

BARBARA J. SCOT

The

NUDE BEACH

NOTEBOOK

The Nude Beach Notebook

Also by Barbara J. Scot

The Violet Shyness of Their Eyes: Notes from Nepal

Prairie Reunion

The Stations of Still Creek

Child of Steens Mountain with Eileen McVicker

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*This book is dedicated to Charles K. Cannon, professor emeritus,
Coe College, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Dr. Cannon believed in my
writing and encouraged me for over fifty years.*



Estrangement and reconciliation thread their way through almost every episode in this narrative, as I strive to understand what constitutes and defines family and how to reconcile childhood religious training with adult skepticism. Symbolism presented early in life made a deep imprint on my mind. Sauvie Island and especially the Nude Beach constitute for me a sort of lost Eden with overlays of culture and history, and the Columbia River is the Jordan across which we stare into the blue-gray mists, searching for shades on the other shore. The Odd Ones of the beach are representative of the general mix of humanity: the good, the bad, and the misunderstood. Memory is an unreliable and self-serving medium, certainly by the time one approaches the Biblical allotment of threescore years and ten. Real life is not fiction, but nonfiction, replete with mysteries that can never be fully resolved, but when we follow the thread back to the start of the tangled skein, it is possible to find a certain peace.

Chapter One



I did not go to the Nude Beach much until after the old dogs died. Their slow demise when they could no longer hike the wildlife areas of the island had been excruciatingly painful for me. Worst of all was having to play god with their lives—or more precisely, with their deaths—having to say to my husband both times, well, I guess today is the day we have to stop pretending we’re letting this go on for the dog.

I was bereft without dogs in the way that only those who relate intensely to animals understand, which led me to contact two Samoyed breeders—we always had Samoyeds. I was surprised by my reaction when the pups, only three weeks apart in age, arrived. For months I often called them by the old dogs’ names, and I almost resented their presence. It wasn’t until they were almost a year old and I started taking them to the Nude Beach at daybreak that I began to fully appreciate their lively individual personalities. “Perhaps it was too soon,” I admitted to my husband, “but if they live their full span like the old dogs, I’ll be eighty by the time they’re gone.” If I’m lucky, I thought but did not say aloud because my husband did not like such conversations. I still have one dog life left in my own years.

The Nude Beach was clear across the island from where we lived, but I didn’t mind that. The twenty-minute drive was beautiful, even in inclement weather, and I often felt like it was not only the beginning of a new day, but the beginning of the world as well. “Where were we when the foundations of the earth were

laid?” I would ask the dogs, an old Sunday-school memory surfacing imperfectly. “We were right here on Wapato Island, where the first mists rose around us and the morning stars sang for joy.” Late autumn, when this story begins, the island crossing was the loveliest of all, layers of blue fog skimming the meadows, ancient oaks at the Marydell Dairy archeological site splitting the eastern sun, and Mount Hood mauve in the early morning light. I drove slowly, not wanting to startle the bush birds into the car’s path. Doves rose from the hedgerows and California quail skittered across the road; a small flock of geese, disturbed from their feeding by a coyote slinking hopefully behind them in the field, lifted in unison, and I lowered my window to hear their noisy clatter.

Collins Beach was its official name, but no one I knew called it that. Nude Beach, we all said. The paths leading through the screen of cottonwoods to the sand were marked with signs that read “Clothing Optional,” except at the first path, where someone had scribbled through the word *optional*. The locals who gathered in the mornings for coffee at the Reeder trailer park store described it this way: “The first path is for families, the second is for normal people who just like to take off their clothes, the next for gay men, then one for lesbians, and another for transvestites.”

“It’s surprising how many old folks go there,” said the clerk when I stopped on the way home that morning for milk, “and they hang out without a stitch, just like the kids.” After I paid, the clerk continued. “I don’t care if people go around nude—not on a nude beach, I mean. Let the naked truth hang out, that’s what I say. It all seems rather innocent to me. God brought us into the world without clothes and to my mind that’s the way we should go out. Lewis and Clark considered the women’s dress somewhat indecent when they stopped here ’cause the Indian women wore only cedar-bark skirts in the warm weather—nothing on top. That makes me laugh right out loud when I think about the Nude Beach now and how crowded it is on sunny afternoons in the summer, cars triple deep in the parking strip on weekends. I

can't help but wonder what Lewis and Clark would think about that."

Wappatoe is how Meriwether Lewis spelled the name of the potato-like tuber that provided the main article of trade for the natives of our island. On the map, though, they used Clark's spelling: Wapato Island. Most schoolchildren are aware that Lewis was a challenged speller, even by the standards of his time. What they are usually not told, however, is that Lewis committed suicide only a few years after the Corps of Discovery expedition ended. Not the sort of thing a teacher likes to present in a grade-school classroom about one of the American heroes of exploration. In this day of computer research, however, the fact is available even on Wikipedia, so any student who has picked Meriwether Lewis for the inevitable explorer biography probably knows about it.

In 1950, when I was in third grade, my absent father committed suicide, and even though I had no conscious memory of the man, his death, and especially the manner of it, affected me greatly. I didn't learn of Meriwether Lewis's suicide until I was in college, but I immediately latched onto the fact. I had become quite obsessed with the idea that my father had deliberately ended his life, and in my late twenties I set about fairly seriously to die, in an unfortunate chapter of my youth that I have explored in an earlier memoir. "Such is the unfortunate hold that a parent, especially one that isn't there, can have on a child's mind," said Eloise, an elderly cousin once removed who had known my father well. Eloise was right about that, not just for me, but for my brother as well, who repeated much of the pattern of our father's unhappy life. In the autumn of 2008 when my dreams began, my brother had been absent from my life for almost thirty years.

Like the clerk at the trailer park store, I didn't care whether people wore clothes, but I always wore mine on the Nude Beach, my lifelong body shyness heightened by age. If I came at first light, before the one law enforcement officer who was assigned to that part of the island was on duty, I could run my dogs the mile

length of the beach and back again without their leashes. Clothing might be optional, but leashes were not, and tickets were at least a seventy-five dollar fine. During the long, rainy Oregon winter, however, when the ribald antics of naked sunbathers that drew the officer's presence were not in play, I could come in the afternoon as well, as did a few others with their unleashed dogs. Often some of the Odd Ones were there—the String-Can Man who tied bottles and cans together with fishing line and hung them high in trees, or the handsome bronze one I called Big Indian in my mind because of his long black hair and his penchant for going nude even in the coldest weather. Or the Builder, who was tall and professorial-looking with his slightly shaggy white hair. The Builder did not go nude, although if the sun was warm, he tied his shirt around his waist. He always acknowledged me by glancing sideways with a slight smile, not quite meeting my eyes but not avoiding me completely. He scoured the beach for planks or particularly straight poles of varying lengths and formed them into lean-to shelters with their open sides to the river. Once, when he was carefully dismantling a length of deck boards that had washed ashore, I stopped slightly below him on the sand and asked, "What are you building?"

He pointed downriver. "The wind comes," he said. "We have to be ready for the wind."

I had a dog now, Devi, who needed to run. Her name means goddess, but my husband Jim soon christened her The Devil Dog because she was so unpredictable. The other pup, Sherpani (Sherpa woman), Pani we called her, was much more like the Samoyeds we'd always had: playful, happy to be snooping in the flotsam or digging deep holes in the sand. With Pani the leash law would not have been a problem except to inhibit my own brisk pace. But for nervous Devi, who, with her narrow frame and long nose, looked more like a coyote than a Samoyed despite her registration papers, these early morning runs were a necessity. She fixated on gulls or cormorants flying above the water and

raced them down the beach, yipping wildly, until she was a white speck in the distance. Always she returned, but it took successive runs before she settled into a normal dog routine. Why was I so indulgent of this dog's intense need to run? Was it that I had been a runner myself, had run my last marathon at sixty, had kept my own life on an even keel with occasional bursts of freedom, or at least the knowledge that had I needed to run, the freedom was there?

I kept a sort of diary I labeled the Nude Beach Notebook that consisted of my island walks, mostly on the Nude Beach, a record of both exterior and interior weather, observations of birds, and occasional historical information about the island I now called home. I included incidents from the popular histories and old explorer journals that captured my imagination, especially those of life that preceded the European occupation, sometimes scribbled elsewhere and later stuffed untidily in the notebook. Our moorage and the temporary nature of our floating homes seemed, to my somewhat romantic nature, almost a modern-day reincarnation of the native villages that in previous centuries had lined the river channel. After the dreams began, I wrote much about my brother and our shared childhood, and as the memories were rekindled, I became preoccupied with his unfortunate resemblance to our father. I wrote about it one day when I returned to the car after two miles on the beach.

I left the bed early while the old cold moon still bobbed in the river beside my upstairs study window. I have begun once more to dream about my brother, vague dreams that I do not quite remember when I come awake, only that the dream was about him or that he was standing somewhere in the background in a crowd of people. I did not leave the houseboat until a faint orange curve of light arced over the water and the newly arrived tundra swans across the channel in Burlington Bottoms rose in twinkling flocks beyond the skeleton of an old mill. Here on the Nude Beach some of the cottonwoods still cling fiercely to their last hint of color, flinging mottled coins in miserly handfuls. Last

week late mushrooms lined the path from the road but now they are gone, perhaps eaten by deer. Neat pointed prints marched toward the water where whitened bones of beaver-skinned limbs lay scattered on the sand.



We were talking about ghosts. The John Street Café in North Portland was our usual meeting place because it was quiet and had big windows, and the proprietor wore his hair in a long gray ponytail. Sometimes we talked about my writing and sometimes we talked about Madeline's. Occasionally we talked about death, as women our age tend to do. More often we talked about horses; both of us were crazy about horses. Someday we'd get one together, stable it on the island, and share the expense and care; it was a game we played. I had been reading Franz Boas's ethnographic study of the Chinook and how hard he had to look in 1890 to find one single speaker of the native language that had dominated the lower Columbia in its various dialects. I had just shared the Chinook legend about dying, which I'd paraphrased earlier in my notebook.

The late nineteenth-century anthropologist Franz Boas had located a man named Charles Cultee who still knew the old language and the customs that were followed on the lower Columbia River and this is what the old man said. When a person died a complex exchange took place between the dying person, the ghosts—the souls of the previously deceased—and the “seers” or shamans. All of these personages traveled in canoes. When a person was dying and the seers intervened, they paddled as far as the morning star to try to retrieve the soul. Sometimes they were successful and the ghosts, usually unwillingly, relinquished the soul and the person recovered health, even if he or she was previously considered dead. But if the soul had been fed by the ghosts or drunk of the water, it was too late and the person remained

dead. On the lower Columbia River islands the bodies were placed in burial canoes and the spring floods carried them to the Pacific.

“I have a friend,” said Madeline, “who saw a ghost, and I’ve heard her tell the story several times.” It was a curious story indeed, for it initially involved only half of a ghost. Toward evening Laura had been walking along a road near Davis, California, when, a short distance in front of her, an apparition emerged from behind a pole. This apparition was the bottom half of a woman’s figure, fully clothed in no particular period dress, walking at approximately Laura’s pace. Startled, she stared hard at this partial person and began walking a little faster to catch up, but she made no discernible gain. Gradually the top half of the woman filled in. Suddenly, as mysteriously as the ghostlike figure had appeared, it began to fade, the top half first, and then it disappeared altogether. Laura went straight home and breathlessly reported what she’d seen to her husband, who was unimpressed, even somewhat dismissive, thinking at first she wasn’t serious. Perhaps, he said, the woman ducked down in the ditch that was along the road. No, Laura insisted, she had that thought too and had looked carefully in the ditch for any sign that someone had passed, but there was none. “Her husband just flat-out didn’t believe that she had really seen a ghost,” concluded Madeline.

“Why was she so sure it was a ghost and not some trick her eyes were playing?”

“She is primarily a science fiction writer who grounds her stories in fact so she would have preferred to think this was a trick, but she knows what she saw,” insisted Madeline.

“Do you believe her? You don’t believe in ghosts.”

“No, I don’t believe in ghosts, but she simply wouldn’t invent this story when it is so contrary to what she believes herself.”

“I don’t *believe* in ghosts either, but I do believe in unexplained coincidences. I’ve had some strange experiences here on the island that I can’t explain logically at all, like the women at Black Ash Alley. That was a ghost kind of thing.” The man with

the ponytail brought our sandwiches while I told Madeline the story.

Black Ash Alley was what I called the strip of land between Mud and Sturgeon lakes because of the charcoal silhouettes the Oregon ash trunks made against the sunset glare. In the early autumn evenings this was a beautiful and mysterious place, even without ghosts. I had parked at the handicapped fishing ramp at Big Eddy on the Gilbert River and headed back toward the lakes through a swale of ash trees. I usually did this walk several times in the fall before Fish and Wildlife closed the area to everyone but hunters, taking note of the time of the sunset, watching for new snow on Mount Hood to the east, and recording in my notebook what day the migrating birds first appeared. During late August shorebirds like yellowlegs and faded avocets begin to show and by mid-September flocks of sandhill cranes arrive. Once I counted a flock of seventy-four white egrets, mostly standing in the trees.

The strip of land on which I was walking surely was a harvest camp for native women digging wapato. Lewis and Clark had described a large cache of short harvest canoes that were used for gathering the edible plant from the shallow lakes. The women, immersed to their armpits, walked beside the little boats while they felt in the mud for the small potato-like bulbs, which they loosened with their toes.

“I was thinking of that—thinking of the women in their cedar bark skirts, so of course I was set up for ghosts and what happened next,” I admitted to Madeline.

The sun was extremely low, melting into Mud Lake, the trunks of the ash trees jet black against the golden light and perfectly still until the shadows started to move from one tree to the next, small black shapes about three or four feet high like children playing.

“It scared me, really. Then the shadows, for which I have no explanation whatsoever unless they were the result of my own aging eyesight, disappeared. At the same time, noises started, low

guttural sibilant sounds that became more musical, as if water were bubbling or birds were talking, but I saw no birds.”

It was too late in the season for the whispery sound of tree swallows. Whatever I had heard did not sound exactly like words, more like feminine whispers and laughter, feet on cool mud dancing, and sometimes sticks breaking. It wasn't loud. I scanned the trees all around, even across Mud Lake, with my binoculars, but I could detect no leaves moving and I saw no birds except two white egrets at the edge of the lake and a small flock of yellowlegs on the shore. The high tinkling cry of the yellowlegs could have accounted for the laughter sound, although the birds appeared to be feeding, not engaged in any conversation.

The sounds continued for a few minutes and then faded. So did the sun except for the blazing reflection of western clouds in the lake. I walked back to the car in the empty parking lot and finally the wind began. I could hear it in the trees—not like the sounds I had heard before but not totally unlike them either, and the amber light softened. “I was spooked,” I admitted to Madeline, “but it was rather exciting, like I'd overheard something that hadn't been meant for me at all, like when you're a kid and hear adults say something they don't think you'll understand, but you do, and it adds a whole new dimension to a familiar situation.”

“Did you tell Jim about this?”

“No. Jim would have reacted exactly the same way that Laura's husband did.” Neither one of us spoke for a moment while a waitress, not the pony-tailed man, brought the bill. The John Street Café closed after lunch and that was probably a hint for us to leave. “So, Madeline,” I asked, “what did your conference people say about the ghost? How did that play out?”

“Well, we tossed around different ideas for a bit and then I suggested one that seemed at least somewhat satisfactory. A lot of scientists now—physicists anyway—take quite seriously the idea of parallel universes. I asked Laura if she would be more inclined to accept an idea that had some basis in quantum physics instead of religion or superstition—that perhaps some membrane of a

similar universe had momentarily intersected and that was what she had witnessed. She was somewhat receptive to that and said that she found the existence of parallel universes more credible than any conventional ghost concept.”

“My ghosts were more like parallel time zones, some mixture of past and present that had to do with place.”

“Some scientists consider that a possibility, too.”

“Well, I’m not a scientist so I can’t disprove or deny it. For me to *believe* in intersecting universes or time zones would require a leap of faith, something akin to believing in religion or ghosts. I remain an agnostic.”

“So how did this Black Ash episode play out for you, then?”

“After I got home I read the rest of Boas’s ethnographic study and his description of native language along the lower Columbia. He said that the language was extremely guttural and sibilant in comparison, say, to the Nez Perce, and that it had lots of onomatopoeic words. In fact, it was terribly complicated with sounds the Europeans didn’t recognize as words; they recorded them derisively as grunts but in reality, in its varied dialects—maybe not so much the “jargon” trade form that developed—the language of the Chinook conveyed complex ideas like the sound of dancing, the wind, sticks breaking, or boiling water.”



The river was deep where we lived; almost forty feet during the high water of the late spring runoff, said the diver who did the float inspection when we bought the houseboat. Often when I focused on the way the wind skated here and there and changed the angle of the light, something bobbed up, maybe an otter or even a sea lion following the salmon in the spring. Under the surface lurked layers of life in the lower depths and layers of death as well, sometimes disturbingly close to the houseboats.

The approach road to the moorage once ended at a ferry slip, which had been the main automobile access point for the island before the first bridge was finished in 1950. It still ran straight into the river on a ramp used by fishing and pleasure boats. The summer that we came, the ramp was redone as a more sophisticated boat launch and stolen cars that had been pushed into the water after joyrides had to be removed. First out, assisted by huge air bags that were inflated until they popped the car to the surface, was a Corvette, covered in brown and green slime. Next, a pick-up truck of no discernible color emerged from the murky depths. Then the diver bobbed up for a conference with authorities. In the remaining car the diver had spotted a body when he rubbed off some of the window muck.

Everything slowed way down and the workers waited for the ambulance. How long had the body been there, anyway, just a few yards downstream from the end of the moorage and none who lived there had known? Two years, if this indeed was the car the authorities had identified with the license plate numbers from a missing person report. There should be two bodies, a woman and a child. The diver went down again and confirmed the suspicions. Two bodies—a woman and a baby. The ambulance went away, the police arrived, and a big flatbed truck backed down to the water line. Airbags were pumped full but the mud was loath to relinquish its treasure. It was spooky, all right, and sad, we moorage residents said to each other, even more so because of the baby, and we all went back to our houses because it was getting dark. Sometime in the night the car floated to the surface with a great sucking sound that no one at the moorage heard. It was loaded onto the flatbed truck and hauled away.

The water stared back in a black motionless sheet when I leaned my forehead against the window in the upstairs study. Had the woman been lost and mistakenly driven into the river because of the poorly marked boat ramp? Or had she, in despair over a broken marriage and shattered future for her and the child, deliberately taken their lives? Slim currents of fog curled and

uncurled above the water. I thought of the ongoing existence of souls and what I had once written about ghosts and seers in my notebook. The wind stirred and the fog tendrils began to organize into elongated shapes slightly above the water. I imagined a mud-covered Madonna with a child in her arms, freed from her metal prison, floating in a slim white fog canoe toward the sea.



The Nude Beach did it—started the writing again, that is, and maybe the more frequent dreams, which I knew were about my brother but never could quite remember. At first I simply scribbled words in the sand, words that scattered when the dogs romped through them. Or Pani, thinking it was a game I was playing, grabbed the cottonwood branch I was using to write so I would throw the stick downstream at the edge of the water for her to retrieve. Sometimes I even wrote phrases on the beach; not poetry, really, not any definite syllabic form, or even any thought that would make sense to anyone but me. I wrote the words and phrases at the very edge of the water. The container ships headed for the ocean would make waves enough to erase them quickly, even if the tide was going out. They were not written for anyone who might come later in the day to read and wonder about, not for the Builder, carrying his smooth white poles and boards he had gleaned, or the Man with the Metal Detector, who said he had found three gold rings last year, one of them quite valuable.

The words I had written in the sand that day were names, first my brother's childhood name, Bobbie. His life had turned out badly, and I had not seen him in almost thirty years. The other word was our father's name, Robert. His life had turned out badly too, and I had often wondered whether some genetic factor this man had transmitted could have contributed to the misfortunes in my brother's life.

“As Barbara Scot invites us along on her daily Sauvie Island walks, she deftly weaves together not only her own complicated personal history but the history and life of that beautiful island. And as she asks questions of herself, questions that most of us will have asked of ourselves at some time or another, her story becomes the story of us all, our lives rooted in place and family. *The Nude Beach Notebook* is just a beautiful book, a book of great heart and intelligence and rigorous honesty—an elegant and moving evocation of the ghosts that haunt families, and the spirits inherent in the landscapes where we walk.” —MOLLY GLOSS, author of *The Jump-Off Creek*, *The Dazzle of Day*, *Wild Life*, and *The Hearts of Horses*

In this engaging memoir, a loose sequel to her earlier *Prairie Reunion*, Barbara Scot explores her reluctance and longing to reconnect with a much-loved brother, lost to alcoholism for thirty years.

Scot reflects on family responsibility, time’s passage, and faith during long walks on the “clothing optional” beach of idyllic Sauvie Island near Portland, Oregon. She weaves entries from her notebook—a record of the island’s wildlife, descriptions of the “Odd Ones” she encounters on the beach, and stories about the native people who once lived along the river—with the main narrative, which traces her search for her brother, her close friendship with a fellow writer, and daily life on the houseboat moorage where she lives.

Scot highlights the importance of place in exploring and interpreting one’s own story, and in the end, her walks on Sauvie Island lead to her own redemptive journey. In *The Nude Beach Notebook*, she considers the uses of fiction and nonfiction in memory and writing, the brevity and beauty of human existence, and the inscrutable, enduring mystery of death.



BARBARA J. SCOT is the author of *The Violet Shyness of their Eyes: Notes from Nepal* (winner of the PNBA Book Award); *Prairie Reunion* (*New York Times* Notable Book of the Year); *The Stations of Still Creek*; and *Child of Steens Mountain* (with Eileen McVicker). She taught public school for twenty-six years and was a Peace Corps volunteer in Nepal. Scot lives with her husband in a houseboat on Sauvie Island.

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