

Nightpaddling

Amazing, the way the world grows smaller as we grow older.

When it was still very large my father would sometimes lead me through the darkness on muggy summer nights, down the hill to the lake where I spent most of the days of my early life. We had a boat moored there, a twelve-foot fiberglass skiff, aqua-green in daylight, pockmarked with scarlike patches that covered the wounds it suffered falling from a delivery truck ten years earlier in Flint, Michigan – a fall that had reduced its value considerably in the eyes of the boat dealer, though not in the eyes of my father. It was a quick, light-footed boat, and I learned to love it like a first bicycle. In the darkness, those summer nights, I sat quietly in the stern seat while my father rowed us swiftly toward the shoreline where the bass fed. To my father the night and the boat were tools utilized in his quest for fish. To me they were wonders that allowed us to drift freely over blackness, nothingness, that left us suspended miraculously in a bowl-shaped void flecked with bits of stars and worlds. It would have been terrifying if not for my father's assured presence. I watched, fascinated, as he dipped the oars, propelling us into space, and the stars fractured and tumbled away as if we were parting them from the sky.

My father always fished. He cast Jitterbugs and Hula Poppers to the shoreline, activating them into gurgling, popping, splashing creatures that largemouth bass sometimes attacked so viciously we shouted in alarm when they struck. I fished too, but without my father's passion. It was enough for me to be there, with my father, awed by the strangeness of the lake at night.

It would be ten years before the magnitude of those summer nights came back with as much force. A few weeks after graduating from high school, four friends and I set out on a long-anticipated canoeing trip to Ontario, an expedition we had inflated with so much bravado that it became a self-conscious quest for manhood. Every step of the journey was colored by the ill-formed version of machismo that only teenaged boys sick of being ineffectual, scrawny, and pimple-ravaged can embrace. If the trip was to be an initiation, as we wanted, it was necessary to make every step of it as difficult as possible. We pooled eight dollars each, stopped at a supermarket the afternoon of our departure, and purchased grocery bags filled with canned stew, pancake mix, powdered milk, cooking oil, and candy bars. We did not leave home until sundown, convinced we would enjoy the six-hour drive north more after dark, when we could roll down the windows and turn up the radio and let the music and our high spirits mingle with the night. We crossed the Mackinac Bridge into the Upper Peninsula with our heads out the windows, howling; crossed into Sault Ste. Marie, Canada, at midnight, our mood infecting even a stern border patrol officer who asked us why we were entering Canada and what we intended to do there and told us, as he waved us on, to catch lots of big ones for him.

After 150 miles of highway and 75 miles of gravel road and a final 15 miles of narrow, tortuous, mud-bottomed, rock-studded, two-track trail that no doubt took years off the life of my Buick Special, we came to the literal end of the road. Late in the night we stepped from the car, cramped and tired, and stood in the cool night air astonished by the sight of the lake. It was a mirror of the sky, a crystalline plane of stars. As far as we could see were stars so bright they seemed to ring like bells.

My father had warned us that the lake, where he had come often to hunt for moose in the fall, was notorious for blowing up sudden high waves that could leave canoeists stranded for days. Ahead of us was a six-mile crossing of open water to a river, a tributary of the lake. Upstream on the river was a series of lakes, each more remote than the one preceding it, each inhabited by larger and more abundant northern pike. Four or five lakes upstream my father had once shot a large bull moose; its antlers hung on the wall of the family room back home. There, also, his old friend and hunting companion Clare Fewins had cast a red-and-white Daredevil from shore, hooked an enormous fish, then stood helplessly with the rod doubled while the fish ran all the line from his reel and broke off somewhere far off near the middle of the lake. By common consent, that was our destination.

Our original plan was to set up a quick camp near the car and start across the lake early in the morning. But we were much too excited for that now. We convinced ourselves it made more sense to start immediately, in the darkness, while the lake was calm. There was little need for discussion. We took down the canoes, loaded them in the glare of the car's headlights, and pushed off into the lake.

It was the same strange nonwater, poised between sky and earth, that had awed me as a child. It awed all of us, five young men with the capacity for being so loud, brutish, awkward, and mindless in one another's company that we could be blind to almost anything. But not this. It was the closest sensation to flying we had ever experienced. One stroke of a paddle and we soared across the void. The stars shone in identical dimensions, as brilliant beneath us as above us, razor-bright and crisp, with eternities apparent between them. When we paddled, ten or twelve hard strokes in succession, our faces and hands sensed motion but there were no landmarks to gauge

our progress and we seemed to go nowhere. It was almost more than we could bear. We paddled, then glided, waiting until we knew by the silence that our boats no longer cut through the water.

We spent a week exploring the river on the far side of the lake. Upstream was a series of lakes strung together like pearls on a necklace. We crossed each lake to where the river entered, often over a short falls or a stretch of rapids, then searched along the shoreline until we found a portage trail that would lead us through a hundred yards or a half-mile of hemlock and spruce forest to the next lake. In the mornings we woke at dawn to go out into the mist on the lakes and cast for the giant northerns we knew lived there. One of those mornings I hooked a large fish that stayed on the bottom, shaking its head, then towed my canoe most of the way across the lake before the treble hook on the lure straightened and the fish was gone. Another morning, after the day had warmed and the mist had disappeared, we watched a bull moose step across the shallows at the far end of the lake, each step raising large, soundless billows of water to its antlers.

Now I realize that the entire week, eventful as it was, was only an anticlimax to that first night when we paddled across the lake in the darkness. Those few hours on the water had been the culmination of the journey. We had come searching for manhood, but that night we were transported to a clarity of perception usually associated with childhood. It was our last long look at the world as children.

When we were somewhere near the middle of the lake we were surrounded suddenly by the wild, uncontrolled yelping of coyotes. Their cries echoed across the water, bounding between the granite ledges ringing the shoreline. We stopped paddling, astonished, to listen. They were not the wailing, mournful howls we'd come to expect from a lifetime of Hollywood

Westerns. They were more strange than that: a sequence of yelps, barks, and yips that seemed a businesslike announcement of mealtime, combined with something like joyfulness. There was silence, and we floated in absolute silent space. Then the coyotes began again, and we could not remain silent. We answered their cries, hooting and barking in clumsy but joyful imitation. In those moments the world expanded around us until it was vast beyond any hope of comprehension, until we were sure it would never diminish and we would never grow older.

But we did, of course, and the world became smaller. As you grow older it becomes difficult to hear coyotes with the intensity of the first experience, or to be as awestruck by the night sky reflecting on glass-still water. But there are compensations. Now there are nights when I drift with my sons in a canoe, on the same lake where my father and I fished in that old fiberglass rowboat, and watch thunderstorms so distant and low on the horizon that their sound does not reach us and only the dim, inner glow of lightning can be seen. My sons' astonishment infects me with some of the awe and wonder I remember from my own childhood.

The night has a way of shaking us from the dullness of busy days and work. It remains, no doubt, a fine metaphor for certain mysterious, elusive truths. But metaphors apply only in retrospect. At the moment we experience it, immersed in darkness on a still lake, a singular and pure appreciation is awakened: for the world, for the water, even, in moments of extreme good fortune, for ourselves.

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