I must have been sitting there with Elena standing at my side for about ten minutes. I weakly waved everyone by but then two guys about 30 years old stopped and one of them kneeled down to see my face. He gave me a piercing look that jolted my heart but lasted too long. Continuing to look at me, he asked how I was feeling.

"I'm nauseous."

"You have heat exhaustion. What food and drink do you have?"

I told him we had run out but I was so nauseous that drinking or eating was the last thing in the world I wanted to do. He responded that he was a doctor and had also been a lifeguard so he had seen many cases of heat exhaustion. He said, "Usually when you feel nauseous, eating or drinking is not good, but with heat exhaustion it is exactly what you must do because you are dehydrated and you have lost electrolytes. Bottom line – you're running on empty and must refuel." He guaranteed me it would quickly make me feel much better.

He then forced me to sip some of his water and suck on a couple of chocolate bits and salted pretzels. While I sat there slowly sucking, everyone else exchanged names, Elena speaking for me. The doctor's name was Ross and his friend was Eli. Then they began plotting. In my fog I felt they were forming a conspiracy. Eli and Elena would go ahead to get help from the rangers at the Visitor Center while Doctor Ross stayed behind to tend to his new patient.

Once they left Ross spoke to me so gently I might have swooned if I hadn't been so nauseous. He kept forcing me to drink little sips and slowly eat the chocolate bits and pretzels he fed me like a baby, and I was too sick to feel offended. In maybe ten minutes I recovered enough to stand up and begin wobbling back slowly, with him at my side feeding me along the way. As the nausea continued abating I began to feel both a growing resentment at being treated like a baby, and a growing sense of shame at my weakness and disheveled appearance.

Ross talked incessantly on the slow walk back, constantly feeding me and forcing me to drink. I don't know anything he said but his words and whole demeanor made me feel I was floating as I stumbled along.

Then he asked me where we were staying. When I said the Loj, he laughed with a laugh so sudden and so pure I had to stop for a moment. The ridiculous thought crossed my mind that

Ross was my long lost love who had returned to claim me. Then he blurted out, “I bet that Eli and I are your obnoxious roommates.”

A few minutes later two rangers from the Visitor Center reached us. I asked Ross to go on ahead and leave me alone with them. He looked straight at me and flat out refused. So, the rangers accompanied us back to the Visitor Center, but then assured by my doctor roommate that I was rehydrating and taking electrolytes and that the Loj was only a short distance away, the rangers stayed behind over my feeble objections, and we continued to the Loj.

Back at the Loj, Elena and Eli had already changed and were sporting in the lake like lovers. “Elena never takes long,” I said (sarcastically and jealously), but observed that they did look good together. Ross didn’t respond to my snide comment but insisted that I also change into a bathing suit and immerse myself in the lake’s unusual warmth. “I would help you,” he gleamed, “but unfortunately it looks like you have enough energy to change by yourself.” And without wasting a breath, he added, “The water is so warm it will do you good. After that, you’ll take a long, hot shower!”

I felt incredibly foolish as I responded, “It’s obnoxious that you treat me like an infant.” But again he didn’t respond to my snide comment and obey him I did.

He let me change first and hobble down to the lake ahead of him. Eli was buoying Elena as she floated on her back. Ross caught up to me just as I reached the shore. It felt so good when he abruptly grabbed my unwilling hand and guided me in. Once in though he let go just as abruptly and moved some distance away. I was annoyed, grateful and, perplexed at the same time, but my solitary freedom allowed me to fully appreciate how the warm water soothed my wracked body, and we all gradually drifted a short distance out into the lake.

Then just as it seemed I was getting ready to be a bit social, Ross abandoned me without a word. He turned, swam easily and powerfully to the beach and disappeared into the Loj.

I anticipated an awkward time sharing our room as we dressed for dinner. But by the time I reached the Loj, Ross had showered and dressed, and was playing one of the board games with the obnoxious post-adolescent girl in the Great Room as they waited for the dinner triangle bell. I hurried past them but was so gloweringly jealous I felt like crying and smashing him (and her) at the same time.

I didn’t want to sit with Ross at dinner but as Elena and Eli seemed to be glued together, there was no way out of it. I can’t believe how awkward I felt. All I could think of by way of conversation was to apologize for looking and feeling so terrible on the trail. Ross assured me to the contrary that even at my worst I looked almost beautiful. “Thanks for the almost compliment,” was about all I could muster, which made me feel stupid and childish.

Soon after the uncomfortable dinner we gathered in the Great Room. We weren’t sitting there very long when the post-adolescent girl sat down at the piano as if she owned it and as if to torture me. With a roll of my eyes almost as loud as the girl’s playing, I announced crudely that I had to get some fresh air.

Ross followed me. I was bursting to vent although I was afraid I would also reveal my jealousy. “That girl played for an eternity last night. She plays so horribly and doesn’t even seem to know it. If you’re going to show off you don’t do it by making a fool of yourself, and oppressing everyone around you.”

Ross looked at me in a way that made me feel he was reading my mind. Then he spoke sympathetically, “She enjoys playing, and some gentle approval might inspire her to improve.” I started arguing with him, insisting that there were standards while he was intolerably tolerant. My responses grew even more acrid, as I resented Ross siding with that puny girl and preferring her to me, which was ridiculous because I had no claim on him. Then Ross said something out of the blue. “You’re missing the whole point in this one life each of us has!”

That comment, delivered without a trace of condescension but with utter sincerity, unraveled me. Peeved, confused, sore, exhausted, and on the verge of tears, I turned, left Ross, and went straight to our room in the Loj, but heard Elena inside giggling with Eli. So, in emotional agony added to the physical I retreated to the Great Room, where I stayed long enough for the girl to finish and for Ross, who was now standing by her, to praise her for her playing and tell her to keep up the good work. I almost vomited.

As lights out approached Elena and Eli allowed us entry to my room. The only way I kept myself half sane was to repeat to myself that it was the last night I would have to share the room with Ross. But I feared the distinct danger that Elena would try to change our plans considering that she and Eli were enflamed lovers.

Why go into the details of the next day? As soon as the new room was ready, Elena and I moved our stuff, but then, she and Eli took it over. I made it clear to Ross that I wanted to be alone and he took the hint. I was also so sore from the previous day’s climb that both my body and mind were worn into restless confusion. It was a perfect time and place to write but I couldn’t even think of trying.

At dinner, Ross and I were stuck together again; it would have been too crass, awkward, and revealing to sit apart. I had never thought of myself as passive-aggressive or morose but those terms encapsulated my behavior.

During dinner it began to rain, and when Elena and Eli retreated to our room to “rest” I was stuck with Ross in the Great Room. Thankfully, the post-adolescent piano player had left with her family. A little later Eli and Elena returned, probably worn out. Elena told Ross she heard he was quite the pianist, and insisted he play something. He sat down. Instantly he transformed the clunky old, out of tune upright into a concert grand. Elena sat down on his left, with Eli standing at her side. Ross’s heart wrenching playing drew me involuntarily to his right side.

As I stood there, transfixed, I got the terrible déjà vu feeling I was reliving my 9-year old girl’s sterile attempt at puppy love, but as a now 24 year old. I fled to our room, broke down, and wept.

And as I lay there convulsed with self-pitying heartbreak, Elena returned to the room. She started to beg me to let her have the room for the night while I shared the bunk room with Ross, but seeing both my misery and the absolute refusal in my look, stopped abruptly and asked if there were anything she could do. I was blessed to fall asleep almost immediately.

The next day, after a silent breakfast and with my room once again occupied I retreated to the empty dining room. For four futile hours I tried to write but all I could fashion was several abortive core fragments of a romantic disaster. My feelings of misery could not scale the cliff of my writer's block. I felt useless in all aspects of life.

Elena, Eli, and Ross were sitting in the Great Room when I emerged from the dining room on my morose way to my room (deliberately without a glance at them). Uninvited, Elena followed me a few minutes later. After I finished jumbling my incoherent papers Elena broke the silence by inviting me to join them in a hike up nearby Mount Jo.

Everyone who visits the Loj is informed that Mt. Jo is a steep but short climb with an awesome view of Heart Lake and the high peaks of the Adirondacks. Our plan was that after the climb, we would swim in Heart Lake.

I rejected Elena's invite in a nasty, spiteful, and jealous tone. "Look! That's fine for you and Eli, but I mean nothing to Ross and it would be torture to me to spend any more time around him than I have been forced to at dinner."

"You are really in deep trouble, Prissy. Didn't you see that from the first moment Ross looked at you, you turned him on? Push him away if you don't like him, but I think you have a secret crush on him."

"What are you talking about? He scarcely talks to me and stays as far from me as he can."

"Are you unconscious? You treat him like the plague! And despite your blatantly overdone obnoxious behavior he's been caring to you, even doting."

"I don't need him to be doctor in my lousy life, I need him to be my lover." I was astounded I had said that.

"What?" Elena's light went on. "You *do* have a crush on him!"

I can't tell you how weird I felt. I wanted to stay far from Ross, out of his sight. I wanted to disappear from him, to evaporate. But my face and body as well as my words betrayed me.

Looking right through me, Elena insisted. "You *will* hike with us! Shut up, get up, and put on your hiking gear!"

I could only manage to plead that Elena not reveal anything of our conversation, either by words or facial expressions.

Lying Elena promised to remain stone faced and silent. She waited as I changed, and we came down together. Eli smiled broadly at Elena and Ross glanced quickly at me, seemingly stone faced, before turning and leading the pack out of the Loj.

After signing in at the base of the trail, Eli and Elena climbed on ahead and Ross dropped back to stay with me. I climbed sullenly and silently with Ross right behind me.

Some 2/3 of the way up, Ross pointed out his favorite outcrop to the side of the trail. He tried to hold my hand as we scrambled over to it but I pulled back uncomfortably at his touch, so he let the issue and my hand drop.

The view at the outcrop was superb. It looked like we could dive into the lake some 600 feet below, and splash the high peaks behind. Ross sat down at the edge with his feet hanging over the cliff and almost willed me to sit beside him.

Then, looking out at the view, he began to talk, as much to himself as to me. “This ledge is one of my favorite spots in the whole world. I’ve been here many times since I was a teenager. I used to come with my family but now I come with friends, or alone if no friends can make it. I love the Loj, its ambiance, the mountains, the lake.”

Then he asked me if I knew the history of the Loj. I didn’t. “Ah, it’s a heart-wrenching story. A young man from New York City, Henry van Hovenberg came up here in the heart of the Sublime Wilderness of the Adirondack Mountains for a vacation in the summer of 1877. On the trail up Mount Marcy he met Josephine Schofield, who was from Toronto. They fell for each other instantly. By the time they reached an outcrop much like this, near the summit, he proposed to her and she accepted. He then named Heart Lake for its shape and Mount Jo after her.”

“At the end of the hike the new lovers vowed to reunite and marry after returning home and arranging matters. But Jo had too high a cliff to scale. Her father had promised her to a man from a rich family he had business ties with. When she informed her father of her love for Henry and refused the arranged marriage, her father in turn forbade her to marry Henry.”

“The subsequent details remain fuzzy, but the story has a tragic ending. Either Jo contacted TB and died from it shortly before they were to wed or, unable to live without Henry she disappeared on Goat Island, possibly jumping off Niagara Falls. In either case, Henry, broken hearted, remained devoted to the memory of his one true love, Jo. He never married. But to be near her spirit, he returned right here to the heart of the Adirondacks, where he built the Loj as a sort of rural Taj Mahal.”

The tale struck too close to home. I feared that I too would die before a second chance at love. I couldn’t stanch my tears. I stood up, averting my face to hide those confessional tears, and wobbled dizzily. Ross lurched up and pulled me back from the precipice. I turned to him with a look whose meaning I could only surmise by the fervor of his return gaze that clicked on some previously unknown switch of life cloistered deep inside me. Our faces were so close it would have been natural, almost mandatory, for him to have kissed me, and I was certain he would, but he didn’t. Instead, he said with a voice of gurgling emotion, “You’re it,” and I knew he wasn’t

talking about playing tag. Then, he added cryptically, “You’ve been so worth the wait”. And as he took my hand to lead me from the outcrop back to the trail, an electric sensation filled me that I could never have conceived in all my writings, imaginings and longings. Thus, he led me from my dark wood to my sunlit summit.

Self Analysis

Several people in the writers’ group asked why I made the narrator a woman. The initial inspiration for the story was the 9-year old girl who developed a crush on me when I was over 60. So that made it natural to make her the narrator or at least the main character. The story also is a hybrid of my experiences regarding the Loj. It includes my wish that my son might meet the love of his life.

But perhaps the real point was that if I expressed the main character as a woman I allowed myself more freedom to be honest about myself. So, in ways, the main character is a feminized form of myself. This deception is similar to the deception of dreams, in which truths are too dangerous to be presented directly. Rather, to pass the internal censor they must be presented in cryptic or misleading form.

The story also asks the question of why we allow shame in particular among negative emotions including fear of rejection to mask love and passion as we get go through puberty and adolescence and early adulthood. We and certainly I would have been so much happier in life if I had allowed myself the candor and naiveté regarding crushes I had in some measure until about 11. By the age of 18 I had lost all my naiveté – too bad for me.

The story must have resolved for me at least some of my lifelong issues regarding love because for two years I could not see writing another story.