

THE TELEPHONE TREE
BY TONY SCARLATOS

A couple of generations have passed since I was a small boy, and I probably now have more yesterdays than tomorrows. My thoughts lately dwell on the past as often as they do on the future; on how much the world has changed, more than how much it still will.

Servers, networks, and data streams weave the web of my existence for most of the year. In the digital media lab at the university where I have taught for many years change is the only constant. Each day brings some new technological marvel, like mobile computing or social networking. But for me, all these modern miracles will never rival the magic of the Telephone Tree.

A small island, barely an acre, set on a remote lake in Maine was my home in the summer when I was a little boy, as it is to this day. I lived with my grandmother Edna, and my sister, Anne, in a tiny cabin lit by kerosene lamps and heated by a wood stove. Civilization seemed to me as distant as the Milky Way that shined so brilliantly at night. Reflected on the pond the bright stars set the island adrift in the heavens, separate from all in time and space. The radio brought us what little news there was from the distant city of Ellsworth, and a creaky red rowboat was our lifeline to the shore.

On the shore my grandmother's cousin Miriam had a camp with electricity and she even had a car, though she rarely drove it. About a mile up the dirt road, set upon a hill overlooking the lake was another cousin, Muriel, who had a small house with a washing machine, refrigerator, and a television. We would walk up there every few days to mail a letter and pick up some ice for our icebox. We picked blueberries and raspberries along the way, and when we arrived Muriel always had some fresh-baked cookies. These visits to the shore were big events for me, almost like visiting some wealthy relations at their mansion.

My grandmother was ancient to me even when I was a little boy. Her face, etched by time and troubles, appeared to be chiseled from the same granite that formed the boulders that ringed our island. But in her eyes was the mirth of a cheery fire crackling in the wood stove, and her heart was as warm as a cozy cabin. Like the island she was stoic and solitary, a survivor of many storms. Edna relished our isolation, especially in the face of bad weather. Nor'easters, as she called them, would turn the sky to an angry amber and churn the placid pond into a turbulent black, frosted with white-capped waves that battered the dock. Edna knelt on her bed, nose pressed to the window, and whispered eagerly, "We're gonna get it good." Each flash of lightning only sparked her thrill and mine. Thunder shook the walls of our little cabin and the wind whipped the branches of the tall pines, but I was never afraid. Like my grandmother I welcomed the rare interruption of our peace and quiet. It was quite a show.

Not much else penetrated our solitude, save for the eerie calls of the loon birds and the rude cacophony of the bullfrogs. On rainy days the blanketing rush of the rain made the silence almost total. The fog drew a veil across the shore, and for us it was a wall. Sometimes the rain would last for days.

My sister and I were quite imaginative in the games we invented to pass the time. One that I remember we called, "God's Secretary," in which one of us, playing the role of the Almighty, would dictate agenda items to right the world's wrongs to a cheerful secretary who would then dispatch angels to accomplish the task. Preventing Lincoln's assassination was

always at the top of my list.

Edna read aloud to us passages from Thoreau's "Walden," poems by Frost, and verses from the Rubaiyat by Omar Khayyam. Khayyam's words summed up the wisdom of her years, and though they were strange to me at such a young age, I have carried them with me all of my life:

"The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it. "

Sometimes a letter from my mother, Libby, would bridge our isolation, bringing tales of her life without us in the big city, landing the new job, finding a new rental house. Was she coming up to the island for a rest? No, at least not right away, maybe just before school started. But she sent her love, and to Edna's delight, a check to buy groceries. And I knew that odd slip of paper meant, whatever the weather, we would soon be going to the shore.

As I lay in bed at night, my eyes straining to penetrate the darkness of the cabin, I tried to imagine the world we would return to at the end of the summer. A new town, maybe a city; a new school, maybe a new state. Would I make friends? Would my mother remember to pack my toys? I prayed into the night that everything would be all right and hoped that God could hear me, even though I hadn't spoken a word.

Sunrise brought the morning chores, and so Anne and I gathered sticks to kindle the fire in the wood stove. Edna perked her coffee, smoked her cigarette, and announced that we had business to do on the shore. Before our departure my job was to gather up the water jugs to fill at the spring on the beach, and Anne's was to bail the rowboat. We were excited because we would get to see Miriam's daughter, Kim, who was Anne's age; and Luke, Miriam's grandson, who was mine. What had they found to do in all the rain?

Can we sleep over? Can we have a campfire, a cookout? Can we sleep in the cedar building down by the shore? Even before we left we rehearsed our pleas and counter-arguments.

I sat in the bow of the rowboat, and always got scolded by my grandmother for leaning over the side to drag along a toy boat on a string. Edna wasn't worried that I might fall into the pond - she never made us wear life jackets - but if I didn't sit in the middle of my seat it made the boat go crooked. Anne sat in the stern, cupped her hands and blew into them to make a loon's call. She wasn't very good at it, but she was much better than I. I hadn't yet learned to even whistle.

Edna rowed, and effortlessly we slid across the clear waters of Abrams Pond. Her rowing held a steady, slow rhythm; each dip of the oars was followed by a rattle of the oar locks, and then the rowboat would creak as it gently lurched forward. Tiny waves lapped at the sides of the boat with a muffled bumping sound. The air was heavy with the scent of pine.

It was a short trip, a quarter of an hour, but I was so eager that the journey seemed to take all morning. The sand on the beach made a lively crunch beneath the boat as my sister struggled to pull the boat ashore, and then we raced off to find our friends. Miriam greeted Edna at her camp and they went inside to have a cup of coffee, spiked with a few drops of bourbon whiskey.

They discussed the grocery list, and kicked us out of the camp for reading comic books inside "on such a beautiful day."

Later in the morning, Edna and I walked through the woods along the shore, towards a camp at the end of a road that ran almost right into Abrams Pond. There, in a clearing where the road suddenly vanished into pine needles, stood a magnificent tree. It was so tall it seemed to reach straight to heaven. And on the tree, about four feet up, there was a rusty old rotary phone, nailed to a weathered board. The telephone line ascended the trunk and quickly became invisible among the lower branches.

Edna dialed a number written on the back of an envelope. A man with a magical name, Dave Magoon, a man I never met, answered the call. Edna may as well have been speaking to a spirit for all I knew. Dave owned a grocery store in Waltham, the town next to Eastbrook about four miles away. Edna requested some bananas, coffee, bread, milk, eggs, and cigarettes. She hung up the phone, slipped the check my mother had sent inside the envelope, and placed the envelope under a rock at the base of the tree. Then we walked back to our rowboat.

Edna rowed us to a wide stretch of sandy beach she called "Uncle Charles' Beach," which at the far end had a large wooden box at the water's edge, guarded by a cloud of mosquitoes. I lifted the box's cover and plunged the water jugs into the cool, bubbling spring.

We rowed back to Miriam's beach and walked again through the woods to the Telephone Tree. A box of groceries now sat at the base of the tree below the phone. Bananas, coffee, cigarettes - all the items she requested were there. Inside the box was the envelope, and its contents had been replaced with bills and coins. Dave had taken the personal check as cash, and this was Edna's change.

On the walk back to our boat through the woods I marveled at how my grandmother could talk to trees and make food arrive, and at how money could magically appear in an envelope. Edna gave me a dime for my efforts, enough to buy a comic book someday, when we went to the big city of Ellsworth.

The years passed and the telephone disappeared, and later the tree was cut down. More cabins were built along the shore and each was more elaborate than the one before. Most camps these days not only have a phone, but satellite TV service. Even the island changed. Propane now lights the camp and provides refrigeration. Motorboats have replaced rowboats.

I have my own family now, and every summer we return to the island to spend a month with Edna's youngest daughter, my aunt Jan, and Jan's son, my cousin and best friend Steve. Steve bought a place on the shore himself a few years back, a house with a washing machine, a phone, and of course, satellite TV.

My mother died of cancer in 1987. Edna scattered her ashes on the island, and so at last Libby is there all the time. Edna lived to be 101. In the summer of 2001 I went to the island to scatter Edna's ashes on the island with Jan and Steve.

My wife Lori and our two children were on the west coast to attend her brother's wedding. It was one of the few times my wife was not with me in Maine since we had met. So I walked out into a starlit evening and stood beneath the tallest tree at the highest point on the island, and called her in Oregon from my cell phone, to talk to the kids, and to wish Lori's brother well.

Their voices were as clear as water from the springs of Abrams Pond. Across several thousand miles and three time zones they sounded as close as if they were in the cabin just down the path. When our conversation ended, I looked down at the small lump of plastic, glass, and metal in my hand. I marveled at how small the world had become.

As I lay in bed that night I thought about my grandmother, born in 1900. I thought of all she had seen in her life, from the horse and carriage to the moon landing. The Depression, Prohibition and Suffrage, two world wars, the Korean war and Vietnam. A marriage, three daughters, divorce, her middle daughter's suicide. Nine grandchildren. A long journey for the daughter of a seamstress, a daughter who once taught in a one-room schoolhouse in Castine, Maine. "Je ne regrette rien", she used to say to me, "I regret nothing". Her simple faith, her family, and goodwill had seen her through.

I thought about my own life, about the blessings of a close family and a remote island. I thought about faith, and remembered the Telephone Tree. I thanked God that everything was all right, and hoped that he could hear me, even though I hadn't spoken a word.