

Group Of Seven

The fire holds sway. Supper is over and we are now sitting by the flames, sipping coffee, tea, cognac. The fire is not essential — we could survive without it — but our weekend canoe trip would not be complete without it. Its unadorned allure has drawn the seven of us together from two provinces and one state. An open fire, a still lake, a beached canoe: we have drifted into a painting.

Josh basks in the warmth of the burning logs and begins to sing. His is a rich voice — a hint of Paul Robeson, a twist of Mel Tormé — and tonight he sifts through a collection of his favourite melodies. For this fortieth birthday he is planning to invite friends and family for a cabaret, an evening of song to celebrate the milestone. After crooning a few ballads he eases into *Try to Remember*, an apt choice for a cool autumn night just days away from October. The song, so familiar, suddenly sounds different when Josh tells us his late father sang it to him as a baby.

*Try to remember a time in September,
When grass was green and, oh, so mellow.*

Terminally single, Josh has yet to sing a lullaby to a child of his own. The rest of us have ten children between us, ranging in age from three to nine. Childhood friends, we were all born and raised in Montreal. Frontenac Park is a perfect, granite-cliffed compromise, mid-way between Toronto (where four of us now live) and Montreal (where Barry has remained), a few hours drive from Ottawa, where Gary has relocated. Allen flew in from Pittsburgh and hitched a ride with the Toronto tribe.

Five of us arrive in a minivan, a vehicle that shouts middle-class, middle-aged, middle of the road. We are who we are, though this trip carries the echoes of who we once were. The seven of us all spent many years at summer camps in the Laurentians, as campers and then counsellors. Canoe trips have a special spot in the mythology of summertime memories. Each of us could contribute to a catalogue of summer fare, from playing board games on screened-in porches to picking berries with stained fingers. Equally, we all know in our bones that a canoe trip is summer distilled. Time in a canoe means time to reflect, to relax, to meditate as you move across water, to coast like driftwood in the sun, to savour a book or shoot rapids. It is both the journey and the destination itself. Though we have only managed two group trips in as many decades we know the effects are long-term.

Now we are back, unquestionably older and arguably wiser, a bunch of forty-year olds, give or take a year. At the outfitter's we choose paddles and preservers. Surprisingly, no one makes any reference to *Deliverance*. We have either matured or mellowed or, more likely, are too busy negotiating who will sit in the stern and guide each of the three canoes. With three lawyers between us, negotiations drag on. The two writers share notes for a comedic remake of *Lord of the Flies*, a blend of action-adventure and Woody Allen. The two doctors offer to treat any bruised egos. Jules, a lawyer-mediator, carves out a compromise. Compromise: the peak of middle-age we could scale blindfolded.

We set off through the narrow straits of Mitchell Creek. It doesn't take long before we realize why we were so keen to spend a weekend in the woods like wide-eyed characters out of a Hardy Boys book. We are quietly determined to reclaim part of our past, the simple pleasure of putting a paddle in water and moving forward, propelled by equal parts determination and desire. A turtle lounges on a sloped stump. Birds gingerly step through marshes as if they were minefields. Leafless trees become wind-swept sculptures.

Once the creek opens out onto Birch Lake a group of us burst into *Un P'tit Cochon Sans Sa Mere*, a rousing, nonsensical song about a motherless pig we made up on a canoe trip many years ago. We were eighteen and pretended we were couriers-du-bois, intoxicated by the rhythms of steady paddling. Age has not dulled our unbridled sense of boyhood glee.

Our campsite, our home away from home for two evenings, is nestled at the end of McNally Bay. We pitch our tents over two sites. Signs of the family life we left behind linger: Lenny's tent was bought to accommodate his family of four, with enough room for two kids to hatch a plot as their parents stand out of earshot.

Much of our fireside conversations revolve around our children, how technology has transformed their childhood. We rattle off the bare truths: kindergarten and computers now go hand in hand. Ten-year-olds carry pagers. Faceless children congregate in chat groups. We reach no hard and fast conclusions, but only know that childhood has been permanently redefined. Too often, summers are programmed: computer camp one week, arts camp the next, with less and less time for the spontaneous delights that spring from a lazy day.

A canoe trip underscores an unspoken legacy: enjoy your laptop but don't overlook the lake, where simple pleasures abound. The decision to stop feeding a fire and watch it fade. The absence of city sounds, and the silence that fills the empty space. The nocturnal cry of an owl.

The next morning the lakes beckon, on this, the only full day of paddling. After a quick paddle and painless portage we reach Devil Lake. We pass by several residential homes but catch no glimpses of the logging and mining life that once coursed through the park. *An old portable sawmill once stood here* reads a line on the park map. The back of the map provides a quick history lesson. After heavy-cutting and fire damage killed the lumber industry local families took to mining phosphate and mica. Now the mines are gone, too, their lives marked on the map like epitaphs: Waffle Mines, 1899 - 1920. Crab Lake Mines, 1880-1949.

From our vantage point on the lake, there is no trace of the mills or mines. The logs from homesteads have long rotted and the mines have become moss-covered monuments to another time. What remains are the lakes, and a shoreline that begins to look indistinguishable. Are we here or there, we wonder, jabbing our maps, agreeing to disagree, eyeing our watches. The consensus is that we are not nearly as far as we had hoped to travel. Should we have started earlier? Should we forge ahead and risk racing against daylight during the return trip? Perhaps, dare we say it, we're not as strong as we once were. We do the honourable thing and decide to have lunch.

A short paddle takes us to a small, uninhabited private island. Over various combinations of salami, cheese, peanut butter and jam we dive into a discussion about God. Once upon a time, on a canoe trip long, long ago, we discussed a wide range of topics. Women, politics, school. God didn't make so much as a cameo appearance. But now we are husbands and fathers, and no longer believe we are immortal, as ageless as the billion-year-old rock outcrops in our midst.

We paddle back to our campsite, our energy replenished, our conversations covering the map. We traverse the same portage going back, and like all journeys home the distance seems markedly shorter. Back at the end of the bay, we toss around a frisbee in a pale imitation of a beer commercial. We lounge on the beach. We nap, ambushed by the pure, sweet air.

It ends far too soon. A last night by the fire, a last morning glazed by the autumn sun. We fold our tents, pack our canoes and paddle back to the outfitter's, back to the life from which we sought temporary shelter. We know what awaits, and despite the families we long for, we are in no hurry to get back. The quicker we paddle the sooner we will fall off this unsigned canvas of water and trees and birds. And so we slow our pace, slowly slicing water that immediately heals itself, leaving no trace that we were once here.

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