

Algonquin Dawn

As I rounded the point, I could see the morning's first light illuminate the racks of red canoes across the lake; the familiar sight was exhilarating. This was the home stretch. I was racing the clock with each stroke of my paddle. I was determined to finish in less than twenty hours.

The clock started when my team of six staff men pushed off from the northern-most access point in Algonquin Park. The northern Ontario sky was a cloudless blue, and the morning air was crisp—a perfect day for canoe tripping. As we paddled lake after pristine lake, with spindly cedars lining the shorelines, I heard the distant loon calls pierce the silent solitude of the north woods. Yet there was no time to stop and listen or to admire the moose wading across Maple Creek as we paddled by. We had to push on. There would be muddy trails and headwinds in the hours to come.

For every stroke, I counted, “one, two, three...twenty-nine, thirty, ready, switch!” It helped me stay focused, and eventually my counting became almost involuntary. The day had a rhythm to it. Every last lake faded from memory as soon as I began the portage into the next. When I paddled, my arms ached with pain, and I longed to be on the trail. When I portaged, all I could think of was that glimpse of blue through the trees that signaled the end of the path; I yearned to be on the water. The canoe was ninety pounds of water-logged cedar, and the wooden thwart fell on my shoulders like the weight of the world. The leather tumpline on my forehead pulled at my hair and strained the back of my neck until it hurt to swallow.

As the sun dipped below the tree line I flipped down, splashing my red cedar-canvas canoe into Burntroot Lake. We were only halfway home, but already I was drained of energy. Night fell. It was clear, and the moon was bright. On the long paddle down Big Trout Lake, the Perseids meteor shower lit up the night sky. I felt small, contemplating the astonishing expanse of the cosmos. I thought of the French voyageurs who paddled these lakes before me and of the natives who inhabited these sacred lands before them.

We soon found ourselves lost in the darkness, paddling up Otterslide Creek. Our headlamps were only useful for a few feet in front of us. All three boats worked together, scouting tributaries, dead-ends, and portage landings. It was useless trying to spot rocks in the murky water, but at least when my canoe scrapped the bottom I could tell my friends where not to go. As I flipped up the canoe at the Alder Lake portage, the end of our journey was just a few lakes away. The ragged, uphill trail ahead was covered in mud, and it soon became the greatest challenge of the night. As my boat partner and I struggled over the last portages, we took turns pulling each other out of the mud—canoe and all—until we finally reached the lake I’ve called home for eight summers. It was dawn, and we had just one short paddle remaining to reach the dock.

We had traveled non-stop for ninety-six kilometers and trekked over thirty-six portages. This race was a canoe trip from the landing at Kiosk Lake to the Camp Pathfinder canoe dock on Source Lake, and my group covered the distance in nineteen hours, fifty-nine minutes, and fourteen seconds, shattering the record by three hours. The adventure was the culmination of eight years of canoe tripping, and it is one of my greatest achievements.

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After the evening meal is done and the food pack is hung, I love to watch the fire die after an exhausting day of canoe tripping. On this night, the dim light of the embers barely allows me to see the faces of my six young campers. For a moment, I catch a glimpse of the past—I see my ten year old self, living in the Algonquin wilderness for the first time. I hear the echo of my voice across time. “Get these things off me! I already have a thousand bug bites. I can’t go any further. My pack weighs at least two hundred pounds. I want to go home, and I miss real toilets.”

“How come we have to go on canoe trips?” asks the closest camper. “I just wanna do the activities back at Pathfinder.”

I respond, “You can do arts and crafts at home, but you can’t say you’ve paddled seven lakes and seen two moose in your backyard like we did today.”

*But there’s got to be more to why I canoe trip—more than the beautiful lakes and incredible wildlife. It is fulfilling. There’s something oddly refreshing about not bathing for seventeen days. So simple, unlike home. I’ve learned a lot up here. If I can trip all day and night without stopping for more than an occasional granola bar, I know I can face the challenges that lie ahead. I am a leader now. People study leadership in textbooks, but do they experience it? Evacuating a camper with a high fever. Paddling all the way up a creek, realizing it’s the wrong way, motivating the boys to turn around and to try again. Seeking shelter as a microburst sweeps through the campsite, felling trees in its path. I guess canoe tripping is about the unknown—no—it’s about accepting the unknown and learning to deal with it.*

*I’m part of a continuum. Ninety-six years of Pathfinder traditions and values. Centuries of wilderness exploration. Who will follow me? I’ll be proud if one of these kids breaks my Kiosk to Source record.*

And I add, “I hope you’ll keep coming back and that you’ll come to love canoe tripping as much as I do.”