



Profile, Fox Island Marsh, Wellfleet Oil on Canvas

Places of the Heart

By Rick Fleury

Graham and I used to be city dwellers -- relatively speaking. We were living on Cape Cod which, by most standards, does not include anywhere that meets the distinctions of a "city." But, we were living in Provincetown, the center of Provincetown, which, compared to where we live now, on a dirt road in Wellfleet bordering Fox Island Marsh, was "the city." Across the street from Duarte's Parking Lot, and what used to be the old train depot, and just up from Lopes Square and McMillan Pier, our small street became a major summer thoroughfare. Finding peace, quiet and solitude for an afternoon walk, or stop, on any given day was not only a challenge, it was a mission. A mission, I am happy to report, we successfully accomplished. We found our tree.

Our tree became a daily destination. It was located just below the Catholic cemetery, on the far side of a hill, overlooking what was sometimes used as a soccer field. It was Town-owned land, just down from the Pilgrim Monument, a real ballfield, and far across faced a smattering of modest Provincetown homes built somewhere in the late fifties or early sixties.

Beneath the tree was a grassy hillside, shade and, most importantly, a breeze. There was always a breeze, especially in summer, regardless of the weather, the temperature or the direction of the wind. For some reason, when we were under our tree, the breeze was always blowing. Graham made a ritual of rolling down the hill. This would start by thoroughly rolling his nose in the grass, his hind quarters high in the air, then tumble, making a variety of grunts and grovels in a chorus of happiness, ending up at the bottom, looking up, with that smile only a dog can make -- well, a smile only a collie named Graham can make. This, of course, was infectious, and instantaneously returned.

And, so it was, and so it became, our spot. Our secret spot. Our summer oasis. Far and away from what most had come to Provincetown for, and for us, far better.

Finding our spot was not by chance. It was not by coincidence. It did not just happen to appear. It was hard won and long sought. This was a quest. And, from the first day of discovery, and for the time we remained in Provincetown thereafter, it became a coveted, and highly guarded secret. It was, and will always be, our place. Our tree. Our spot.

We've since moved away, and have called the environs of Wellfleet and Eastham home for going on six years now. We're not city dwellers anymore. More like beach guys, or, more accurately, marsh dwellers. We've come upon many spots since then - many with grander views, more obvious solitude, even more majesty. But the sweetness of the grass beneath our tree still ranks among the best.

We've moved on, but not beyond. In the sanctuary of Fox Island Marsh, the vast grandeur of White Crest and Lecount Hollow beach, and the hidden beauty of Sunken Meadow and Cape Cod Bay, what will soon be our new home and studio in Eastham, we are still in search of the same thing, that same ethereal sense we found beneath that tree, that feeling that transcends all beauty and awe that nature and the earth can provide in places all over the globe: a place of the heart.

I can speak for Graham here, as is necessary, and tell you of one we both share with certainty. It is at the waterline of any tide in the late afternoon shadows at Lecount Hollow. It is here, in the cool, wet sand, where Graham lies down with decisiveness and abandon, I beside him, and we look out to sea, listening to that familiar roar, feeling that familiar rumble and smelling that fresh, briny smell of the salt air. Here we are one, with each other, one with ourselves, and one with our surroundings. We are truly in one very special, one extraordinary, and one extremely fortunate place, this place of the heart.

It matters not the time of year, the weather of any given day, or who may or may not be walking by. For any day, any condition, good or bad, warm, cold or otherwise, this is a meeting place for us. Not a meeting place of the convivial sense, but of one much more important, much more precious. It is a meeting place of our spirits, a meeting place of our souls.

Fox Island Marsh is something different, but also quite the same. It is here that, for more than five years, each of our days have begun. It is here, at the point, where the road turns, the log lies still and tides meet wet and folding grasses that we look out toward Fox Island, around its eastern point and beyond, following the wandering, meandering waters of the marsh as they ebb and flow into the great expanse of Blackfish Creek.

Standing at this headland, for this is exactly what it is, is a daily act of perception, an opportunity to evaluate the beginning of another day, and pause, for a moment, and appreciate the beauty of this quiet, humble spot of grand proportion. If that sounds like contradiction, it's because it is. Quite so. For this place, this vista, of grand skies and wandering tides, captured in so many of my paintings, has become a place so familiar, so personal. Beginning as its first on an easel in Maine, I painted this location as a hope, a dream, a visualization of what might be, what may one day become our home. When it did, I would bring reverence to it every chance I got in the studio. From *Grey Skies* to *Autumn Shadows*, *Fox, Marsh Garden* and *Profile*, this place has been captured on canvas and copper in paintings too numerous to count, and mornings still more numerous quantify. This place, too, has become a place of the heart.

Heading across Uncle Tim's Bridge, and on to Cannon Hill, one of two Cannon Hills in Wellfleet, one arrives at another place that has become familiar like and an old friend, yet ever changing, always new, and always a reprieve. Duck Creek surrounds this hill most all the way around, sparing a narrow spit of land that connects to narrow land and the old railroad trestle. I once asked the esteemed Janet Erickson, as she sat sketching the bridge, one early day for us in Wellfleet, why such an elaborate bridge was created to such a barren, inconsequential place as this small hill in the middle of this inner harbor saltmarsh.

Ms. Erickson is one of the matriarchs of Wellfleet and president of Wellfleet's Historical Society. On this particular day, she was doing her civic duty by drawing the bridge for preservation purposes, as the town was discussing an eventual reconstruction. Ms. Erickson would ensure that this would be done to the greatest care for detail and historical accuracy, which, years later and project completed, one might say her efforts paid off.

She did, however, break from her task this day to answer me, responding with a voice and authority well matching her presence: "This bridge does not connect this point with a tiny hill" she announced. "This bridge connects all of Indian Neck with the town, and was once a major thoroughfare for all living in Wellfleet...."

I went on to learn that Wellfleet once had two harbors, its present harbor near Town as we know it today and a southern harbor, near the other "Cannon Hill" in an area now known as Drummer's Cove. The cannons were fired to announce where the major catch was coming in. And Indian Neck, with its central placement between the town's two harbors, was home to many of the town's fisher people who earned their keep from the many varieties of means brought in from any major catch. Wagons and their teams of workers would meet the boats as directed by the cannon fires. This all went on for many years, until, I'm told, Old Man Paine got tired of young pranksters intentionally misfiring the cannons, sending hoards of well-intentioned workers in the wrong direction, and, so, buried both cannons somewhere on his land on Pleasant Point, surely a place of the heart for this legendary 'Fleetian.

And, to that, I would think any and all parts of Wellfleet are places of the heart to the venerable Ms. Erickson.

I've painted Duck Creek many times since that day, but always different. And crossed Uncle Tim's Bridge just as many, if not more, with Graham, to walk that barren, inconsequential place that has become so dear. The paintings here bear many names, too, like Reason and Testament, Affinity and Sweet Reprieve. This last, referring to the oysters of Wellfleet, basking in the reprieve of another high tide, one more reprieve from the determined Wellfleet oystermen.

I could go on to other places -- the Herring River, Coast Guard Beach, Newcomb Hollow and the kettle ponds. Great Island, Lieutenant's Island and Jeremy Point as seen from Sterling Pass.

But, what is more important than any of these particular locations is why and how any such place becomes a place of the heart. It is not because of their great beauty, though this is always an added bonus, nor is it because of its solitude, for this may sometimes be hard to come by. Places must, as a general rule be shared, though some, like Walden Pond, may always seem to belong to someone that has come before them.

So, what makes a place of the heart? To this, I can only speak for myself, and for my constant companion, Graham. For us, a place of the heart is one of peaceful solitude and quiet familiarity. A place of connection.

Such a place comes with time and frequency. Trust and understanding. Listening, learning, watching and observing. Being open to what it has to offer and curious enough to find out. Something like that of a friendship, perhaps. Perhaps, because that may be what it is.

I remember one day, years ago, I learned of a place of the heart from my grandmother. She was on her way out, after years of Alzheimer's had ravaged her of most everything of who she once was. I was sitting with her, in the nursing home, talking of nothing, and hearing little more.

Suddenly, she pointed, off into the distance, toward the corner of this large, empty room.

“Look,” she said. “Over there.”

I looked, seeing nothing, but asked, “what, Memere? What’s over there?”

“That girl,” she said, a serene smile coming to her face. “That pretty little girl, sitting there under the apple tree.”

I nodded, urging her to go on.

“She looks so happy, her feet dangling there, just at the edge...”

That was the last I saw of my grandmother, and the last I heard her speak. But, that day, that moment, I went with her, surely, to a place very dear, long ago, but near as yesterday, with smells as sweet and a breeze as fresh, to her, a place never to be forgotten. This was, indeed, a place of the heart.