

VOWA/Bass Pro High School 1st Place Winner

Sanctuary

Wrapped in a silken cloak of summer evening air, I lie at ease in a groove carved out in rock. I listen to the quiet rhythm of water gently licking the nearby shore; I stare up at the sky, colored a soothing gray, a shade that promises a light, refreshing rain. Beside me, clinging to the face of the rock, are strands of tiny leaves, dotted with dark, not-quite-ripe blueberries. I imagine the long vine coiling itself around my arms and my wrists, my legs and my ankles, adorning my hair with a delicate crown and my collar with a blue-beaded necklace, binding me to the rock so that I might never leave this place, so that I might grow old in an impenetrable state of perfect peace.

I sense a small part of this vast peace each time I relive this moment, stored in the most precious reserves of my memory, a treasure that I grasp from my mind and *feel*, calming myself whenever the burden of worry and anxiety is heavy upon me. I recall it from the remarkable summer backpacking trip, rich with these precious moments, that began when two counselors, seven fellow campers, and I arrived from a Wisconsin summer camp to Isle Royale National Park, a remote Michigan island isolated in Lake Superior.

For five days and five nights in early August, we ten hiked mile after mile, hugging the breezy shoreline of Superior, venturing inland on wooded trails, walking along much of the high, rocky Greenstone Ridge that spanned the length of the island. We carried bulky packs stuffed with food, sleeping bags, and first-aid supplies; ate dried fruit, instant oatmeal, and dehydrated mashed potatoes; drank water filtered from small inland lakes. We slept in tents beneath a canopy of stars.

On the trails, we stepped over roots and rocks, climbed up and down steep hills, crossed narrow planks laid over streams and marshy areas. Trees rose majestically above dense shrubbery, and bright wildflowers abounded near lush wetlands. The warm sun tanned our skin high up on the Greenstone Ridge.

At times we spoke or sang as we walked, bonding with one another, growing closer, and at times we walked in silence, wordlessly appreciating the serenity of the island. We tasted the bitter thistle berries that grew near cool creeks, and plucked sweet blueberries grown plump and ripe in the sunshine of the hot Greenstone. We rested on scenic headlands overlooking Superior and on logs near small lakes where tall water grasses swayed in the breeze.

There were lookouts stretching high above stands of silver birch trees, where we could gaze out across the island, inland lakes shimmering in the light like tiny sapphires, misty fog hanging over an expanse of green woodland, even the hazy blue figure of Canada rising above the horizon of Superior in the north.

The nights were still more enchanting. The sky was a dark tapestry, and woven upon it was the intricate pattern of the constellations, of hundreds, thousands of flecks of light, each little dot a distant world of its own. Very much like the island, which was yet a place on Earth, every speck was a special place apart from the world that I knew.

As the days and nights passed, we fell into a rhythmic pattern, ruled by only the enduring laws of nature. We were bound by nothing but the need to eat, drink, and sleep. The sun was our clock, our feet were our guide. My thoughts, clear of the worries and trifles of ordinary life, were marked by a sense of extraordinary freedom and calm. My spirit was searching, curious, and I was inspired by a fervent desire to discover what was around the next bend in the trail.

Caroline Armstrong
Deep Run High School, Grade 10
Glen Allen

I dreaded leaving and returning to life away from the island, which was a place I had learned was not only a sanctuary for plants and animals, but also for people. When at last it was time to leave, I trudged rather than walked to the small harbor from which we would depart by ferry. But as I boarded the boat, I recounted the incredible things I had seen, happiness I had felt, and memories I had shared over the past five days. Despite my hair's being matted with grease and my skin's being soiled with dirt and sweat, I felt, in a way, cleaner than I ever had.