

The background of the cover is a serene landscape photograph. In the foreground, two wooden Adirondack chairs with yellow cushions sit on a wooden dock, facing a calm lake. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow and reflecting on the water's surface. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds. In the distance, a line of green trees marks the far shore of the lake.

On Moonberry Lake

a novel

HOLLY VARNI

On
Moonberry
Lake

a novel

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Holly Varni, *On Moonberry Lake*
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To my mother, who always believed.
And to my father, who always hoped.

*A lake carries you into recesses of
feeling otherwise impenetrable.*

William Wordsworth



*Small towns make up for their lack of people
by having everyone be more interesting.*

Doris "Granny D" Haddock

One

Her mother knew when someone was pregnant and when someone was dying. She claimed it was a gift from God. At the briefest glance, she could determine if someone was experiencing the beginning of life or in the process of reaching the end.

She would see a woman shopping in a store, her stomach flat, and nod in her direction. “She’s expecting.”

A perfectly groomed man with only a hint of gray at the temples would be walking back from communion to his pew at Sunday service, and she’d whisper, “He doesn’t have much time.”

This powerful insight would have been challenged or mocked if it weren’t for one annoying fact: she’d never got it wrong.

Not even when the premonition came about herself.



Cora Matthews thought of this as she looked down at the coffin. Her mother had saved her the hassle of choosing one by preordering and paying for it herself. The thing had been waiting for her mother’s passing on a kind of death layaway plan. Ready when she was.

Just as well. It had saved Cora a lot of trouble, because this was *not* the casket she would have chosen. The glossy lacquer finish

over the fire-engine red made her think of the wall of nail polish at a salon. For the briefest moment, she had the urge to smile at the thought of telling the pedicurist, “I’d like the color of my mother’s coffin, please.”

Cora restrained the impulse to display anything but misery. Appearing reticent wasn’t difficult. She didn’t want to be there. She was fulfilling her obligation as the sole child. The smallness of her family had dwindled to where she now stood alone in the world. The hollow feeling that accompanied that realization was surprisingly not all-consuming or overwhelming. She had gradually gotten accustomed to it over the years, like immersion into freezing cold water, nursed by her distant relationship with her mother. The closeness she had shared with her mother was more civil than familial. Neither ever saying what needed to be said.

Cora stood motionless, stuck in a state of graveside mourning expectation, not sure what to do next. A tiny part inside her, hidden below years of strife, imagined heaving sobs of heartache overcoming her—or, perhaps, searing grief that would squeeze all the air from her chest.

But she experienced neither.

At one moment she had even held her breath, waiting for a swell of emotion, but nothing came. Air moved freely in and out of her body, mingling with the tree overhead. She had no desire to collapse from sorrow onto the freshly mowed summer grass. She didn’t need an arm to steady her. Her legs stood as wooden as chess pieces.

It shouldn’t have been surprising. Loss was a companion that had become part of her long ago, like a callus on the pad of her foot that dulled sharp sensations. To anyone else, the bereavement would be tremendous. But Cora had been orphaned by family she cherished years ago.

Concentrating on the blades of grass, she tried to muster a single tear. She knew it wouldn’t appear normal to all these people who once knew her mother to not see some show of emotion. This kind

of loss was supposed to be deep and painful. Perhaps at a time that wasn't so public, she'd be able to summon that emotion from memories that still haunted her. However, today, she sensed the evaluation from others in penetrating gazes, whether it was real or imagined, and it only caused her to go more numb.

Making a fist with one hand over the other, she dug her fingernails into the soft flesh of her palm, hoping to elicit the slightest stinging in her eyes. *Just one tear*, she willed herself. *One stupid tear*.

She kept her eyes fixed on a flower resting on the coffin. The withering blossom had fallen away from the rest of the arrangement, bedraggled and abandoned. Its pitifulness captured her attention, and with luck, onlookers would assume she was lost in her grief and leave her alone. It worked successfully until the moment the service ended.

"Would you look at that, Henry? The poor dear is in shock."

Cora glanced to her right and met the stares of an elderly couple. Both had pearly white hair and pink scalps. With the same number of wisps as her nearly bald husband, the woman had pushed her thin hair back with a wide headband that looked more like a vise for her skull. The man inched closer to Cora, keeping the same distance a person would if peering into a lion's cage.

The woman pressed one hand to her chest, eyes crinkled with concern. "She's been as quiet as a mouse this whole time. I haven't seen her talk to a single soul or make a peep. I wonder if she's hysterical."

"She doesn't *look* hysterical." The man's volume revealed his hearing loss. Scrunching his face, he examined Cora through thick glasses.

Cora stared back at them. *Who on earth are these people?*

The woman squinted in concentration. "What if it's one of those silent hysterias? Do you think someone needs to shake her out of it?"

"*I could shake her.*" The man spoke as if it were the most natural thing to say. His skin creased in folds as he studied Cora with magnified eyes.

“You most certainly will not, Henry Gustafson! You have a reputation to uphold in this community, and I will not be married to a man who shakes women.”

“Now, settle down, Martha. I wouldn’t shake her *hard*!”

His wife waved him away with a flick of her hand and stepped forward. “Oh, stop it. Let me handle this.”

Curiosity bubbled up like ginger ale inside Cora. It wasn’t every day that an elderly person offered to shake her.

“Honey, can you hear me? Are you all right?” the woman asked, articulating each word as if Cora were hard of hearing or knew no English. To answer her own question, the woman muttered, “Of course you’re not all right.” She tried again at full volume. “What I mean is, do you need me to shake you out of it? Maybe give you a hug and jiggle you about? I’m not that strong, but I’ll try.”

With the slightest curve touching the corners of her mouth, Cora took her time answering. “No . . . I don’t think that will be necessary.”

The man nodded to his wife, a wide, lopsided smile reconfiguring his wrinkled features as if to say, “See, she’s not crazy after all.”

The woman’s face lit up in silent agreement.

Cora struggled not to laugh. The pair reminded her of matching salt and pepper shakers. They seemed proof that couples married a long time could begin to resemble each other. Their mannerisms, appearances, and ping-pong conversation were interchangeable.

“We’re sorry, sweetie, but you haven’t moved or said anything in a long time,” Martha said. “I didn’t even see you blink during the ceremony. It looked like you went into one of those catatonic trances.”

Henry snorted. “I don’t know how you could see anything when you’re as blind as a bat without your glasses!”

“Hush, now. I’m talking to her.” Martha reprimanded him with a stern look before focusing watery, cornflower-blue eyes back on Cora. “We were friends of your grandparents.”

The words hit Cora as though she *had* been shaken, her numbness replaced by an unwelcome sensation. The cemetery began to feel cold, though it was a warm June day. She wrapped her arms around herself to combat the chill. She shifted, aware of the throbbing pain in her feet from standing in stiletto heels a half size too small. The sunlight suddenly seemed too bright but lacked the heat she craved.

Cora stepped out of her shoes and wiggled her toes in the grass, not caring how inappropriate it appeared. Her breath grew shallow, and she swallowed hard at the discomfort of it all.

“We loved them dearly and know they would’ve wanted us here today,” Martha continued. “We’re so sorry about your mother. We watched Lydia grow up.”

The pastor cleared his throat to announce his approach, interrupting before Cora could respond. His eyes grew round, staring at her bare feet. After the service, he had mingled with the people who lingered, speaking to them in hushed tones. Though the pastor flitted around, pausing to shake hands with each person, nodding in sympathy, his hurried steps suggested he wanted this shindig to be over.

Unlike the pastor, Cora felt no rush to leave. She had nowhere she needed to be. She still hadn’t found a place to live. Funny how breaking off an engagement two weeks before the wedding left one scrambling to figure out what to do—and where to go—next.

Everyone had blamed her change of heart about the wedding on the loss of her mother, and Cora hadn’t done anything to contradict that assumption. She couldn’t explain the panic rising like bile in her throat when she and Kyle spoke about the future together. Instead of filling out a gift registry, she had packed up her apartment and her mother’s house and put it all into storage.

She had felt sick in the pit of her stomach at the look of shock and hurt in Kyle’s eyes when she broke the news. She was screwing up his grand plan and doing something unexpected, which he hated. He reasoned with her that losing someone close could make

a person do crazy things, which became his family’s mantra to everyone after the breakup: “The bride had a breakdown.”

Fine, they could think whatever they wanted. Her perceived irrational behavior had served its purpose. Her mother’s death had provided an opportunity to escape the commitment she’d gotten herself into, and it was seen by others as socially acceptable considering the magnitude of her loss. She was able to abandon her life in one erratic swoop because she had seen it done. She had experienced it firsthand. That was the legacy her mother had left her—the propensity to cut ties and run.

The pastor cleared his throat again. “Pardon me, but I need to get going,” he said, his eyes on Cora. “You will be in my prayers for your loss.” His reverent voice, surely intended to be sincere and spiritual, felt perfunctory and scripted.

Cora couldn’t explain the immediate dislike she felt when she met him. If anyone else had been available to do the service, she would’ve taken them. But she’d been told this man with his ashen face, drooping jowls, and sad eyes that mirrored an undeniable resemblance to a basset hound was the only pastor available.

She nodded, smiling politely, and he walked away. The service hadn’t brought Cora comfort or even celebrated her mother’s life. The pastor’s gloom had made it hard for her to breathe, and she hated every moment in his presence.

An older man with dark eyes and a rugged appearance approached her, suddenly becoming animated after he had stood like a pillar throughout the service.

“Hello. I’m Sam Klevar.” He took her outstretched hand, his grasp strong but gentle. Though not as old as the elderly couple that continued to observe her, Sam had as many deep wrinkles in his face. Thick, steely hair framed his wizened appearance, and he stood with the solid build and nonchalance of John Wayne. “Welcome back to Moonberry.”

His apologetic tone and sympathetic manner felt soothing. Cora recognized his voice immediately from the phone call she’d made

the previous week to discuss the funeral and her obligatory return to the town from which she had been taken almost two decades ago.

She mustered a weak smile. "It's nice to meet you."

"We've met before, but you were probably too young to remember. You couldn't have been more than six years old."

"Seven," she corrected him. "I was seven the last time I was here." That she knew with certainty. The last time she was here, her mother was crying and screaming at her grandparents and then she took her away. Cora was never allowed to see them again. And the ocean of tears she cried never brought them or her happy life at the lodge back. "I'm twenty-six now."

Sam frowned. "It has been a long time."

Her stomach growled loudly.

He smiled. "Can I offer you something to eat? Some folks have organized a small luncheon and would love to meet you. Besides, I need to speak with you about some business before you leave."

A handful of people milled around. Apparently, they weren't going to leave until she did. Spending time with a group of strangers was not something Cora wanted to do, but the guilt of proper etiquette weighed on her. She found it astounding that, even though her mother had been gone so many years, townspeople who had known her mother from childhood attended the funeral and gave a reception. She supposed the least she could do was show the same courtesy.

Cora nodded. "Thank you."

Sam's shoulders eased, and the lines on his face slackened.

"You can follow me in your car. The drive is short." He turned and nodded to the remaining mourners. Silently, they began to leave.

Cora lingered for a moment, taking one last look at her mother's lonely grave. It hadn't even occurred to her to bring flowers, the conventional sign of sympathy. Another indication of how removed she felt from the experience. Cora looked down at her feet with her sore red toes and the discarded heels next to them—shoes her mother would have loved and insisted Cora wear if she were here.

Cora had no flowers to leave behind. But she did have those uncomfortable shoes that more accurately represented their strained relationship.

Taking a deep breath, she let out a long sigh and left them, walking to her car barefoot.



After following Sam's pickup across town, Cora parked in front of a small home facing one of the area's many lakes. Riffling through her car in search of some sandals, she moved a pile of junk and saw her mother's letter. Her hand jerked away as if she'd been burned. Reaching over again, she picked up the blue envelope. The pages tucked inside were folded neatly, and her name scrolled across the top of the envelope in elaborate cursive.

So much had changed in a week.

Henny, a longtime friend of her mother, had dropped in on Lydia for lunch and found her in her recliner, lounging back as if taking a nap. The house had appeared tidy. On the kitchen table sat two envelopes, one addressed to Cora and the other to Henny, with letters tucked inside. Henny's letter outlined instructions on whom to contact. Cora was third on the list, after the mortician and the police.

Her mother had detailed and neatly organized everything, an act that only fueled Cora's anger. How could she have chosen to say nothing, knowing her death was imminent? Doctors said she couldn't have predicted the aneurism and that she died of natural causes. There was no sign of any harm or foul play. It was documented as a random, and very unfortunate, biological occurrence. But Cora knew better. The fact that her mother had updated her will and finalized allocation of her estate and belongings a few months earlier provided proof to Cora's suspicion that her mother knew her time was nearing the end.

Everything had been handled, down to her mother's request to be buried in the small northern town of Moonberry Lake, Min-

nesota, where her mother had lived from infancy to when she was a young, single mother. Then, one day, she took her child and left Moonberry, never to return.

Lydia Matthews had separated herself from the town without explanation, as cleanly as the swipe of a scythe, yet had chosen to return in death.

Cora's letter contained two parts. The first page was a list of six things to do, which were easy to complete:

1. *Call lawyer*
2. *Transport me back to Moonberry Lake*
3. *Bury me in plot (already designated)*
4. *Contact Sam Klevar (phone number provided)*
5. *Attend funeral reception*
6. *Ask Sam Klevar for the envelope*

The second page of the letter offered a short goodbye and an apology for not giving Cora notice about her death.

Neither gave solace.

Cora had thrown the letter in the car along with select belongings. Now, readying herself to complete task number 5, she took a deep breath. *At least it's almost over.*

Accompanied by Sam, she entered the house, where a barrage of people waited to offer their condolences.

Most were her mother's classmates, some were old neighbors, and others were friends of Cora's deceased grandparents. All told stories of remembrance, no matter how small or vague, while feasting on the typical funeral fare of hot dishes and creamy salads. An hour and a half later, feeling dazed from endless pleasantries—not to mention a bit ill from a pistachio-green Jell-O concoction and two helpings of potato and macaroni salads—Cora escaped to the patio.

Free of the crowd, she closed her eyes and filled her lungs to capacity with the fragrant lake air. The smell of algae and fish

awoke a faint memory of childhood. Footsteps padded across the patio behind her. She turned and her chest dropped in relief.

Sam.

He had been such a gift during the reception, skillfully negotiating her through the parade of townsfolk, never letting any one person keep her too long.

“Tired?” he asked.

She nodded. “You wouldn’t have any antacids by chance, would you?”

He laughed. “I think that marshmallow Jell-O salad was your downfall.”

“You could have warned me.”

“Are you kidding? Those women made you two other plates that I personally had to eat for you.” Rubbing his round belly, he shook his head. “When grieved, we eat. Food is supposed to replace the emptiness in our hearts.”

Cora didn’t respond. Nothing would ease the emptiness in her heart.

Sam looked out at the lake and then back at her. “Thank you for coming. This is a close-knit community, and they wanted to show you the love they had for your entire family.”

Cora struggled to find the right words. She changed the subject instead. “I have something to ask.”

He waited. A warm wind swept through the trees, flowing past them with a light touch.

Cora looked up at him. “I don’t know if this makes any sense, but my mother left me a list of things I have to do. Contacting you was number 4, and number 6 is to ask you for an envelope. Do you have any idea what I’m talking about?”

He hesitated. Though brief, Cora did not miss the sign of internal struggle that flashed across his face. Whatever he was silently debating ended with a slight nod. “I’ll be right back.”

When he returned, he handed her a blue envelope with his name scrawled on it.

It looked exactly like the one she had received. She looked at him.

“There were instructions inside for me to pass this on to you.”

He coughed.

She read the paper inside and, after a minute, looked up, her brow furrowed. “What’s this?”

“The deed to your grandparents’ lodge.”

Cora’s breath caught. Just the mention of the lodge was like pressing against a bruise. She was surprised at the actual ache she felt—like when an old injury or healed broken bone throbs unexpectedly, bringing back memories of the incident that edged between ignored and forgotten.

“Actually, your mother bequeathed the lodge to you with the condition that you maintain residence there for a certain period of time.”

What? Is he serious? She struggled for words. “W-what? My . . . grandparents’ lodge? It’s available? It hasn’t been sold after all these years? And I’m supposed to *live* in it?”

He nodded again. “Nobody has lived there since your grandparents died.”

Cora couldn’t believe the building had been left empty all these years. More shockingly, she couldn’t believe her mother had owned it all this time and didn’t say anything when she knew what it had meant to Cora as a child. Perhaps it was the guilt that had prevented her from saying anything or selling it. Her mother knew Cora had never forgiven her for taking her away. It marked the beginning of the rift in their relationship, like a small tear in a sweater that weakens all the threads around it so the hole just keeps getting bigger. Her mouth agape, she stuttered, but no words came out.

Sam faced the lake while he spoke, talking more to the trees than to her. “The paperwork states that it is to be handed down to you on the condition that you must spend one year living there. If you leave before the full year is complete, the agreement is null and void and there is no compensation. No exceptions or leniency. I don’t know if you feel you can do that, but the inheritance

is worth considering. It's sizable." He paused. "Before you make any decisions, you should probably take a tour of the property."

Of course she put in a clause forcing me to stay a year. Anything to get me to stay in one place.

Clearing her throat, Cora tried to sound casual despite her rapid heartbeat. She felt like a seven-year-old again, confused about what was transpiring. "As it happens . . ." She paused. "I'm kind of in transition at the moment. I was planning on moving after the funeral to find a place in the city." The words tumbled out. Nobody had ever understood, especially her mother, why Cora was so restless—why she switched jobs as often as she did. "*You're always on the run toward something or away from it. The time in the middle is only long enough for you to retie your shoes. Why can't you ever settle in somewhere?*"

Cora shook away the echo of her mother's voice in her head. That was one of the reasons she had said yes when Kyle proposed. To prove her mother wrong. It wasn't that she wasn't capable of settling in somewhere, it was that no place had ever felt right after the lodge. She had always divided her life into two segments: early childhood at the lodge with her grandparents that was imprinted on her as strongly as a branding mark. And then life after, which was marked by loneliness and struggle as her mother tried to survive as a single parent with no help from anyone. Where moving constantly and feeling unsettled became her norm from her mother's insistence, and aspiration, that she wanted bigger and better things for her daughter.

Sam sighed. "Then it's perfect timing. Do you have a place to stay tonight?"

"The motel in town."

"Good. You need rest after today. Why don't you sleep on it. A lot has been thrown at you. I'll meet you at the lodge tomorrow at ten and show you around. Here are the directions." Sam pulled a small piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to her. With a smile, he turned and left.

She glanced at the paper. The address on the bottom made her heart skip. She tucked the scrap into her purse, then walked to her car. The lodge would be a place to live for *free* while she figured out what to do next. There was no way she'd be able to afford to keep it long-term with the property taxes and upkeep. The very idea of owning something so large was too daunting, especially since she had no job or excess of funds. But if she managed to live frugally and stay the year and then sell the property, she would have some serious seed money and the freedom to go anywhere.

She could start over.

Again.



In the inky blackness of the motel room that night, any chance for sleep was lost. Unanswered questions about her family and Moonberry Lake—questions that had been buried deep for so long—rose up like ghosts from the grave.

Cora remembered her grandparents and begged to see them. She cried for weeks after she and her mother had left, until her mother announced one day that they had died, which ended it. It brought an abrupt stop to her pleas but not her sorrow. That lingered.

After her mother's death, as she sorted through some of her belongings, she'd found a box of old pictures that sparked dim recollections. And when she went to check the burial plot at the cemetery and saw her grandparents' gravestones next to it that clearly indicated they hadn't died when her mother said but many years later, she was overcome with a mixture of rage and confusion. Why had her mother lied about everything? Why would she deny her a relationship with her grandparents?

Something had happened. And it must have been something awful for her mother to walk away and cut every tie. Whatever it was, her mother's rash decision had altered Cora's life to one of disjointed chaos. The sudden loss of everything was a ripping. A ripping of trust in the idea of family and home. A ripping away

of actual family. She learned not to hold her breath for the next thing to be taken—and instead held tightly to nothing and no one.

Cora stared into the darkness, turning from side to side, restless from the lack of answers. Nothing made sense.

Why hadn't her mother sold the lodge when they were always struggling financially? What was the secret that marked the beginning of her lost childhood and the end of her mother's relationship with her family?

And why had her mother adamantly taken the secret with her to the grave?