

THE
LAND OF
9,999 LAKES

a novel

ZUBIN J. SHROFF



FOUR CIRCLE PRESS
MINNEAPOLIS

THE LAND OF 9,999 LAKES: A NOVEL

Copyright © 2011 by Zubin J. Shroff
All Rights Reserved

If you'd like to reproduce, transmit, sell, or distribute any part of this book, please obtain the written permission of the author first.

Note that you may freely quote (verbatim) sections of this book (with clear and complete attribution) for the purposes of articles, reviews, peaceful and nonhateful political manifestos, or doctoral dissertations (we'd like to see that thesis...).

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, locations, events, brands, corporations, and organizations mentioned are either the product of the author's imagination or are being used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real people (alive or other), real places (old or new), real organizations (naughty or nice), or real events (serious or silly) not covered by the previous statements is coincidental and could be stemming from a repressed need to build a _____.

Cover Art by August West
Book Design by Jack & Betty Frost

Set in Caslon

Published by Four Circle Press
Minneapolis, MN 55458-0422
First Edition, 2011

ISBN: 978-1-937308-15-5 (alk. paper)
ISBN: 978-1-937308-03-2 (ebook)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

www.zubinshroff.com
www.fourcirclepress.com

**THE
LAND OF
9,999 LAKES**

I

Alexander and Alexandra Anderson had those names even before they were married, and in fact might not have met if not for those names. See, back in the old days when our Alex and Alex had just left their suburban Minneapolis-St. Paul homes to travel across the great Mississippi River (which runs right through the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul) to the University of Minnesota's Twin Cities campus (located right on the banks of that same old river), university administrators and the celestial beings that govern their actions had already ensured that these two particular Alex Andersons would meet in the brand new dormitory donated by and named after Albert Anderson (no relation).

This administrator, let us call her Alexis Anderson (real name, and no, no relation), had been in an especially rushed

state of mind and body that week due to the looming influx of students and the mischief of the celestial beings that sometimes pull strings and poke at people to get them to do funny things.

The printer wasn't working right, and the flashing light on the printer said it was the computer's fault. Of course, the computer being bigger and more powerful simply denied this and suggested that perhaps sweet old Alexis was losing it, and perhaps she should think about retiring if she could not work with these new electronicated devices. Now, being a state employee with two more years left to go before she reached the holy grail of thirty years of service (after which you can retire with oodles of income and benefits), Alexis saw her life flashing before her eyes, and the images of bus-sing it up to Winnipeg (Canada) just to buy medication and cheap DVDs were extremely troubling.

And so she stepped up her frustration levels a notch and picked up the phone and screamed into it until Ramesh, the IT-support guy and frenemy of Alexis, came in with a sulk on his face and a frown on that part of the face that wasn't sulky.

"What is it, Alexi?" he asked sulkily.

"It's Alexis," she said sweetly (because even though she was frustrated at both the computer as well as Ramesh's lackadaisical attitude towards her distress, she was still of Swedish descent with Minnesotan upbringing). "Can you help me with these electronicas? I need to get these dorm-room assignment letters printed out and put into the mail before the mail pick-up, which is in, oh, thirty-three minutes. Thank you, Ramesh."

Sulkiness and sloth-like body language notwithstanding, Ramesh was an excellent doctor to sick technology, and to be fair, his attitude was somewhat affected by the outdated electronics that usually had him up all night doing silly fixes and what-not. With a quick backslash-fullstop-curlybracket combo he fixed the problem, much to Alexi's delight and the (unhearable) titter of those mischievous celestial beings that hang around university campuses.

"Oh, thank you, Ramesh," squealed Alexis. "You are the best. I will make sure I tell your supervisor about your excellence and promptness. Someday you have to teach me that slash-and-burn tactic of yours that fixes things."

"Never," said Ramesh with a sulky smile. "If I teach it to you, then the conditions of my work-visa will no longer be satisfied because there would be an American who is able to do my job."

"Fair enough." Alexis thought back to her Swedish ancestors who left their wonderful icy fjords behind to travel to Minnesota for a new life. "Fair enough."

And with her mind up in that murky area between thought and action (the Scandinavia of the mind's Europe, if you will) Alexis poked some keys and pulled some levers and out popped a slew of dorm-room assignment letters. She nipped and tucked and folded and dropped, and the mail-person picked and grabbed and sorted and delivered. When it was done, Alexis sat back and thought about retirement, because in some way she felt her job was already done.

And it was, at least as far as this story goes.

2

The letters traveled across town remarkably fast (it is a small area with a highly modernized and efficient mail system), and both Alex Andersons were quite pleased to find out they had been assigned to Room 4D in the brand new Albert Anderson Hall.

Now, men and women may not officially room together at the University of Minnesota (a parting of ways from Minnesota's Scandinavian heritage), and so when Alex and Alex arrived to find each other in each other's room, it created a bit of a tense situation, especially with everyone's parents and pets and what-not around (they all come to drop off the kid at college).

Of course, we're talking about two young, attractive Swedish kids who come from old Swedish families, and so the ten-

sion was not something that prompted the fathers to “have it out” to claim the land or anything like that. No, the tension was simply of a boy-meets-girl type, and while the dorm-room situation was resolved with great politeness from all parties involved, the tension stayed with Alex and Alex, and when they were finally thrown together in a Geography class, the tension could stay contained no more and it overflowed and burst open in that soft Swedish way (you know . . .).

And since this is not a story about the wonders of Swedish massage or American college life, we’ll skip over that part. (Although all those parts certainly did happen.)

The Andersons selected a spot up near the Boundary Waters for the wedding, and after the nice and simple ceremony, they enthusiastically took part in the ancient post-wedding ritual designed by Swedes to expedite the arrival of children. (No, we’re not talking about sex; there really is a ritual.)

Children did not arrive in the first year, nor in the second year, and as that year ended, the wife Alex was a little happier (for reasons unbeknownst to her) and the husband Alex a bit sadder (and in a similar state of self-cluelessness). Each responded to his or her emotional state by focusing more on the job.

Some jobs lend themselves to focus better than other jobs, and the wife Alex’s job resembled the first kind (“some” jobs), and the husband Alex’s job the second (“other”).

The wife Alex was a lawyer at a Lutheran law firm, and she had joined the firm when it was a sleepy little Lutheran concern. However, somewhere around the time of her own heightened emotional state, the little Lutheran law firm

landed a big Lutheran client. The wife Alex was put on the case, and she dug in with her heels and tripods, and within a few months the little Lutheran law firm was well on its way to becoming a high-powered Lutheran Law Firm (note the capitalization), and the wife Alex was already becoming known as a high-powered Lutheran lawyer.

The husband Alex, it turned out, was in the kind of job where added concentration only reveals the lack of potential in that particular job. He was a human resources director at a small Minnesotan (non-Lutheran) company that had only three employees. And so his job, although satisfying in a small way because the people were very nice, did not provide that surge of regular adrenaline that slowly changes your body and mind and makes both hungry for the daily rush.

And in this way, the little arm of evolution wound its way through the lives of the Alex Andersons. The wife Alex with her daily doses of naturally-produced stimulating chemicals became a powerful and confident adrenaline-junkie who never lost a case (or an argument), and the husband Alex ambled along in his nice stable job where even caffeine was too much of a stimulant to handle after eleven in the morning.

All this while Alex and Alex lived in a fancy apartment in downtown Minneapolis. It had big windows and a big door, and the windows faced the Mississippi River and the door faced the other way. They had two cars, although, being Minnesotans, they only used public transportation. Pets were not allowed in their apartment building, but the Alex Andersons were not too concerned about it at first. They were still in their twenties, and they had both agreed that it

was a time to work hard all day and play hard at night and on the weekends. There would be no time to feed a dog or look for a cat or flush down a fish.

But sometimes the plans made by two people in love do not work out exactly that way, and when those two lovers are also young, it adds to the mess (because when you're young, you don't know what the hell is going on).

Now mind you, this was not a mess in the true sense of the word. It was just a small situation of escalating tension. Happens to everyone, and all the time. But like with any situation of escalating tension, something had to pop.

And so, one Wednesday evening, the husband Alex sat there on the Swedish leather couch facing the big windows and watched as a storm brewed out over and across the Mississippi. The popcorn was popping in the popcorn-popper, and the celestial beings were dancing their invisible and imperceptible little dances.

The wife Alex tore in through the front door, not because she was in a hurry, but because that was just how she moved around from place to place these days. Her arms were full of files and papers and files made of paper and papers filed in files. She ran into the extra bedroom that had been converted into her home office so she could work hard at night and on the weekends, and eventually she raced back out to the living room and gave her husband a quick kiss and did a cartwheel on her way to the kitchen to fill up her wine glass.

"Just one glass," she said, panting as she slid over the top of the Swedish leather couch and landed next to her quiet Swedish husband.

"You always say that," said the husband Alex. "And you always have just one glass. When was the last time you had a second glass of wine?"

"Well, if you add up the glasses of wine I consume over the course of the week, which, by the way, is how you're supposed to measure wine-consumption, then I have a second glass of wine at least two-and-a-half times a week. So there." And the wife Alex put her feet up on the Swedish glass coffee-table and moved them from side to side as if to remind all those present that she never lost an argument.

The husband Alex was not impressed, and he sat in silence and listened for the popping of the popcorn in the popcorn-popper to slow down to one or two pops per five or six seconds. When the popping was done, he slowly and deliberately went over to the popcorn-popper and filled up a bowl and popped on back over to the couch where his wife was just draining her glass of wine and already checking her BlackBerry.

He stood near the couch as if in thought, and then moved around the coffee table to one of those chairs (the kind of chairs that people have across from the couch and which are never used, not even when guests come in) and sat in it with that same pensive deliberation that made him an excellent mediator of the non-critical arguments that took place once every six months at his job.

"So, honey," he said deliberately.

The wife Alex raised one finger in the air, not to be rude, but in fact to be not-rude, as she was about to make a phone call. She made her phone call, which consisted of yelling at

some paralegal (nicely, of course. Remember, we are still talking about Minnesotans of Swedish descent here . . .), and then she shook her head and polished off the wine.

"I need to pop over to the office and pick up something that my paralegal forgot to include in my files and forgot to scan into the system and so I have neither a paper copy nor an electronic copy when I need one or the other and possibly both," she said.

"You want me to drive you?" said the husband Alex, but the way in which he was tossing the popcorn (kernel by kernel, very slowly and deliberately) into his mouth made it quite obvious (though not explicit) that it would be best if she went alone.

"Nah, the buses are still running," she said. "It's only a couple of stops away. I'll be back in thirty minutes."

Thirty minutes passed in less than twenty, and the wife Alex stormed back into the apartment just as the last kernel met its end in the husband Alex's doleful maws. The celestial beings giggled at the synchronicity of these two seemingly trivial and unrelated events, because nothing is trivial or unrelated from the point of view of those pudgy pranksters.

"Finally," said the wife Alex, and she flopped down on the couch. "Finally I can get to work. I have all my stuff. The sun is down. That infernal popcorn-popper isn't popping away." She leaned over and kissed her husband, who had since moved back to the couch.

He stood up and walked over to those unusable chairs again, and stood there in silence as if he wanted to say something but perhaps was hoping he wouldn't.

"So," he said. "Honey—"

"Not now, honey," she said as she leaned over and grabbed the television remote. "Swedish Meth Lab Busts is on, and I need to see this for one of the cases I'm working on."

"You're defending a Swedish meth gang?"

"Of course not. The meth lab was found in one of our oldest client's rental properties, and he's being sued by the parents of the head of the gang. They say his property was too well set up for a meth lab, and so it's his fault."

"Fair enough," said the husband Alex.

"I know. Drug manufacturers and distributors should not be held liable for their actions. But still, I need to work the case. And I'll win it. Fair or not, those meth dealers will have to go to jail, and my client will get away with a slap on the wrist and one less rental property."

"What happened to the property? Isn't it vacant now?"

"Watch," she said as she tipped over the empty bowl. "You finished all the popcorn?"

"I'll make some more," said the husband just as the meth lab blew up on television.

"I love you," shrieked the wife, partly motivated by the blast (in which no one was hurt) and partly by the prospect of eating crunchy salted corn.

"How about another glass of wine?" he asked hopefully.

"Can't do it. I need to work for a couple of hours after this. But I'll be a happy wife if you brew some fresh coffee."

"Coffee? In the middle of the night? You know how bad that is for you?"

"It's only nine. Don't be such a—"

"Such a what?"

"Never mind."

"No, tell me. Such a what?"

"Nothing. I wasn't going to say anything."

And the husband Alex went silent again, and the room was filled with the sounds of police radios on television and popping corn in the popcorn-popper and dripping coffee in the coffee-dripper. The tension was thick, but still barely noticeable (at a conscious level) to these fine young Swedes. Then there was another explosion on television, and the popcorn began to pop furiously and the coffee machine started to make that desperate gurgling noise and the celestial beings all clutched each others' ephemeral arms and watched.

"I want a dog," said the husband Alex suddenly and loudly.

"What?"

"I want a dog. A puppy, which will become a big dog."

"Well, honey, we discussed this before we moved in here. No pets allowed in the building."

"I want a house," he said, and his voice became peaked, and the pitch was more pronounced because the popping had slowed and the coffee had stopped gurgling and a silent commercial was filling the blank space on television.

"Well," said the wife, and she stopped there.

The husband Alex was sweating, and his soft Swedish skin was glowing like a freshly glazed white meatball, and his hands shook violently as he went to pour the coffee,

and he wisely decided to unload the popcorn before pouring the coffee.

But the popcorn-popper's lid would not open, and he clawed at it as if it were the metal hatch of a submarine that was taking in water, and just when he thought he would surely be taken under by the rising bilge, he felt two soft Swedish hands on his, and the lid came off smoothly and the fresh popcorn spilled all over.

"I'll have that second glass of wine, I think," she said to him.

And they hugged each other and cried silently, partly out of wonderment at why this had suddenly become such a big deal.

3

The search for the house began in earnest the very next day. The wife Alex knew too much about the law and what-not, and she insisted that they do most of the work themselves and even attempt to work directly with an owner (or owner's agent) to do the transaction. Of course, this meant that most of the physical searching would be done by the husband Alex, with the wife Alex visiting the candidates over the small window of free time she got every two weekends.

This was good for the husband Alex, because it was a nice sustained task with a clearly defined goal, and we all need things like that to do sometimes.

And so he shuffled from this suburb to that one, and the previous neighborhood to the next one. There were many questions to ask and possible pathways he could take things down, and the responsibility made his hand-shaking quite

pronounced at times, and he started cutting back on his caffeine to the point where he was only taking an espresso-sized shot of decaf at six in the morning and it kept him going clean through the day.

The evening conversations between the Alex Andersons took on a different tone, and the husband Alex was perpetually in that half-crazed state of excitement and anxiety because he was not used to making decisions that were not guided by overwritten rules and regulations, preferably handed down to him by some government agency (possibly headed by a Minnesota Senator).

"So many things to think about," he gushed on Tuesday evening. "Who would've thought."

"Well, owning a house is a big deal," she said patiently. "But you'll figure it out. Just go with your gut."

"But you're a lawyer. How can you say just go with your gut? There are thousands of rules and loopholes to those rules and gotchas to those loopholes, and I need time to study all of these things. This is bigger than me. It's not just about me. If it were just about me, I'd just pick any house. I'd just point at a house and say, 'I'll take this one.' But it's not just about me. It's about us. You and me, and someday even more than just you and me."

"The dog," she said without looking up from her BlackBerry. "What?"

"I mean the puppy. The puppy that will grow up into a big dog. That's why we're getting the house, isn't it?"

The husband Alex glared at his wife and stared at his own hands. "You don't want the house?"

"I didn't say that, honey."

"If you don't want the house, well, then—"

"Then what?" she said with her lawyer voice.

The husband Alex was afraid of the lawyer voice, and he shrugged and mumbled something.

"Of course I want the house, silly." She kissed him gently, and he smiled, and all seemed well.

Except for the decisions.

"But how can I decide whether to pick a house in the suburbs or in a nice Minneapolis neighborhood? Or what about St. Paul?"

"We aren't moving to St. Paul," she said firmly.

"Okay, great, that's good. I mean, that's something. Now that's a decision we've made about the house. One entire city with its many neighborhoods eliminated. Hold on while I update my spreadsheet." He was excited.

The wife Alex looked over at her sweet Swedish husband booted up his laptop and clicked way too many times. She smiled and acted interested (and she was interested. The acting was just to make sure the husband Alex knew she was interested. Hey, marriage takes work, you know . . .).

The husband Alex poked around and clicked here and there, and soon he looked up and stared at his wife as if he was going to ask her to do something terrible.

"So," he said, and took a deep breath, "when we say no to St. Paul, does it mean we're eliminating all of the St. Paul suburbs?"

"I thought St. Paul *was* a suburb," she quipped, and then she closed her eyes and waited for it.

"How can you say that?" he shouted. "I grew up in St. Paul. My parents still live there. What has happened to you? This job has changed you, I swear. God, Alex. Jesus."

"Hey hey hey," she said. "I was kidding. You know I love St. Paul. I was teasing. Just wanted to play with you a bit. It's so cute to see you all tangled up with the details of this stuff."

He sulked for a bit, and the wife Alex watched him.

"Now you have a sense for what I do every day at work," she said, but then felt bad for turning the conversation around to where she could jab at his masculinity. Not that she meant to, of course. She knew her mind and wits were as sharp as a lawyer's scalpel (they use scalpels to open envelopes sometimes), and it was not fair to bring her weapons home to use against her sweet defenseless husband.

But for all his sweet Swedish quietness, the husband Alex had no fundamental problem with the fact that the wife Alex worked three times as hard and brought home eleven (yes, eleven) times as much money as he did. And so he simply nodded at her remark, and he took it at face value, and he clicked some more at his spreadsheet.

"Well," he said after several minutes of heavy squinting. "I'm adding St. Paul back onto the list, but I'll leave out the St. Paul suburbs."

"Sure," she said.

"My parents still live in St. Paul," he said earnestly, "and it'll be nice to have them close when we have a—"

But the wife Alex had raised a finger and was already on the phone. After some polite reprimands to the paralegal again, she turned back to her husband and sighed.

"Sorry for not listening," she said sweetly. "What kind of dog do you want to get?"

"You don't want to get a dog?" he said defensively, or perhaps offensively.

She started to laugh at the silliness of it all, but when you are an adrenaline-junkie and you've been taking it all day, you get a bit squirrely by the night-time hours, and the wife Alex was getting squirrely.

"Sorry," she said through her semi-hysteria, "I'm too squirrely for this. I'm going to make some coffee."

"You're sure that's a good idea? Don't people get squirrely *because* of coffee?"

"I don't think so. I've never heard that."

"I have."

"So you don't want me to make coffee?"

"I didn't say that."

"No, you didn't." And the wife Alex got the coffee brewing so fast that anyone watching would have pointed out that such a quick-moving woman did not need coffee at nine in the evening.

And they had several more nights like this, and several months of such nights, and soon it had been years (well, just one or two), and the Alex Andersons still did not have a house.

4

By the time the Alex Andersons selected their house, they were no longer in their twenties, but not far into their thirties. (Exactly thirty, to be precise.) The husband Alex had, by that point, become an expert in the neighborhoods and suburbs of the Twin Cities (except for the St. Paul suburbs), and every real estate agent with a house to sell knew his name and his phone number and the smell of his subtle Swedish cologne, because as nice and quiet as the husband Alex was, the more he learned about houses and neighborhoods, the more questions he asked and the more indecisive he got, and it got so bad that the real estate agents were not sure if they should lower the prices to way below his range or raise them out of reach to make him stop asking them questions like could he take just another look at the house or steal just a bit more soil (as in dirt) to test for humus and mercury levels.

About a year into the process, the husband Alex had decided that buying a house was such a big decision that it was not fair for him and his wife to make it themselves. After all, he explained many-a-night to the wife Alex, they were part of two great old branches of the Anderson trees (separate-but-equal trees, as verified by the Swedish Institute for Anderson Research), and their old Swedish relatives took these roots very seriously, or at least the husband Alex thought they did.

"We are the next generation," he explained to the wife Alex. "This house will be the Minnesota center of the Anderson empire of the future, and it is only right for all Minnesotan Andersons to have a say in its location."

The wife Alex, by this time, was up for partner at her law firm, and she was powering through cases and paralegals at a rate and with a smooth Swedish drive that had not been seen in the Lutheran world since *whatsizname*. She had almost entirely taken herself out of the housing discussions, and was actually happy that the husband Alex had taken so long with the search and was now undoubtedly going to extend its life by bringing in the rest of the Andersons.

The rest of the Andersons were a good group of people. Both sets of parents were alive and well, and so were two sets of grandparents (one set from each side). There were some cousins, but none of them lived in Minnesota anymore, and so they were not consulted.

After some preliminary meetings to set the stage and review the spreadsheets, the husband Alex began to take them along for his evening-and-weekend assaults on the real estate agent community. Soon, however, at the requests of some of the older Andersons, the field trips were replaced by photo-

graphs sent by e-mail, and finally even the extended Andersons arrived at a point similar to one the real estate agents were at, in that no one was sure whether to reject every potential house or accept it, because either path seemed to only lead to more discussion and questions.

Until finally, one summer day, the husband Alex came home with a look of panic on his face.

"Edina," he said to his wife, who, for the first time ever, was home before her husband.

"Good lord, Alex," she said. "I was worried. You're always home at this time, even now with the housing situation so crazy." (Of course, she meant the housing situation in the Anderson family, not in the country at large.)

"I'm sorry. There was a miscommunication with one of the real estate agents, and I'm not sure what I did wrong, but it turns out I bought a house."

The wife Alex stared at her husband, and only then did she remember the word he had uttered earlier. "Edina?"

"Edina. Is that okay?"

She stood up and hugged him dutifully, and in truth she was more excited than she had expected. "Edina's fine. Congratulations. You did it."

"We did it," he said proudly, but he meant he.

They popped some corn and clinked some glasses together and stared at the Mississippi River (which would not be visible from the suburb of Edina) and talked idly about something or the other. Then the wife Alex refilled both their glasses and removed her glasses and cleared her throat.

"So," she said. "I made partner today."

“Jesus,” said the husband Alex. “That’s amazing. I’m so proud of you.”

“And I’m so lucky to have you. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Yeah, right, you high-powered Lutheran lawyer.”

She laughed, and they drank their wine and drank some more, and soon enough the bottle was empty and they were close to each other and they moved away from the window because it is rude to make sweet Swedish love in front of an old majestic river.

As they stumbled into the bedroom, the wife Alex pointed at the dresser drawer and whispered into her husband’s ear.

“They’re in the top drawer, I think. Grab one, will you.”

5

Edina is a nice, upscale, urban suburb of Minneapolis, and the Andersons decided they would fit in very well with the polite-but-welcoming community. Their house was in a prominent lot, but still secluded and private enough mainly due to an oversized backyard. The backyard was massive, in fact so massive that amongst the trees and rolling hills and natural canyons there lived a small roundish body of water. A lake, it was. A Minnesotan lake.

Now, Minnesota is not known as the Land of 10,000 Lakes because it doesn't have ten thousand lakes. No, it gets that title precisely because it does have that many lakes. Ten thousand. Yes. The holes left behind by the hoof-prints of the mythical lumberjack-giant Paul Bunyan's even more mythical gigantic blue ox were filled with water, they say, and so the lakes were formed.

And now the Andersons owned one of them.

"We own a lake," said the husband Alex to the wife on their first trip to the lot.

"How nice," said the wife Alex.

"I can't believe this is happening," said the husband. "I was so scared when that agent said her client accepted my offer and it was done and I didn't need to sign anything because my thirty-six e-mails were legal enough to establish my legality. Or something like that. Does that make sense?"

"Sure," said the wife Alex. She was back to checking her BlackBerry.

The husband Alex, although he had no fundamental problem with the wife Alex's work hours and her intense need for adrenaline and her feverish addiction to her BlackBerry (indeed, she was now making twenty-three times his salary, and it was an expensive house in the nice upscale suburb of Edina), did want some more reassurance at this point in his life. After all, now that the house had been bought, he had achieved his clearly-defined goal, and suddenly it seemed like all the other goals were hazy and murky, like the surface of his new lake.

"We should get the lake cleaned," he said. "Don't you think?"

"Sure, honey," she said without looking up.

"You're not listening," he said, and it was the first time he had said that in a long time.

"Sorry, honey," she said. "It's just that there's a lot going on at work."

"But you're a partner now. Aren't there young ambitious up-and-coming lawyers to handle all the work?"

She looked at him with an intensity that could have dried up a lake. "Of course. And I need to keep them at bay. They're all bloodsuckers, these new breeds of Lutheran lawyers."

Then she sighed and put away the phone and looked at the lake.

"Actually," she said while surveying the green glaze that coated the surface of their new lake, "I think this stuff is supposed to be on the lake. It's natural. It's probably good for the fish or whatever else lives in the lake."

"You think?"

"Sure."

"Perhaps I should call in an expert to look at it and run some tests."

"Tests for what? Fish?"

The husband Alex shrugged. "Yes. Tests for fish."

The wife was quiet for a few seconds. "I think you just look."

"Sorry?"

"I mean, to see if there are fish in the lake, I think you just need to look. Here." She grabbed his hand and they both went close to the lake and looked, but the green-glaze was quite thick, and if there were fish, they were either green or invisible, because they could not be seen.

"Huh. Maybe we should get it cleaned a little bit," she said. "That was a good suggestion, honey. Is that something you can take care of?"

The husband Alex used all his self-control to appear nonchalant, but inside he was burning with pride and relief. He turned away for a second and exhaled so that his perceptive

wife would not smell the intensity of those emotions on his breath, and then he turned back in a slow Swedish way that seemed very at one with the surroundings.

"I guess so," he said. "I think so."

"Are you sure? I know you've been going non-stop on this house thing for at least one or two or three years now, and if you need a break from it, I'm sure I can just get a paralegal to call someone. Like a pool cleaner or something."

"I'll take care of it." And he looked around the yard for other possible uses for his now highly-developed project management and question-asking skills.

Of course, this was an old-new house (old in general, new to them), and there is always something that can be done with such a situation. And before long, the husband Alex had developed a new spreadsheet (his spreadsheet skills had also improved considerably, by the way), and on it he listed all the possible projects, and he ranked those projects based on complexity, cost, fun-factor, and weather-dependence, and then he color-coded each project using a special color-coding chart that he created based on aggregating the various colors of the decision factors (complexity, cost, etc.), each of which was also color-coded.

The spreadsheet-making took several months, and soon it was fall and the weather-dependence factor suddenly became more important as winter loomed.

"Oh dear," he said one evening to his wife. "I made the worst project-planning blunder of all. I didn't account for the time needed to actually plan for the projects. Now winter is coming, and the weather-dependence factor needs to move

up in importance, and this could affect the complexity and cost factors as well, and it could turn into a never-ending escalating spiral of action-and-reaction that could take all winter. And when will we have our Anderson family housewarming party around the lake? We can't do it in the winter, and not even too soon after the winter. Oh dear."

"Don't worry, dear," said the wife Alex. "Our parents and grandparents are healthy and patient, and they can wait until next spring for the housewarming party. It'll give them something to look forward to."

"Yes. Yes, you're right." The husband Alex looked relieved. "It's nice to give people something clearly-defined to look forward to. It allows them to focus their energy on a goal. It's good to have clearly-defined goals."

"Yes, dear. That's very perceptive," the wife said without being patronizing or condescending. (These really are very sweet and unassuming people.)

And so the trees changed color along with the spreadsheet, and soon winter came and the green glaze on the lake turned into a thick green sheet of ice, and things went along reasonably well in the new Anderson household in the nice upscale urban suburb of Edina. No one in the Anderson family questioned why neither Thanksgiving nor Christmas was held in the new future headquarters of the Minnesota branch of the two great old Swedish Anderson families, and this was because the older Andersons were well aware of the turmoils of dealing with a new house, especially one with a lake.

And the lake was a hot topic at both the Thanksgiving as well as the Christmas Anderson tables. Thanksgiving

was hosted by the wife Alex's parents (they lived in Wayzata, a very nice and very upscale suburb of Minneapolis), and Christmas was held at the husband Alex's childhood home (in a suburb of St. Paul, not within city limits per se, although the husband Alex always insisted it was virtually the same thing).

"I hear you kids have a lake at your new house," said the wife Alex's mother after the Thanksgiving meal.

"A lake," shouted the wife Alex's grandfather, an old Swede who had spent his (very) young days in Sweden during the War. (He was one of the good guys.) "I remember we had two fjords on our property in the old country. Two." He leaned forward in his recliner and made eye contact with everyone in the room until his old Swedish meatball-sized eyes locked with the husband Alex's meatball-sized head. "Two."

"That must have been very nice," said the husband Alex. He was well aware of the older Anderson's hearing and staring problems, and so he neither took offense nor saw the statement as a challenge to his manhood or anything silly like that. "We have just one lake, but it's a big lake."

"No, it's not," said the wife Alex with a snort. "It's barely a pond."

"It is so not a pond," responded the husband Alex with a bigger snort, and one that came dangerously close to bringing out some green glaze. "I've checked the dimensions, and our water-body would officially be classified as a lake. A Minnesota lake."

"One of the ten thousand?" exclaimed the grandma Anderson. "Oh, how nice. You must be very proud. How many

people can say they own a lake? Did you hear that, dear? They own a lake." She poked her husband with a foot, and the old Swedish warrior grunted and tickled his wife's sock-clad stump.

"Two," he mumbled, and then promptly fell asleep.

Christmas at the husband Alex's childhood home was similar but a bit more intense (perhaps because ham is a redder meat than turkey). After the ham and the pudding had been attacked and conquered, the oldest Andersons (the husband Alex's grandparents) led the charge on the topic of the new house.

"Three bedrooms, is it? I couldn't tell from the pictures," said the grandfather Anderson.

"Four," said the wife Alex.

"Four? Oh my," said the grandmother Anderson, and she giggled a little bit in that sweet Swedish grandmotherly way, but she did not go any further and make silly comments like: "Oh, that must mean you are planning to have at least three children, or perhaps even six, because children can easily share rooms like we did in the old days."

The grandfather Anderson grunted. "Must be small bedrooms, judging from the size of the house. Because you want to have a big living room, of course. It has a big living room, of course?"

"Massive," said the husband Alex.

"Big enough," said the wife Alex.

“Big enough for what? You guys planning on kids this year?” said the mother Anderson without thinking, and then she tensed up when she thought about it.

See, the extended Andersons (both of the separate-but-equal branches), due to their overwhelming sensitivity and niceness on account of them all being Swedish-Minnesotans, had, after the first two childless years of their kids’ marriage, stopped talking about babies. They had assumed that if the two young Alexes had tried unsuccessfully for two years, perhaps there was something wrong, or something lacking, or something missing, and these were not topics for Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner tables, at least not unless brought up by the kids themselves.

And the kids themselves never brought it up at the dinner tables, not at any dinner tables apart from the one time at that one dinner table many years prior:

They had indeed tried to conceive fair-and-square during those first two years, and after that, at the insistence of the husband Alex and the agreement of the wife Alex, had gotten tests and what-not, all of which showed that these two young Swedes were “all there” as far as baby-making potential went.

But soon after those tests, the wife Alex, who hadn’t really analyzed why not getting pregnant had actually made her a little bit happier, eventually figured out that she was indeed happier without kids (even though she didn’t know why). And so, shortly after those first two years of not having children and not talking about it, she brought it up at their dinner table.

"I'd like to wait," she had said.

"For what?" he had said.

"You know what."

"Oh," he had said. "Okay. It's your choice, of course."

"It's our choice," she had said. "But there are things I want to do first."

"Things like what?"

"Whatever. I think things at work are picking up, and I'd like to see where I can take it."

"So, work-things."

"And other things, perhaps."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. We're young. There's plenty of time."

"We're in our twenties. I guess that's pretty young," he had said. "How long do you want to wait?"

"I don't know. Maybe until we're thirty or so? I don't know. What do you think?"

The husband Alex just shrugged. "So we'll talk about it when we're thirty or so, I guess."

And that was the last time the Andersons had talked baby at the dinner table.

But now the mother Alex had brought it up without thinking, and she was embarrassed because she and her husband and her parents all assumed that there was something wrong or something missing or something lacking. And the Alex Andersons were embarrassed because they had not talked about it for many years, and now they were in their thirties, and the wife Alex was wondering if the husband Alex remembered what he had said on the matter when they had

last talked about it (when in their twenties), and the husband Alex was upset that it had been brought up at the Christmas dinner table, because he had been planning to avoid talking about it for at least another few months, which was when he and his wife would both be thirty-one, at which point there could be no argument about whether they were “thirty or so” because thirty-one would be fair-and-square within that range.

And so everyone just ignored the comment, and someone made up some kind of diversion, and although all those present avoided the topic for different reasons, the end result was suitable to all, and that result was the silent delivery of coffee and reinforcements of Christmas pudding.

But the drive home from that unnamed St. Paul suburb to the aptly named Minneapolis suburb of Edina was lacking some of the merriness that most people (and certainly the Andersons) would associate with Christmas. It was that funny situation where each of them was trying to imagine what the other was thinking, and in doing so lost track of what they themselves were really thinking, and it resulted in that awkward middle-ground between confusion, paranoia, and self-consciousness (the Scandinavia of the heart’s Europe, if you will).

And somewhere between Minneapolis and Edina, those celestial beings that had been bored to death with the previous two or three years of house-hunting did some poking and stoking, and our two Alex Andersons blurted out some words at precisely the same time.

“I want to wait a little longer,” said the wife Alex.

“I want that dog,” said the husband Alex.

Now, these statements were expelled into the turgid air with great expediency, astounding diction, and ridiculous synchronicity, and so it sounded something like this:

Iblongtoodayteglobawongle!

The end result, of course, was that neither heard the other's words, but the tension had been broken by the blurtations, and so both the Alex Andersons laughed with relief that they wouldn't have to talk about it quite yet. But one must not discount the very true impact that words, even when not apprehended by the mind, make on the emotional receptors of sensitive people, and so these statements were indeed assimilated by each counterparty at deep layers of consciousness, far below the murky green surface of day-to-day cognizance.

And so, the very next day, the wife Alex, without really understanding why, ordered a paralegal to go out to the SPCA and pick up a cute and healthy dog, but not the cutest or healthiest (because the cutest and healthiest will always get adopted, and so it's much nicer to adopt one that may not get adopted easily).

6

They called him Babe, after Babe the Blue Ox, gigantic mythical companion to the mythical giant Paul Bunyan. (And not after the imaginary Anderson baby that the poor dog was proxy for.)

Babe was a mutt of several fine breeds: Dalmatian, Alsatian, Labrador, and Swedish Terrier (yes, there is such a thing). He was grown, but still very young, and so quite firmly in that gray area between puppy and dog. He was housebroken, and was reasonably friendly and bouncy, and the husband Alex (who spent the most time at home) got to like him a lot.

Unfortunately, Babe did not take to the husband Alex so much. Perhaps it had something to do with that sixth sense of animals, and so perhaps Babe had understood that it was

the wife Alex's sixth sense that had freed him from the animal shelter, or perhaps he picked up the odd smell on the husband Alex's breath which, to a dog, is a dead giveaway that the pet situation in the house is not so much training-for-a-baby (completely acceptable to a dog) as it is instead-of-a-baby-or-at-least-until-we-talk-about-it-again (border-line sketchy for a dog).

And so, when spring came and the weather forecast indicated that freezing temperatures were done with for at least the next seven-to-nine months, Babe took off. He left. Ran away. Scrammed.

The husband Alex was beside himself, partly (actually mostly) because the day-care (his term) was his responsibility, and partly because he really did like Babe (but even he had figured out that Babe didn't really love him as much as think of him as the help—someone to be respected and compensated, but not loved unconditionally). The wife Alex laughed it off and calmed her hubby down by explaining that urban Minnesota at the beginning of spring was possibly the best space-time coordinates a runaway dog could find himself in, and if Babe didn't come back, it would only be because he had found a new home that treated him as well as his old home. She placed no blame, neither verbally (externally) nor mentally (internally), and soon they called off their search, and eventually the husband Alex took the doggy-bowl and the doggy-pillow and the doggy-toys and tied them all together and tied a big rock to the bundle and gently lowered all of it into the green murky depths of their lake. And then he sat there and cried silently.

But his wonderfully perceptive wife had just the solution for him, and when she returned home from work that evening (the evening of his lakeside cry, which of course she did not know about) she casually raised her voice above the mournful sound of the popcorn-popper and asked her dear sweet Swedish husband about his spreadsheet.

And so began the Spring of the Spreadsheet.

7

Within a week, the walls of the living room had been plastered with full-color printouts of thousands of rows and columns from the husband Alex's spreadsheet (proving that the living room was big enough, but perhaps not massive). The thousands of rows and columns naturally did not equate to thousands of home-related projects, and once the combinatorics had been worked out, the husband Alex proposed ten major projects and twenty-six minor ones.

Cost was not an object, even though it had been a colorful factor on the spreadsheet. The Alex Andersons were pulling in a lot of money as a family, and although this did not make them careless with their cash or disrespectful of their disposable income, it did make them comfortable enough that the husband Alex felt fine with using the finest com-

ponents and contractors, and the wife Alex felt great about paying for all of it.

As the weeks rolled on, things began to change around the Anderson home. Walls came down and bookshelves went up. Storm windows were replaced with Swedish storm-shutters that would have made Frank Lloyd Wright mumble with approval. Skylights were moved around with careless abandon, but finalized with great regard for the movements of the sun (which does not travel directly across the top of the Minnesota sky). The finished basement was refinished and refurnished, and the attic was converted into a dry-cleaning station (they had to get special licenses for the machines and chemicals, but it was a small price to pay for perfectly pressed pant-suits every morning. She was a partner now, you know . . .).

Out of regard for both nature and the neighbors, the husband Alex had minimized the number of outdoor projects. The lake, of course, had been cleaned. The lake-cleaner (different from pool-cleaner, at least in Minnesota), assured the Andersons that the fish would be just fine without the green murkiness, but that was only because the algae would slowly re-form and keep the circle of life going. That being said, he went on, one might see some short-term fish death, but it would only be the old and sick ones that would go, and this would actually make the fish population healthier and stronger in the long run.

The husband Alex, who, after several weeks of supervising strong men in his yard and house, was feeling exceptionally manly, liked the image of strong fish prevailing at the ex-

pense of the weak ones, and so he applauded this and bade the lake-cleaner to proceed with extreme prejudice. And although the wife Alex, who had actually been present for this portion of the conversation, was a little bit grossed out by the brutal statements of natural selection, she was also reminded of the young bloodthirsty Lutheran lawyers at her firm, and so she hurried back to where she had left her phone.

The gazebo came up quick, and a custom-fitted almost-invisible mosquito net was sent over from Sweden (they knew a guy). Two picnic tables with attached benches were placed near the lake, and after some thought and a few clicks in the spreadsheet, the husband Alex had a third one put in. After all, he thought, there were now three branches of the Anderson family that would be picnicking there, even if one of the branches had very few leaves on it.

But it would be a mistake to think that the husband Alex was sitting and obsessing over the baby-Anderson conversation. He rarely allowed himself to think about it explicitly, and any obsessive brooding had been pushed way down-down into his psyche (the classic American male side of that Swedish psyche), and so it was like he wasn't thinking about it at all.

So within the next few weeks all thirty-six projects had been completed, and the Anderson home was ready for its long-awaited housewarming get-together. The husband Alex, in his debrief presentation to the wife Alex, proudly showed a colorful timeline that made it clear that all projects had been completed on budget and within schedule (two months). Of course, he did not superimpose the line-graph showing that

the spreadsheet creation process had taken eight months, but if he had, one could have easily pointed out that better planning was the reason the projects had been completed with such efficiency. (Seems like a missed opportunity there.)

But if anyone thought the hard work was done (and no one in this small leaf-less third branch of the Anderson family thought this), they would have been wrong. It would not be easy to plan and execute the first joint session of the two (separate-but-equal) Minnesota branches of the great old Swedish Anderson families in the house which was destined to be the Minnesota headquarters for this sapling (though in their thirties already) branch of that same old Scandinavian tree.

"Maybe I should plan this," suggested the wife Alex as she eyed the new page of a spreadsheet getting rapidly colorized. "You've been working yourself to the bone with these home projects, and I feel I need to pull my own weight around here. I'll handle the housewarming plans."

The husband Alex was still riding the construction-worker high (which, incidentally, the wife Alex did not mind so much in and of itself . . .), and so he confidently vetoed her suggestion and simply started hitting the keys faster and harder. The wife Alex let it go, and simply went back to her own key-punching, and things went on quite well during this post-project and pre-party phase.

8

By the time the big day arrived, the husband Alex was thin and weary and a bit squirrely himself. The construction-worker macho buzz had long since left him, and it had been replaced by whatever kind of buzz you get when working with caterers and party-light hangers and table-cloth applicers and the special dessert-people that don't work through the caterers and don't deliver and so you have to drive out and drive back with their carefully prepared (and hence easily destroyed during a car-ride) creations.

Nonetheless, the husband Alex held it together (in all senses of the word), and the food and the sundries were all ready and set well before the older Andersons (both sides) were due at the lake-side picnic spot.

"The weather," said the husband Alex as he stared at the sun.

"It looks fine," said the wife Alex. "There isn't a cloud in the sky."

"That's what I'm worried about. It means the clouds are gathering somewhere, and when that happens, they move together like a pack of wolves, and they may come for us."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're acting ridiculous. There isn't a cloud in the sky."

"Am I? Isn't there?" The husband Alex was drooling a bit, but it was not a sign of rabies, because the dog had been gone at least two months, which is longer than the incubation period for rabies.

"Honey, relax. You've done a great job, and now you need to relax. The weather is perfect. The food looks great. You can hardly see the mosquito net covering the gazebo, and all the dead fish have been taken out and the ones left over seem quite healthy."

They went over to the lake, and sure enough, through the newly-forming thin translucent green glaze they could see a few fish, and the fish were definitely moving about.

"See," said the wife Alex. "You did it, honey. Congratulations."

The husband Alex was looking at the sun and scratching the back of his neck furiously, and he didn't react to the reassurances.

"Honey," she said sternly. "Put some sunscreen on your neck, and stop staring into the sun. It's not going to rain. And even if it does, so what? We can go into the gazebo."

"The gazebo isn't big enough for all of us. And my grandma won't make it up those large stairs. I knew I should have made those three gazebo steps smaller. Perhaps turned it into five smaller steps. Or even six. But you can't have six

steps, right? They need to be an odd number, right? Five, or seven, right?"

And this went on until about three-forty-five in the afternoon that Sunday, which was when the first Volvo-load of Andersons showed up.

"Oh, my," squealed the wife Alex's mother. "This is beautiful."

"So lovely," squeaked the wife Alex's grandmother. "More lovely than we imagined it."

"Good stuff," said the wife Alex's father. "Good stuff."

"Two," said the wife Alex's grandfather, and he went directly to the lake and stood by it and they could all tell he was pleased.

The timing was perfect, because just as the Alex Andersons got the first set of the older Andersons seated and fooded and beveraged, the second Volvo slipped its way into the driveway, and both Alex Andersons were ready and able to greet them.

"Oh, this is so much bigger than it looked in the pictures," exclaimed the husband Alex's mother. "Isn't it, dear?"

"Looks about the same to me," said the husband Alex's father. "Not bad, though. Still, you could have gotten an invisible mosquito net for the gazebo. You should have asked me. I know a guy in Sweden."

"We'll have to get his number from you later," said the wife Alex in a pre-emptive (defensive) strike.

"Harold. Come stand here with me," shouted the wife Alex's grandfather to the husband Alex's grandfather.

The two of them had met each other briefly as young men in the old country, and had reconnected after their grandchildren had gotten together. Needless to say, their friend-

ship had made combining the two old Swedish families easier than it could have been (but it would have been easy regardless, because all of them generally got along with each other). And so, instead of asking about the bedrooms again, Harold trundled over to his counterpart and they both stood near the lake and stared out across it like two old men staring out across a lake.

"We had two fjords on our lands back then," said the wife Alex's grandfather. "Beautiful ones, but this one is nice too."

"My family had one fjord, but a big one," said the husband Alex's grandfather. "Much bigger and nicer than this one, but this is okay. It will do."

"I drowned a Nazi in our fjord once," said the wife Alex's grandfather proudly. "Back in the early days of the Resistance."

"No you did not," said the wife Alex's grandmother. "He did not drown a Nazi."

The grandfather turned and almost lost his footing, but not his nerve. "I did too. How do you know? You were not there. You had already left for England with your rich family."

"Your family was rich too," she replied. "You had two fjords, remember?"

The grandfather turned back to the lake and smiled. "Yes," he said. "Two."

"We lost our fjord when I was still young," said the husband Alex's grandfather. "The Nazis took it away. All of it. The house and the stables and everything, but the fjord was what we missed the most."

"I hate Nazis," said the wife Alex's grandfather, and he clenched his fist.

"Good lord, let it go, Sven," said the wife Alex's grandmother.

She turned to the rest of them, all of whom were used to such chatter, although the presence of the lake did seem to have added some gusto to it. “What he means is that he misses having Nazis to hate. Sometimes these men look back on those days of vitality and danger, and in their minds it becomes glorious and exciting, when in truth all of it was miserable and disgusting and just plain sad.”

“I would have drowned a Nazi myself,” said the husband Alex’s grandfather. “But I had no fjord, and so I was powerless against their military machine.”

And he too clenched his fist, and the two of them stood at the banks of the Minnesotan fjord, both clenching and staring out across the Scandinavian landscape, imagining Nazis being chased into the icy waters of powerful fjords.

“Well,” said the husband Alex’s grandmother. “I think they like your lake.”

And everyone laughed, and that broke the Nazi-hold on the group, and soon people were eating and drinking, and before long the sun began to move closer to the horizon and the desserts were brought out and quickly ravaged by the Swedish Resistance, and all seemed well in the new Minnesota headquarters of the two great old (separate-but-equal) branches of the Swedish Anderson families.

9

But just like Alexander wept because he ran out of places to invade, and just like old men feel sad when there are no more Nazis left to hate, the husband Alex suddenly found the evenings following the housewarming to be cold and lonely even though summer was rapidly approaching. The wife Alex had been working harder than ever, and the house-projects related to the Spring of the Spreadsheet were all holding together annoyingly well.

Still, Alexander did find more land to conquer (although he lost that battle and was himself killed), and there are still a few Nazis running around (everywhere except Germany, Sweden, and Minnesota), and so the husband Alex slowly came around to dealing with the emotions that were bubbling up in him like green bubbly glaze in a popcorn-popper.

“We have all this water,” he said to his wife one evening as he stared out of the kitchen window, “and so I wonder if it’s time we had some waterbabies.”

The wife stared at the back of his head for an instant, and then decided to pretend not to hear. She started the blender, but it was a professional quality machine and so it quickly decimated whatever it was she had put in it and the efficient smooth blade soon sounded like nothing more than a purr.

“I mean,” said the husband Alex. “It seems only logical that if we have all this water, we should also have some waterbabies. Or perhaps just one waterbaby.”

The wife did not want to encourage this metaphor, partly because as a Lutheran lawyer she was discouraged from encouraging the use of metaphor, and partly because she did not really want to talk about what lay beneath the confusing (but not obscuring) metaphor. And so she simply replied in her soft Swedish way.

“No,” she said.

And that was the end of the waterbaby discussion.

IO

After several more cold and quiet evenings at the kitchen window, the husband Alex finally spoke about something besides the weather (which had been shockingly stable) and his job (which had paralleled the weather).

“You know,” he said one evening as his wife tried to race in and out of the kitchen without having to turn on the blender. “If we aren’t going to have any waterbabies, perhaps we don’t need all this water.”

The wife Alex stared at her phone and willed it to ring, and she stared at the ceiling and wished it to collapse, and she wondered if she would have kicked the dog had it still been around. Lucky dog, she thought, but immediately felt guilty because she loved her husband very much, and her silence and tension had nothing to do with a lack of love and everything to do with the slight bit of guilt she was burying

under several layers of Swedish self-righteousness (her grandfather had drowned a Nazi, after all) and American ambition.

"I mean," said the husband Alex, "what's the use of having all this water if we're not going to have any waterbabies?"

But the waterbaby discussions were over as far as the wife Alex was concerned, and so she ignored the blender and poured out her coffee and gave her dear husband a peck on the cheek to remind him that this had nothing to do with a lack of love and everything to do with being a Minnesota-based Swedish-American high-powered Lutheran lawyer-woman who still felt young at thirty-one and was quite happy with her job and house and husband and was willing to live with a little bit of repressed guilt and evening tension, certainly for the present, and perhaps for the indefinite future.

I I

The summer arrived with a swarthy vengeance (sort of like Alexander's invading hordes), but the kitchen was damp and cold and the kitchen window was smudged with the oily abstract images of waterbabies dancing with chubby celestial beings. And this little dance, although imperceptible to the husband Alex, nonetheless coincided with an elevation in his mood (and may have even caused the elevation, but who can say that?).

"Honey," he said to the wife Alex as she tiptoed into the kitchen that evening. "I think we should build a _____ in the backyard."

She stared at her husband's head and smiled in shock and relief and surprise.

"Oh, honey," she cried, "I've always wanted a _____."

"Then it's settled," he said. "We will fill in the lake and build a _____."