



*The* Fishers of  
Paradise

RACHAEL PRESTON

*The* Fishers *of*  
Paradise

RACHAEL PRESTON



© Rachael Preston, 2012, 2016

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher or a license from the Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). For an Access Copyright license, visit [www.accesscopyright.ca](http://www.accesscopyright.ca) or call toll free to 1-800-893-5777.

James Street North Books is an imprint of Wolsak and Wynn Publishers.

Cover images: boathouses: “Around Dundas Marsh,” by John Morris. Courtesy of Local History & Archives, Hamilton Public Library; skaters: iStock

Cover and interior design: Marijke Friesen

Map on endpapers: “*Topographic Map, Ontario, Hamilton Sheet*,” 1909

Source: Library and Archives Canada/Department of Militia and Defence,  
Geographical Section/NMC-0079203

Author photograph: Christian TW Photography

Typeset in Goudy

Printed by Ball Media, Brantford, Canada



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des arts  
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO  
an Ontario government agency  
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario



Canadian  
Heritage

Patrimoine  
canadien

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Book Fund.

James Street North Books  
280 James Street North  
Hamilton, ON  
Canada L8R 2L3

Originally self-published, in different format, as an eBook in 2012.

### **Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Preston, Rachael, author

The fishers of paradise / Rachael Preston.

Previously published: East Point Publishing, 2012.

ISBN 978-1-928088-16-5 (paperback)

I. Title.

PS858I.R449F57 2016

C813'.6

C2016-900681-6

# Chapter 1

The sledgehammers fall silent and the house shifts forward with a wooden groan. Like an aged swimmer anticipating the starter's pistol, it wavers a moment in the wind, knees creaking with the newly uneven weight, and then, in a slow choreography, the stilts fold under themselves and the house slides into the marsh. Water and birds explode into flight, squirrels leap from the bare trees. The sound, magnified by the geography of this enclave of lake and forest, by the stillness of the grey morning preceding it, ricochets a warning. The surface churns, and muskrats and beaver dive to the muddy bottom where carp and pike and bass huddle in the reeds. Water rushes over the porch of the two-storey home, washing against the door and windows as the house lurches drunkenly in its own wake.

No sooner has the lake settled than the thrum of an engine, expensive, throaty, cuts through the silence that has claimed the small crowd gathered on their docks and porches to say goodbye. A gleaming mahogany powerboat noses out from between a set of weathered boathouse stilts like some exotic, temperamental animal and guns into the marsh, leaving behind the heady scent of gasoline. The boat alone, a Grew recently confiscated from bootleggers who ran contraband liquor across Lake Ontario, is worth standing outside in the November cold to see.

Its current owner claims he can still smell the cordite along the three grooves carved portside by glancing bullets.

The driver circles the floating house, making it bob again, then eases back on the throttle and slows to an idle. His passenger turns in his seat to face the front door.

Everyone watches and waits.

Five minutes pass. Six.

Egypt Fisher stands at the shoreline, thinking her eyes might dry out from the wind if the door doesn't open soon.

"What are we waiting for?" Her young brother, Aidan, twirls a stick.

"For Ida to come out."

"Why is she in there?"

Why indeed? "She doesn't like boats."

"So why does she live in a boathouse?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Because, because." Egypt ruffles his hair and whistles for George, who materializes from a scrum of children and lopes towards her, licking his chops. He settles at her feet with his big-dog sigh and nuzzles the back of Aidan's legs.

"Stop it." Aidan wriggles and dances about but doesn't move from George's reach. Egypt keeps one eye on the stick.

"He's loving you."

"His nose is all cold and wet."

"That's a good thing."

Leaves rustle along the ground and a susurrantion of concern purls through the crowd. "Something's not right," someone whispers. "There's been an accident."

When Aidan spins around, Egypt puts her finger to the question on his lips and relieves him of the stick. She stares hard at the windows of the floating house for signs of movement, but they have become mirrors, revealing only the shifting reflections of water and trees. The air grows sticky with unease. What began as a wager has turned deadly. Someone

should have dragged Ida Turnbull from her house before the sledgehammers started. Put her on the bus.

And then the door opens and Ida steps out with a smile and a wobbly curtsy for her neighbours. “I was having a nap,” she kids, but she’s rubbing her arm, and the sun, piercing the grey, catches sparkles on her clothing. Egypt pictures a shattered window, or, more ominously, the cloudy mirror that hangs above Ida’s dresser.

“Having a drink more like,” a voice mutters close to her ear.

Mick Long. Great. She braces for a barrage of Aidan questions, but her brother has slipped away. Then she spies the Mullins kids helping him onto someone’s roof. The little monkey. If their mother catches him up there, Egypt will hear about it for the next week. She should give Mick a piece of her mind for distracting her, but turning around will mean greeting the lovesick Joey Payne, Mick’s shadow, and today she just can’t fashion her face into the necessary shape. George gets to his feet.

“Not speaking to us now, then? Uh-oh, Joey. You hear that? It’s the sound of your girlfriend growing too good for the likes of us. Must be all that schooling.”

Egypt rolls her eyes in case anyone is watching. Someone is always watching.

“Better take back that birthday present you got for her.” Mick leans in so close she can feel his face part the curtain of her hair. “We’ll buy some *li-chor* instead. Have ourselves a real party.” His tongue darts out and grazes her skin. “Snob.”

“I am not a snob,” Egypt snaps, rubbing viciously at her neck. But when she looks around, her mouth stretched in a *Hi Joey* smile, the boys have disappeared.

When she faces front again, so has the dog.

Jacky Turnbull leaves the passenger seat to toss his wife two lines tied to the stern of the boat. Ida holds out her arms to catch them and ducks her head out of the way at the same time, causing laughter to ripple along the waterfront. When she secures the lines to the porch railing, a

cheer breaks out. But it's a half-hearted hooray, one muted with sadness. Since plans for a new bridge were first announced, the community has been on edge. With the Turnbells' leaving, it's as if the city has trespassed into paradise, marking it.

Ida curtsies again and disappears inside her house, emerging moments later with a wooden chair, a blanket to drape across her knees and a mug. As the Grew winches backwards on a long line, Ida seats herself on her lake-washed porch, the mug of tea – or something stronger – cradled in her hands, and, in a parody of Queen Mary, waves to her audience as she slowly begins to glide across the marsh and along the canal that cuts through the Heights. As if towing your home across the bay were an everyday occurrence.

## Chapter 2

Boat and house pass under the fretwork of road and rail bridges that span the cut, and some of the spectators, unwilling to let the Turnbells go just yet, stroll up the path that carves the brow of Burlington Heights to watch them emerge into the bay on the other side. Egypt hangs back until George returns, yipping at Aidan's heels and barking with the excitement in the air.

Up on the Heights, the wind is fierce, lifting Egypt's hair and blowing it across her face like a dark flag so that until she tames it in a loose twist of braid, she sees nothing of the bell-shaped expanse of harbour or the city and its dark mills sitting sentient at the water's edge.

"Goodbye, Ida. Goodbye, Jacky." Hands cupped to mouths.

"Make lots of new friends."

"Don't let those city folks push you around."

More waving, more farewells cast to the wind.

Egypt remains on the Heights long after the other well-wishers have dispersed, to fish or trap or play, to clean house or conjure the Sunday meal for their hungry families. The house passes the witch's finger of Carroll's Point and shrinks to a small, dark shape. She tugs at the collar of her coat. Ida is no doubt feeling seasick by now, listening to the chinking of plates in the cupboard and wishing she'd taken her neighbours' advice to pack her wares into boxes and ride up front in the boat. Egypt's own



leave-taking won't be such a spectacle. She'll use the path. Chin held high. She shifts her gaze to the sickle sweep of bayside homes below her, almost a mirror image of the houses that hug the water's edge in Cootes Paradise, the marsh side of Burlington Heights where the Fishers live. A hundred or so dwellings in total. Less one as of today. There's a gash in the shoreline where the Turnbulls' house was ripped from its moorings. Tomorrow the neighbours will squabble over the garden fence, dismantle the privy. Over time, marsh reeds will gravitate to the sunny spot where the house used to sit, and come spring, the bindweed will reclaim Ida's potato patch.

She picks out the Turnbulls' convoy again, watching until it is barely visible, willing herself into the city, into next September, lessons tucked under her arm, the resounding clip of her heels in the school corridor signalling her authority, a hushed and expectant class of scrubbed and eager faces. *Good morning, Miss Fisher.*

George nudges her legs and she rests her hand on his shaggy head. "I know. You wouldn't last five minutes over there, would you? Fenced in, or worse, tied up." George pricks his ears, the whistle of a train sounding off in the distance. "No place to run. No rabbits or deer to chase." The dog's long, lean body tenses, every inch of him alert. He steps away from her and barks. "I'll miss you too, but you'll be fine here with Aidan." George barks again, a deeper and more menacing alarm, and Egypt at last turns to see the stranger who is making his way along the old ordnance road.

He crosses the railway tracks and approaches as close as George will allow. Hellos a greeting and lifts his hat. His hair, the colour of dried grass, is longer than it ought to be, ending just before his shoulders. Surprisingly, he's clean-shaven. A shade taller than average, and stringy – these days, who isn't? – he is good-looking in the way all newcomers to a small community are good-looking – their differences exciting and exotic. A girl could be attracted to someone simply because he doesn't look like all the males she's spent her life around.

"Nice dog."

George winds his long body between them, all hackles and rumbling throat, pushing Egypt so that she has to take a step backwards.

“He doesn’t know you.”

“True.” He tips his head and shrugs his eyebrows, and though she keeps her face straight, she can feel a smile tugging at her mouth. George is the size of a small donkey.

“Stand down, killer.”

George lowers his rear end and sits with his ears pricked, chest puffed out. The stranger’s face creases in a laugh.

“What’s his name?”

“George.”

“How d’you do, George?” He holds out his hand for a paw, but George turns his head to watch Aidan digging at the edge of the embankment, lobbing stones and whooping when they hit the water. “Wolfhound?”

“Mostly.” She scratches the back of George’s neck. Lurcher. In George’s case, part wolfhound, part bearded collie, part something else. Not a breed as such, but a type of dog. Fleet of foot. Bred by Irish gypsies and tinkers for poaching rabbits and hares. When Egypt finally understood that her father wasn’t coming back and that George was his way of softening the blow, she’d gone to the library and looked up what she could find on the lineage of her new puppy, hoping for some kind of message. Her mother said that George had likely been plucked from a litter bound for the lake in a sack. Or some crony owed Egypt’s dad a favour.

“He a good hunter?”

“He’s fast.”

“That your kid?”

“He’s my brother.” She juts out her hip and stands arms akimbo, flattered he thinks she’s older than her nearly seventeen years. “He’s five.”

“Five and a half and a bit,” Aidan, crouched in the dirt, calls over his shoulder. He jumps up and runs towards them, hands clasped together in front. “I have worms,” he says, thrusting his hands towards the stranger.

“Let’s see.”

Aidan opens his hands a crack, and the stranger tips back his hat and stoops to peer inside.

“I reckon they’re good for fishing with.”

“You want them?”

“Sure.”

Aidan releases his wriggling bounty into the young man’s outstretched hands while Egypt regards his knapsack, his worn shoes and faded clothing. A drifter. But not like the blank-eyed tramps and hoboes that sometimes – more frequently since the stock market crash last year and the sharp rise in unemployment – jumped from the city-bound trains and wandered into the community to beg – or steal. He isn’t so ground down. He doesn’t smell so wretched. She almost changes her mind when he opens his jacket pocket and slips the worms inside.

“What are you going to do with them?”

“I understand there’s some good fishing to be had round here.” He winks at Aidan. “Thanks there, buddy.”

“You can get fishing line from the flowers in the graveyard. Come, I’ll show you.” Aidan starts off in the direction of the road.

“Er, no roads or strangers, remember?” Egypt says. Aidan throws his arms up in the air and sighs dramatically.

The stranger laughs in an earthy, melodic register that thrums all the way down to her toes. “Your sister gives good advice.” Then he levels his gaze at Egypt. “You two live round here?”

“That depends.”

“On?”

“Who wants to know?”

“Matt Oakes.” He sweeps his hat from his head and holds out his hand, which she takes, warm and dry. “Pleased to meet you.”

Her brother pushes himself forward. “Aidan Fisher. Pleased to meet you too.” But with the formality of shaking hands, Aidan is suddenly bashful.

“And what do they call your sister?”

“Egypt.”

“Egypt.” It catches him by surprise. Catches everyone by surprise.

“Ray’s idea,” she says.

“Ray?”

“My dad.”

“You’ve got the look of an Egyptian about you.”

She doesn’t know if he intends this as a compliment or not, whether his eyes are smiling or laughing. “He was there during the war,” she says, affecting a tone of indifference. She has to hurry because the train is on its way and she will lose his attention. “He was mesmerized by the great Sphinx in the desert.” Matt Oakes lifts an eyebrow. *Little Sphinx* was always Ray’s pet name for her, so she feels an affinity for the regal and lonely-looking statue in the desert. “And sickened when troops began chipping away at its face for keepsakes.” A detail she’s polished in her mind for so long – Mr. Mitchell mentioned it in class years ago as one of the theories behind the Sphinx’s mutilated face – that it trips easily off her tongue. “When around the same time he learned that his wife – my mother – was pregnant, he wrote back telling her that if the child was a girl he wanted to call her Egypt.” Egypt was born before the war started, but the story has always been too good to resist, and no one has called her on it yet. As to whether her father was in uniform during the war, let alone in North Africa, she doubts even her mother knows. And if he were, chances are he wouldn’t have given a fig about any monument.

“It’s a good story.” Oakes crosses his eyes at Aidan, who bursts out laughing.

“She’s telling porky pies. Egypt was the name of a horse that gave in when she was born.”

“That came in, stupid.” She bends to pick up a stick for George and hide her burning cheeks. Her words are lost as the train that’s been approaching since their exchange began thunders onto its iron bridge, burying her discomfiture beneath the chest-thumping pump of mechanism. George turns up his nose at the stick, a soggy, crumbling specimen that she now feels obliged to hurl into the water. Airborne, it disintegrates. She lifts her chin, self-conscious under Matt Oakes’ scrutiny

and the realization that she's given away far more than she's gotten in return. While the train spews noise and soot on its way into the city, she composes a petition of piercing questions, but her brother is quicker off the mark.

"We live over there," he shouts as soon as the train has cleared the span and he can be heard. He points along the canal to the houses on the marsh side.

"Exactly where I was headed."

"How come? You looking for someone?" Egypt asks.

"I might be."

"Who?"

"Awfully young and good-looking for a gatekeeper, aren't you?" He winks at Aidan. "I was told to expect someone hairy and bent over."

Aidan laughs, points at his sister. "He thinks you're good-looking," he sing-songs, then pretends to retch.

Egypt blushes furiously. If her brother were within clouting distance, he'd be nursing his ears right now.

Matt Oakes sets down his pack and brushes the hair from his eyes, adjusts his hat.

"Either of you know anyone by the last name of Todd? Myrtle Todd?"

The marsh monster. Who flew on a broomstick and boiled children for breakfast. Egypt starts to laugh, then covers her mouth with her hand.

"Nope." Aidan spreads his arms out at his sides and spins like a top.

He does. Or did. But what kid ever bothered learning the monster's name?

"She passed away this July." Bloated in the heat for days before the stink finally rolled out and hit people. As offensive and vile in death as she was in life.

Aidan stops his spinning, eyes widened in horror, and for the second time today Egypt shushes him with her finger.

"I'm sorry. Did you know her well?"

He stares out across the bay, lost in thought. "I hadn't seen her in years. Not since I was a kid. She was my grandmother," he says after a pause.

“Oh.” Egypt is at a loss for words. Squeezes Aidan’s arm in warning.

“She used to write and tell me stories about this place.”

The monster wrote letters? To a child? Egypt has already said she’s sorry but wonders if she should apologize again. After all, being shackled with Myrtle Todd for a grandmother can’t have been fun. Not that Egypt has any grandmothers – or grandfathers, for that matter – with whom to draw comparisons.

“Are you sad?” Aidan asks, wriggling out of Egypt’s clutch.

“A little.”

“Are you still coming to our house?”

“Who said he was coming to our house?” She rolls her eyes, but Matt Oakes only laughs his beautiful laugh again.

“How about you give me a guided tour of the area?”

“Only if I get to ride on your shoulders.”

“Aidan!”

“Sounds like a deal to me.” Matt crouches and helps Aidan find his balance before shrugging his knapsack into place and standing again. Egypt is captivated by his elegant hands, his long, square-tipped fingers gripped around her brother’s skinny ankles.

“I can see our house,” Aidan shouts.

“You could see it before,” she gripes, “without acting like a monkey.”

“It’s not a problem,” Matt assures her.

*Until he falls*, Egypt thinks, shaking her head at her brother’s cheek, his *brass neck* in Ray’s parlance. *Like father, like son*, her mother would say, though Aidan has never even met Ray.

“After you,” Matt says. They cross over the tracks, and Egypt follows George down the incline, under first the High Level Bridge and then the second set of railway tracks, all the time keeping one eye out for her mother. Aidan caught perched on a stranger’s shoulders will land Egypt in more trouble than her life is worth. By the time the path flattens out, she has made up her mind to take her brother home and leave Oakes to find his own way around. But then she turns to face him and already he’s grown better looking. Aidan is yammering about the

need to fetch his fishing pole, and when Matt lets him down, he runs for home.

“He’s a sharp little man, your brother.”

She smiles, knowing the minute Aidan steps over the threshold, her mother will want him to stay inside. And as long as he keeps his mouth shut about Matt Oakes, she won’t come looking to drag Egypt back home too.

But now that she’s alone with her handsome stranger, she finds herself tongue-tied. They stroll the path to where the cut opens into Cootes Paradise and a small sandbar forms a natural break in the line of jumbled homes. Matt steps down to the water’s edge and toes at the mud with his scuffed boots. Hands in his pockets, he takes in the marsh and its islands, the grey forest stretched on either side. “That must be Rat Island.” He nods towards Hickory.

“Rat’s farther out, past that clump of trees on the right.”

“So, where’s Cockpit?”

“Over there,” she says, waving her hand in the direction of Princess Point. “I’m not really sure.”

“You’ve never been to Cockpit Island?”

“Never.” She folds her arms across her chest.

“Bet your old man has.” What cheek. She’d stomp off if only she could be certain he’d follow. Instead, she watches as he laughs with his perfect mouth, the curved lines that bracket his lips. Already she senses how dull and empty this day will feel once he’s gone. Gesturing to indicate the stumps that outline the old Desjardins Canal, she brushes his arm with her fingertips as if by accident.

“When it freezes over you can skate all the way to Dundas.” Her fingers tingle and pulse.

“How far?”

“A few miles.”

“And is Dundas worth skating all the way to?”

“It was an important manufacturing centre and shipping port before they built the railway,” she says. She’s never been to Dundas, or even

spoken to anyone who has. “The houses and mills are all built with local stone,” she continues as he raises an eyebrow. “It’s very beautiful.”

“Sounds depressing. I prefer it here. This is beautiful.” He holds out his hands in gesture. “And so peaceful. It’s paradise.”

She glances at his face to see if he’s pulling her leg, and then scans the shoreline mix of rugged and weathered homes for evidence of this beauty. While it’s true that some of the houses – tall and squat, narrow and wide – have been designed and built with obvious forethought, others edge precariously into the water on mismatched legs. Clumsy roofs balance on patchwork walls of corrugated iron in varying shades of decay. Some are little more than tin-roofed tarpaper shacks. Then there are the names, painted or burned on shingles nailed up over the doors: *Jakaloo*, *The Better Ole*, *UGOIGO*, *Kildare*, *Idle Some More*, *Seldom Inn*, *More Fun*. And the cringe-inducing moniker she has to duck under every time she enters her own house: *The Salty Mare*.

“People in the city think everyone here is inbred, only into drinking, gambling and blood sports.”

“And are you?”

She rolls her eyes. “No.”

“Then why do you care what they think?”

She lowers her voice, lest it carry across the water to one of the fish boats dotted about, or someone standing on their back porch jiggling a line. “This place is full of small minds and busybodies with their noses in other people’s business.”

“Or maybe they’re just looking out for each other. There are drawbacks to living anywhere. Depends on how you look at it.”

She shrugs and points to a cabin three doors from her own. “Your grandmother’s house is over there.”

“Empty?”

She nods. The body was dripping when the men carried it out. Afterwards, they boarded the windows and nailed shut the door. “You’re not thinking of staying there, are you?”

“A night or two. If no one minds.”



People are more likely to lay bets on how long he'll last than to mind his staying. While he stares over at the marsh monster's old lair, Egypt commits every inch of him to memory: the breadth of his shoulders, the set of his hips, the squint lines around his eyes, his slender hands. Piano hands. "I don't mind," she hears herself saying.

"Mom said –" The scudding sounds of her brother running in gum boots. They turn to face the path. "Mom said you're in charge of the boat." Aidan is carrying two fishing poles, the ends of which are dragging on the ground. She's never been more disappointed to see him in her life.

"You have a boat?" Again the heart-stopping smile.

"A skiff."

Matt Oakes rubs his beautiful hands together. "I smell dinner."

"I told Mom you were taking me fishing," Aidan says to Egypt as he reaches them. He hands Matt the longer of the poles.

"That's my man." Matt squeezes his shoulder.

Egypt pulls her trembling mouth back in a smile. Her cheeks already ache. "Oh. That's good, buddy. And what did she say?"

"She said not to let George in the boat."