

The Drive Up North

At night, if you lay just right in the back seat of the old station wagon you can see the stars. That's what he was looking at now. To the blond haired seven year old the stars held a wonderment unmatched in his mind. He was eating a tunafish sandwich with olives as the family motored northbound under a magical dome of shimmering light. It was Friday and like many other Fridays he was eating his mothers pre-made sandwiches of tuna fish earmarked for the drive up north. Till his dying day, he would always love tunafish sandwiches with green olives.

His brothers were somewhere in the car too, but, as long as they didn't touch him on any part of his body he was fine. Besides, he was happy because after a week of school, he was heading "up north."

He studied the randomness of the stars from the darkness of the wagon. His thoughts turned to the school playground from earlier in the week. He remembered his first kiss better than who it was that gave it to him. During recess she had chased him all the way to the old growth tree line boarding the playground in the then very rural suburb of Minneapolis. She had caught up to him and pinned him up against a large red oak tree. One of her arms locked straight out with her palm tight against the thick bark on his right side and her other arm the same on his left side. While face to face, she said, "You can't say my name right." With that, she leaned forward and kissed him on his lips and then she ran away. He had "wet kisses" before from family that sometimes made him shiver so he would quickly wipe his mouth after greetings and goodbyes. But, from what ever her name was, for some reason he would never forget this kiss against the old tree. It did bother him a little bit, though, he couldn't pronounce her name right, "what ever it was." Of course he still wiped his mouth off afterwards on his sleeve.

"No way" could he find the cabin on his own but he did know "about" where it was. "Under the North Star," he knew. He was old enough to point it out to any that asked. He couldn't see the North Star from where he was laying in the back seat but knew if he was driving the car he could find it in no time. The North Star never changed positions but the "Big Dipper" did, so, sometimes it took him a minute. Finding the Big Dipper was the secret to finding the North Star. He loved living in Minnesota even though he had never lived anywhere else and when he got older he would understand why Minnesota was the North Star State.

He could feel the bumps in the road as the family drove. Nothing severe enough to pay attention to nor was the rattling of cars interior enough to distract him from his thoughts. Going to "the lake" was an "adventure!" He never bothered to put it into words but if he thought about it long enough he would have taken a second before he would just say, "because, it is fun!" If pressed he would say something about the lush but "spooky forests" and dirt trails, the smells of so much life, candy from the nearby resort (pink Snaps tasted like soap), neighbors and nearby family always welcoming him, other kids to play and explore together with, and everywhere water to play and swim in.

What was really scary was being in the boat during the "white caps." The green outboard that said, "Johnson" on the side, could go just fast enough so the water spray would get the people in the back of the boat soaking wet while bouncing on White Caps! He remembered another old silver motor called the "coffee Grinder." That one took a rope that you had to carry separately and "wind around the top just right and then pull real hard." Sometimes He saw that

done many times before it would start. He figured he was strong enough to do it himself but was never asked so he couldn't prove it.

He liked sitting in the front most seat of the old Lone Star boat because he could get a "wild ride," stay dry and have the seat all to himself. It took skill to get in and out of the boat. "The floor of the boat isn't flat!" "You just don't jump in like you think or you will fall either inside the boat or worse yet fall outside and into the water." "Who knows what, if that happened," he thought. Especially if you were "far out in the middle of the lake." "You would never touch bottom if you fell into the lake there," he would say.

He would admit that sometimes he would fall asleep during the drive up north. "Anybody could," he thought. "It's a long way to the lake." But, he was quick to add he always woke up when they "hit the gravel." Before you get to the cabin, you have to go down a long gravel road. Somewhere he heard about "10 miles." He didn't mind that part of the drive but it sure did "make the car bounce and rattle and dust came into the car too!" Eventually he came to the "really scary" part of the trip. Going down the giant hill before driving onto the "Island." Even at seven years old he knew that the Island was called Battle Island because it involved a war between Indians long before he was born. He could never imagine, however, the generations of Indian History witnessed right there on Big Sandy Lake.

Every part of every trip held something new for him and at the same time after each trip he felt more and more comfortable and understood things only experience taught. All this experience, little doubt, gave him surprising insight into the world. No, he didn't know where he came from and he didn't care about the future. What he did know was that he found himself in the middle of a great adventure and so much of it revolved around the cabin at the lake. Going there, like today, was part of that adventure and it was for a time of planning.

Something deep inside told him that he was at a magical age. The sounds, sights, and tastes of life surrounded his every moment. Whether he was standing in his driveway at home near a town called Osseo looking across the endless expanse of potato fields with the morning sun warming his face, or here heading to the lake, he loved living. He would tell you so with his eyes.

He was getting sleepy here in the back seat with the lulling sound of the engine and minor rocking of the wagon. Soon he would be on the gravel and then the big hill going onto the Island. He would get up early tomorrow and run down to the lake. Then he would run over to the Island Cove Resort and see the old man that sold minnows - not to buy any - just to look at them. He had a quarter from his allowance and would use that for a box of Snaps. Sometimes he had to wait for the resort store to open because he always seemed to be there too early. He was comfortable as his eyes closed in the darkness of the car.

Suddenly, He woke up - just as planned. The old wagon just "hit the gravel" and he heard it. In the darkness, he sat up. He placed his hands on the seat ahead and prepared himself for the hill somewhere soon.

The World lay in front of that windshield of the old station wagon and far beyond its headlights. Many a reader would bet that He would see that world in the years to come, and, when wounded, come back to the sanctuary of the Cabin and The Drive Up North. They would be right.

