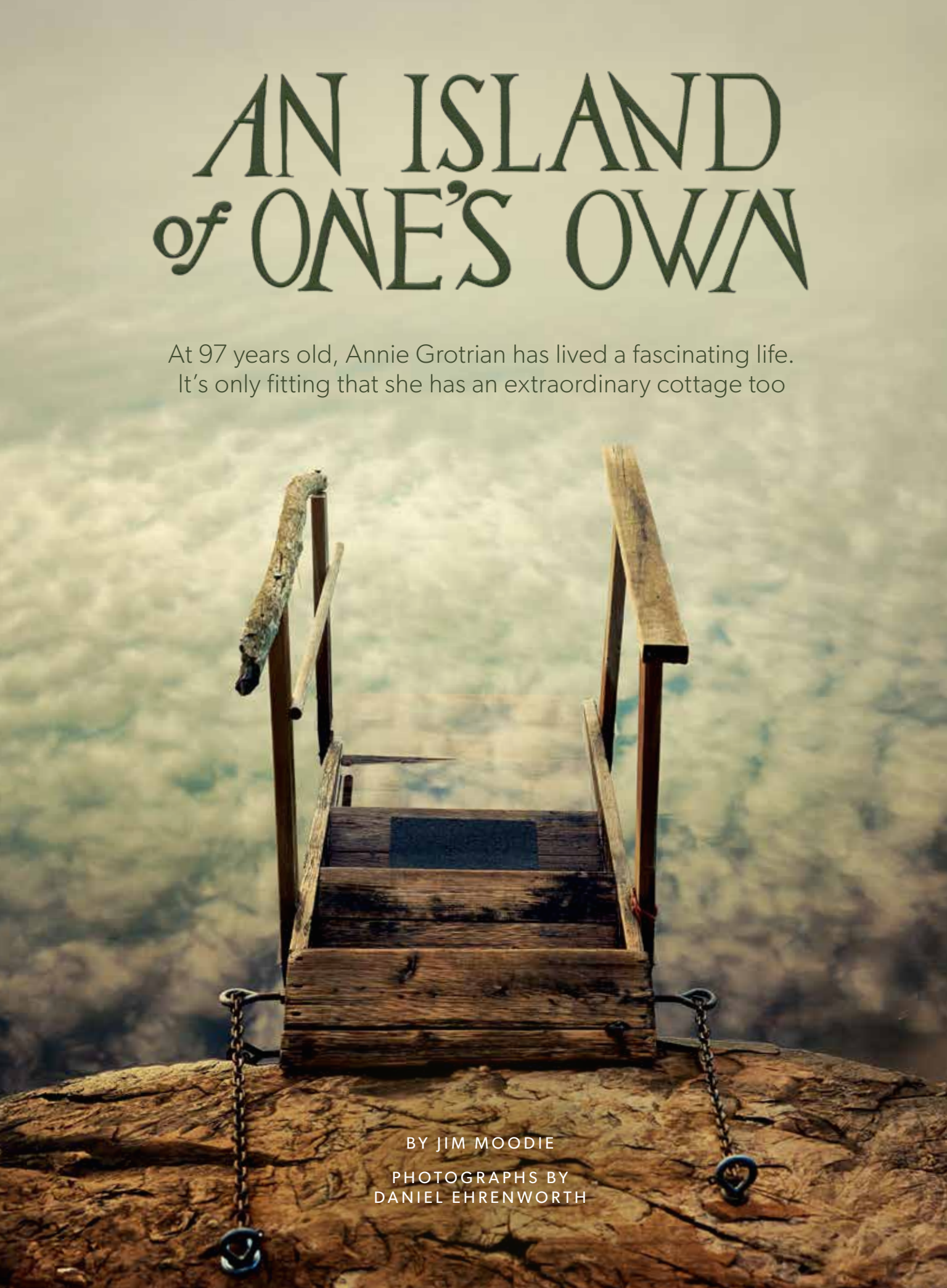


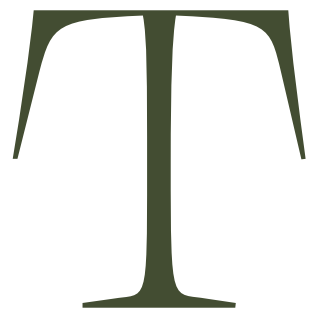


AN ISLAND of ONE'S OWN

At 97 years old, Annie Grotrian has lived a fascinating life.
It's only fitting that she has an extraordinary cottage too



BY JIM MOODIE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
DANIEL EHRENWORTH



The same could be said of the creator. Born in Toronto at the tail end of the Roaring Twenties, Annie had a comfortable upbringing—a home in Rosedale, another one used seasonally on Ward’s Island, a private school education at Branksome Hall. But in many ways, she forged her own path in subsequent years, bucking conventions. She enrolled in art school, toiled in the display department at Henry Birks and Sons, and wed twice—first to a CBC journalist and then to an Englishman seven years her junior. By her early 40s, she had three kids but was otherwise on her own. She has contentedly remained so ever since, pursuing her career and passions: studying and teaching at George Brown College; working in the Arctic; year-long adventures to Mexico and Europe; a safari in Africa. And, oh yes, returning again and again to Georgian Bay, where, at the age of 31, she made arguably her most audacious move in acquiring one island among 30,000. Which might sound easy, given the amount of real estate, but of course is anything but.

“I first came up here in the 1950s with a woman named Gladys Smith whom I met at the Ontario College of Art,” says Annie, while sipping a pre-lunch vermouth. Her friend frequented a tourist lodge near Sans Souci to paint and Annie was keen to tag along. Prior to this, she thought of herself as “a Muskoka girl”—her grandmother had a cottage near Port Carling—and she was also familiar with the Haliburton area, having worked there for a time as a camp counsellor. The explosion of windswept islands she encountered beyond Parry Sound, however, was something else. “I took one look at Georgian Bay and fell madly, madly in love.”

She and Gladys, as everyone called her, would toot around the outer islands of Parry Sound in an old inboard lapstrake her friend had dubbed *The Old Mrs. Smith*, checking out islands that seemed empty and possibly available. By this point, Gladys had acquired her own island, directly across from the lodge, and Annie was tempted to follow suit. “We had a lot of fun,” she says. “And in 1959 she said to me, Anne, if you are serious about getting an island—because I would fantasize about it—you better do it now, because Crown land is closing down soon, and you won’t be able to buy anymore at \$150 an acre.”

Simultaneously, Annie had been considering a proposal from Christian—an “Old Etonian,” as she describes him, in reference to his time at a posh British boarding school—who would become her second husband. “I went back to Toronto and said, ‘Are you still

serious about getting married?’—because I more or less implied to him that we didn’t have to get married in order to carry on. I was ahead of my time, I might add—and he said ‘Yes,’ he was. I said, ‘Good, we’re going to buy an island.’”

The one they found was just 1½ acres, but it featured great views of sunsets and stars, smooth swimming rocks, a variety of flora (including vivid red cardinal flowers), and a sheltered spot to tether a boat. It also, bizarrely, came with a bright-orange bus. A previous owner had barged it over, says Annie, thinking it would meet the requirements of the time to “prove up” a Crown property within two years. That didn’t fly, and the land went back to the government. “It was in that very brief space of time that I was able to buy it for \$180.”

The bus was eventually cut up with an acetylene torch and sunk in the bay. (While swimming as a teen, Annie’s daughter, Lynn, recalls getting spooked by a part that lurked offshore. They eventually dragged the mess out deeper.) But for a time, the bus provided some basic, if buggy, accommodation while the cottage was being

built. In this, the couple got some expert help, at a price they could hardly refuse. The two had been introduced to Inigo Adamson, a budding Toronto architect who had recently studied under Frank Lloyd Wright at his Taliesin estate in Wisconsin. “We had been thinking about a prefab, which is really boring, until we met Inigo,” says Annie. “He told us he would design us a

In 1980, Annie (below) was keen to visit friends in Frobisher Bay (now Iqaluit), but she couldn’t afford airfare. One friend suggested applying for a job there that he was looking to vacate—a government position managing a small, Inuit jewellery store—as a way of getting the government to fly her out for an interview. “I thought, aha, brilliant, what a good scam,” she says. “Apparently, I was the only person they interviewed. So I thought to myself, Anne, you’re 53, you don’t have many more big adventures left, so why not? And it was the most interesting year of my life.”

THE ISLAND’S ONLY name is the alphanumeric one assigned by surveyors, but even that is enough to get Annie Grotrian going on a riff. “I think it has a nice ring to it,” she declares, before launching into song. “B-652, I love you,” she trills, while her children Lynn and Bruce look on with bemusement. “It was,” she continues to ad lib, more *sotto voce* now, “the best island in the world.” You could liken the tune to a mix of “A Bushel and a Peck” and “The Ballad of Gilligan’s Isle,” but really it’s pure Annie: whimsical, irrepressible, full of surprises.

The biggest surprise, to family members included, is that she is actually here again at her cherished hump of granite. “I figured we were done, but not quite,” Bruce tells me, during the half-hour boat ride from the marina. “By force of will, she’s making a last trip to Georgian Bay.” Annie is 97 and requires oxygen; to cross a room, she relies on a walker. As Bruce and I jolt across Five-Mile Bay (each wave feeling, to me, like a punch in the gut) and on down the South Channel, swerving around shoals, I try to picture her enduring this same jaunt a few days earlier. And that’s before we get to the stairs. I count 23 from the dock to the cottage. How does his mom do it? “One at a time,” says the son.

Once inside, the matriarch arises from a brightly upholstered settee adorned with hand-painted pillows to greet us. Annie is colourful herself, in a floral shirt and a fuchsia fleece. A round pendant big as a sand dollar, crafted from silver and walrus ivory, is draped around her neck, while a finger on each hand bears an impressive ring. “Blinged right out,” as Bruce puts it. But these are Annie’s own creations—the jewellery, and the pillow paintings too—and they’re far from garish. Each is intricately made, one of a kind.





cottage and maybe even help build it—and he would only charge us \$400, which honestly is insane—with one stipulation: the site and the design would be entirely up to him.”

The post-and-beam building with pagoda-style roof went up in one summer, with Christian, Inigo, and their friend Alistair Grant—all just 24 at the time—doing most of the work. Of course Annie rolled up her sleeves as well, as did Lynn and Bruce, then 10 and eight, respectively. “Scrap wood pickup,” says Bruce. “And a lot of it,” adds Lynn. “Basically, child labour.” The resulting structure is rustic yet elegant, with lots of windows to let in light, a wide-open living and kitchen area, and a wraparound sleeping balcony set at a quarter-turn to the main floor, such that four triangles are available for beds and a huge, diamond-shaped aperture yawns above, revealing the cedar-sheathed cathedral ceiling. The cottage is just 24-by-24-feet (or was, before a small bedroom was tacked on) but it feels much bigger. “That was Inigo’s whole point,” says Annie. “In what is a very small structure, there is a great feeling of space.” He also insisted on a complex roof design—each of its four panels is doubly curved into a hyperbolic paraboloid, saddle-like in shape—which might not be the most practical for shedding twigs and needles, but does make for an aesthetic fit with the forest. “Inigo designed it like that to emulate the curve of a pine branch,” says Annie.

Natural themes and artifacts also dominate the interior, from landscapes painted by friends to a giant assortment of seashells to a spiky array of bones that Annie has collected in her travels. “I love skulls,” she states. One cranium is from a bear that was harvested by a local man; others owe to her time in Iqaluit, where she managed a jewelry company owned and run by the government of the Northwest Territories and spent her spare time combing the shores. Vying for space along the loft walls, or suspended from overhead beams, are walrus tusks, muskox horns, a massive rack from a caribou, and a narwhal spine that Annie cut into sections with a Swiss Army knife after tripping across the carcass on one of her treks.

Annie’s son Bruce (opposite) poses with the infamous narwhal spine (far left), which Annie smuggled on a plane *before* cleaning it. She traded two necklaces for the Canada goose carving (right). “It’s in desperate need of dusting, but still beautiful,” she says.



“The smell was enough to drive a vulture off a garbage truck,” she says. “However, I found enough wood to start a fire, poured a gallon of Javex into a big bucket, and boiled every part before I threaded it back together.”

Dinner plans are now underway—and what better way to whet your appetite than to talk about the rotting cartilage of whale vertebrae?—but a beverage is suggested in the meantime. “In for tea, or do you want to go straight to whisky?” Bruce asks his mom. A single malt, it is. “I’ve been a very enthusiastic drinker for most of my life,” says Annie. “And a smoker.” Indeed, the nonagenarian only quit her cigarette habit a few years ago, when she had to go on oxygen after being diagnosed with COPD. Before that, well into her late-eighties, she could still be found sheltering from rain

in the biffy—as she and her family call their quite spacious and agreeable outhouse—to enjoy a puff while listening to CBC on an ancient Telefunken radio and re-reading the poetry that guests have left on the walls, or the *Oxford Book of Quotations* she leaves on a hand-made lectern.

Her appetite for literature goes well beyond that. Annie always has a tome on the go and over the years has happily devoured many classics, including such doozies as *Remembrance of Things Past*, *Don Quixote*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*. The night before I arrived, she finished a collection of Chekhov stories, and while sipping her pre-dinner Scotch announces: “I am horribly in need of a new book.”

She doesn’t flip pages by this point—macular degeneration has made small print impossible—but she keeps going with audiobooks. And if she needs to see something else, such as cards for the mandatory post-dinner cribbage game, she dons her “super specs”—a set

of black jeweller’s glasses that make her look like some kind of hero in a futuristic action movie. She was still swimming up until the summer of 2023, and prided herself on doing 100 strokes each time. In, always, the buff.

While Annie goes for a nap in her little bedroom, trailing her oxygen tube behind her and passing beneath a sign that reads, “A Room of One’s Own” (no doubt she’s read that one), her kids talk about her capacity to soldier on, without complaint. “Her body probably would have quit long ago had it not been controlled by her,” says Bruce. Adds Lynn: “I’m the kind of person who whines about everything—complete opposite to Mom, who never does that. She is a liver of life.”

Annie has now outlived her first husband by seven years at this point, and Inigo, the architect, by many more—he died prematurely at 42. Christian, whose name she kept, is still alive (he’s seven years younger, recall) and has been invited to visit the *Cont’d on p. 62*

Most of Annie’s furniture is built-in or repurposed—the coffee table (top, middle) is made from a piece of wood that was originally slated to be part of a boat’s stern. Annie found it in a Toronto lumber store and had a frame constructed for it. She designed, built, and hung the hanging chair herself. It has an adjustable back, which is an improvement on the design of others like it, says Annie. “When I look at it, I think, Oh the cleverness of me.” One of Inigo’s original drawings of the cottage hangs on a beam going up to the loft (top, right). A neighbour built Annie a small bedroom (bottom, right) on the first floor when it became challenging for her to climb up to the loft.



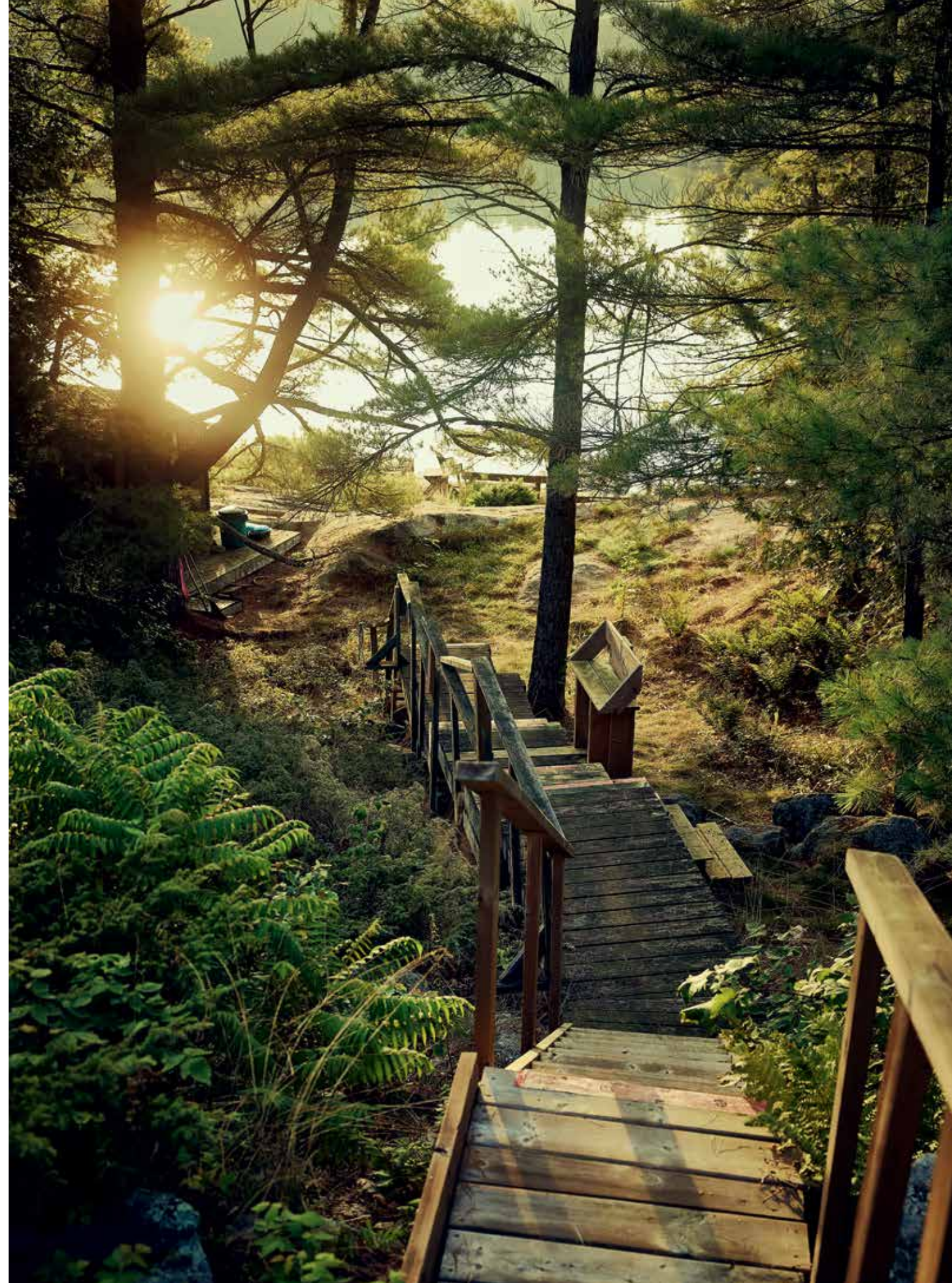


“I took one look at Georgian Bay and fell madly, madly in love,” says Annie

Judy, Bruce’s wife, in the kitchen (above). Annie made do with a basic setup, just a propane stove and fridge, to entertain guests over the years. “We didn’t have electricity until three years ago. I didn’t want it, but I got out-voted,” she says. “But I was grateful for it last summer. I wouldn’t have been able to go to the cottage without it.”

cottage again, although he now lives in Catalonia, and the family doesn’t feel this is likely to happen. Gladly, who introduced Annie to the bay, is sadly gone, as are many other friends. But she also made lots of younger pals through studying jewellery arts at George Brown and going on to teach there, which she continued doing until she was 83. “The age difference didn’t matter,” says Lynn, “because of the kind of person she is.”

When she was in her late 50s, Annie and an artist friend named Audrey drove from Toronto to the Yukon and Alaska, camping as they went. “At some point, the rear window of the Volvo shattered, so they had a piece of plastic taped on the back,” says Bruce, who had settled by that time in Whitehorse, and was patiently waiting for the two to arrive. When they finally did, a few days late, the road warriors promptly exchanged their



wheels for paddles and canoed with Bruce and his wife, Judy, to Dawson City, a 700-kilometre jaunt down a sparsely inhabited stretch of the Yukon River that typically takes a couple of weeks. “It’s one thing after another,” says Lynn, shaking her head. “She’s an adventurer; she’s game for it. And so, looking back, I can see how this cottage happened. Her just saying: ‘Yep, we’re getting an island. We’re going to do this.’”

It’s not completely true that the island has no name. Before the family secured it in 1959, it was known locally as Bus Island, after the eyesore on its shore. But nobody calls it that now. The cottage has a name too, according to the original sketch done by Inigo that you encounter on a beam while ascending the stairs to the loft. “Casa Grotian,” it says. “Does it?” says Annie, when I point this out. I’m pretty sure it’s not that she has forgotten—her brain burns at a higher wattage than most people I know, even those half her age—but more that she’s just never cared for such a highfalutin’ term.

The most logical name, and one some people already use, is Annie’s Island. But the cottager isn’t too keen on that either, in part because there is already an Annie Island in Georgian Bay. (And could there really be two of her?) Mostly, though, she doesn’t feel like she has a claim to this piece of wilderness. “I just think how grateful I am that the fates—and I am an atheist—allowed me to borrow this island for 65 years,” she says. “I’m just resting my bare bum on the rock.”

That said, she would be okay with leaving a slightly firmer mark on her beloved B-652. “I wouldn’t mind having a little brass plaque installed out there at some point,” she admits near the end of our visit, gesturing in the direction of the lee-side cove that once hosted a beat-up bus and has since become the family’s spot to strip down and sink into a liquid hug, like being born in reverse. “A tiny, tiny bit of me bolted to that rock would be nice.” 🐾

Jim Moodie once camped unknowingly in the vicinity of Annie’s island while on a canoe trip in Massasauga Provincial Park. He has a cabin on Panache Lake, Ont.

Bruce, Annie, grandson Ben, and Judy toast another cottage day at the dining table Inigo designed specifically for the space. Annie painted the top for the first time just a few years ago.

