

Today

I dip my paddle beneath the glassy covering of the still lake. Pushing down with my left hand gripping the tip and pulling back with my right hand clasped around the neck, I move the flat wooden plane through the water. Tiny whirlpools form around it and then swirl away. When my left hand is over the starboard gunwale of the aluminum canoe, shining a blindingly brilliant silver in the midday sun, and my right hand is by my side over the water, gleaming a deep green, the paddle breaks the surface and slips into the air with a faint whooshing sound. Droplets of water fall from the blade as I feather, and they plunk into the water, their little ripples marking the curve of the semicircle my paddle repeatedly traces.

It is quiet out here, way out in the middle of a sprawling network of lakes interconnected by rapids and portage trails, in the middle of what is officially called the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, located along the border of the United States and Canada. The bow slices through the water as we propel the canoe forward, and I hear only the work of our paddles, moving rhythmically and in unison. There is not the faintest breeze, and the vast lake is utterly smooth—a rare sight at this time of day. A hazy heat, a still calm is heavy in the air. It is the calm after the storm that shook the tiny island on which we slept the night before, an angry storm that lit up our tent as if it were day and sent trembling cracks and booms hurtling to the earth and left us curled in our sleeping bags feeling helpless before the wrath of nature and then praising the Lord when we awoke again to morning light slanting through the pines.

Today is the sixth day of our eight-day canoe trip. Four canoes have carried us six people—campers and counselors from a Wisconsin summer camp—for the duration of the trip,

and we people have carried our canoes, too, sweating and stumbling and panting until at last reaching the end of that strenuous portage and having the canoe lifted from our shoulders.

It's this effort, and the effort of battling against head-on wind and massive waves, combined with the beauty and simplicity of our surroundings, that make a bed of pines more comfortable than any sort of mattress.

Thus far we have seen dark green spires rising up over the horizon; jagged cliffs spattered with subdued green and burnt orange lichen; skeletal trees branching out with eerie majesty and bone-white columns looming where forest fires once raged. We have hiked to a place where white sheets of water tumbled into a cove with wide-eyed frogs leaping all around; watched the sun, a glowing orange ball, light a path on the water and then sink beneath the horizon; climbed onto a rocky overlook to see the black water lit by the moon and the dancing stars.

Today, all is shrouded in what seems like a mist of heat. I feel relaxed, calm, like the placid water. We talk and sing and also listen to the quiet and reflect. When we talk we talk of anything. We are from Charlotte, North Carolina; a small town in Illinois; Boulder, Colorado; a university in England; Richmond, Virginia; and Mexico City; we are very different yet feel close and the same out here in the wilderness. We can speak of life and religion and emotion out here, for out here we can see the world and each other in nature's pure light, untarnished by the busyness and flashiness of iPhones and iPods and iPads, untainted by false semblances and senseless pressures and trivial obligations and paralyzing worries. Out here, we are with each other, the skies, the lakes, and the trees, and the quiet and the music that reverberate around.

When we arrive at our campsite, we unload our gear and then paddle back out into the lake. We vault out of our canoes, and I let the cool water seep around my toes and chill my body.

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Glen Allen

We flip the canoes and try to stand on their bottoms before slipping and falling back into the water with a splash. I spend the afternoon swimming and playing, listening to the echo of our laughter, reveling in the peaceful aura of the day and the freedom and genuine happiness to be found and experienced in the present.