

Upstream

The days were all sunshine and golden. Waking to the smell of cedar wood, sweet and musky like pencil shavings, I'd lie and listen to the high-pitched trill of red-winged blackbirds, *conk-la-ree*, harmonizing with the low, nasal *wha-wha-wha* of white-breasted nuthatches outside the screened window by my bed.

After devouring a breakfast of eggs and pea-meal bacon with book-sized pieces of fried toast dripping with gobs of wild-berry jam, I'd pull a pair of jean cut-offs over my navy one-piece and shouting "see ya later," I'd fly out the back door and run down the gravel road to my cousin's cottage.

We always met at Charlie's. He had the biggest cottage and the slickest motorboat — white with Crayola orange stripes and a seventy-five horsepower outboard motor. His cottage and ours bookended five more that belonged to our family, passed on from our grandparents who built them in the nineteen-thirties.

Traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, Clear Lake was where my cousins and I spent our summers.

We swam and waterskied from morning to dusk, slathering our skin in coconut oil every few hours, breaking only to replenish with ham sandwiches and Pop Shoppe root beer. Sometimes, the boys stashed a few real brews in a cooler under the paddles and life jackets. We'd drop anchor and sit in the middle of the lake, smoking du Maurier cigarettes and sipping Molson Canadians.

At night, we'd play hide and seek. Well into our teens we could be found running through the woods with flashlights, the sounds of snapping branches and delighted

squeals filling the air. We'd take one last dip in the lake at midnight, splashing and floating our way to our own cottages for the night.

One particularly hot day, five of us decided to take Charlie's boat up Stoney Lake and over to Burleigh Falls. With its chutes and low cascades it was our favourite spot. We'd wade across the wide, shallow river to some rocky islands adjacent to the falls and spread out our towels on the flattest surface. I would swim and sunbathe. The boys would dive from the highest point and swim into the rapids, riding the rush back into the pools at the bottom.

Sam and Charlie were champion swimmers. Their shiny bronzed bodies were lean and muscular, their hair bleached flaxen from the sun. Sam was outgoing, talkative, while Charlie was introspective and more given to thought. Danny was dark and brawny with curly black hair — a flirt, with a horselaugh that could be heard down the lake. Joe, the youngest, was quick-minded, his mouth always twisted into a wry smile. The others teased Joe whose freckled skin paled in comparison to the others.

As we headed in to beach the boat, some swimmers waved us off. "Someone's gone under," shouted a goggled man in his forties, the din of rushing water behind him.

"He dove off that island there," cried a woman beside him, pointing. "He didn't come back up."

We were all strong swimmers. We would help. We tied off at one of the islands. "Can you stay with the boat?" Charlie asked me.

“Be careful,” I said, tying up my tangled blonde hair. I sat in the bow of the boat and watched as my cousins took over the search. They split up, trying to cover as much area as possible — diving under for what seemed like too long, then surfacing for more air.

A canoe appeared, carrying a man with long, silver hair. “You’re too far downstream,” he said, before disappearing again.

Moving upstream, the boys swam hard against the current. Just as an OPP boat arrived, Charlie found the body. He emerged, his face white as chalk. The boat circled around him.

“Hello Fellas!” a hefty cop with a flattop said, removing his sunglasses. “No need to wear yourselves out now. We’ve got this.”

“Looks like blind man’s bluff,” laughed the other cop, flashing a mouthful of pointy teeth. Flattop laughed too, hacking and snorting as he tossed a boat cushion Charlie’s way.

“I found him,” Charlie muttered, his eyes wide and still —like a fish on a hook.

“What’d you say boy?”

“He said he found him!” Danny yelled, swimming towards them.

“No kidding,” Flattop said, throwing Charlie a rope with a loop at the end.

Charlie looked at him, then grabbed the rope and dove straight down. He struggled, trying to pull an arm through the loop. The rope was twisted and Charlie surfaced again, gasping. *You've got this Charlie*, I thought, digging my nails into the palms of my hands. Sam and the others surrounded him, treading water. He plunged under again, finally securing the loop over both arms.

The cops pulled up the lifeless body while Charlie and the boys swam back to our boat. We sat silently on the hot granite of the island for a long while, watching as they completed their investigation. I pulled on my wide-brimmed straw hat and leaned against Charlie.

We waited there until the cops sped away without so much as a glance our way. Boats of all sizes had gathered by then — spectators already telling their own version of the story. Exhausted, the boys piled into our boat and I drove us home.

That night, we shared a bottle of tequila on Charlie's dock. The haunting call of loons rang out of the darkness as if they knew, and shared in our grief.

“He was sitting on the bottom. Just sitting there with his arms at his sides, facing downstream,” Charlie said.

“Do you think he did it on purpose?” Joe asked.

The lake was so still, reflecting the crystal stars that seemed closer now somehow. “I'm not sure I can go in,” Sam said, sitting on the end of the dock, legs crossed.

“We have to,” Charlie said.

And so, surrounded by the gentle glow of fireflies, the towering pines and blue spruce exhaled with us as one by one we slipped into the window clear water.

Jennifer Paquette, 2021