

The Boys at the Lab

The boys at the Lab were not boys. They were young men, but not extremely young: a couple of them were already thinning at the temples. They must have been in their twenties. If you were speaking of one of them – one at a time – you would never have called him a boy. Yet, in a group, they were boys. They were “The Boys,” with quotation marks around them, standing all together on the dock, some with their shirts off. They had tans: the sunlight was thinner then, the ozone layer was thicker, but still they had tans.

The boys had muscles, and also grins, of a sort that you don't see any more on men's faces. Faces like theirs date from the wartime; they went with pipes, and with moustaches. I think the boys had pipes – I seem to recall a pipe or two – and one of them had a moustache. You can see it in the picture of him.

I found the boys very glamorous. Or no: I was too young for glamour. I found them, instead, magical. They were a longed-for destination, the object of a quest..Going to see them was – in anticipation, at least – a radiant event.

The boys arrived at the Lab every spring, around the time the new leaves and the blackflies and mosquitoes appeared. They came from many directions; there were different ones every year; they worked with my father, I wasn't sure what this work involved, but it must have been exciting because the Lab itself was exciting. Anywhere we didn't go often was exciting.

We would get there in a heavy wooden rowboat, built in the five-house village half a mile away – our mother would row, she was quite good at it – or by following a twisty, winding footpath, over fallen trees and stumps and around boulders and across wet patches where a few slippery planks were laid across the sphagnum moss, breathing in the mildewy smell of damp wood and slowly decaying leaves. It was too far for us to walk, our legs were too short, so mostly we went in the rowboat.

The Lab was made of logs; it seemed enormous, though in the two photographs of it that survive it looks like a shack. It did however have a screened porch, with log railings. Inside it there were things we weren't allowed to touch – bottles containing a dangerous liquid in which white grubs floated, their six tiny front legs clasped together like praying fingers, and corks that smelled like poison and were poison, and trays with dried insects pinned to them with long, thin pins, each with a tiny, alluring black knob for a head. All of this was so forbidden it made us dizzy.

At the Lab we could hide in the ice house, a dim and mysterious place that was always bigger on the inside than it was on the outside, and where there was a hush, and a lot of sawdust to keep the blocks

of ice cool. Sometimes there would be a tin of evaporated milk with holes punched in the top and wax paper stuck over them; sometimes there would be a carefully hoarded stub of butter or an end of bacon; sometimes there would be a fish or two, pickerel or lake trout, already filleted, laid out on a chipped enamel pie plate.

What did we do in there? There was nothing to actually do. We'd pretend we had vanished — that nobody knew where we were. This in itself was strangely energizing. Then we'd come out, away from the silence, back into the pine-needle scent and the sound of waves plocking against the shore, and our mother's voice calling us, because it was time to get back into the rowboat and row home.

The boys at the Lab had caught the ice-house fish, and would cook them for their supper. They did their own cooking — another unusual thing to know about them — because there weren't any women there to do the cooking for them. They slept in tents, big canvas tents, two or three to a tent; they had air mattresses, and heavy kapok sleeping bags. They horsed around a lot, or so I like to believe. There's a photo of them pretending to be asleep, with their bare feet sticking out the end of the tent. The names of the boys with the feet were Cam and Ray. They are the only ones with names.

Who took these photos? And why? My father? More interestingly, my mother? I expect she was laughing as she did it; I expect they were playacting, having fun. Maybe there was some harmless flirtation of the sort that used to go on more because everyone knew there would be no consequences. It was my mother who pasted the boys into her photo album, and wrote captions under them: "*The boys.*" "*The boys at the Lab.*" "*Cam and Ray, 'sleeping.'*"

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My mother is lying in bed, where's she been for a year now. In some ways it's an act of will. She became progressively blinder, and then she couldn't go walking alone because she'd fall down, and she needed to have someone with her, one of her elderly friends; but even when the two of them would set out, arms linked, she'd trip and stumble and then they might both fall down. She got a black eye or two, and finally she broke a rib — she fell onto the nightstand beside her bed and must have spent many hours on the floor, painfully pulling herself up and falling down again, like a beetle inside a jar, trying to get herself back into the bed, and was discovered by the woman who'd been hired — over her protests — to come in during the days.

Then she became afraid to walk, although she never said so, and then she became angry at her own fear. Finally she became rebellious. She rebelled against all of it: the blindness, the restriction, the falling down, the injuries, the fear. She no longer wanted to have anything to do with these sources of misery, and so she retreated under the bedcovers. It was a way of changing the subject.

Nowadays she couldn't walk even if she tried to: her muscles have become too weak. But her heart has always been strong, and it keeps her going. Soon she'll be ninety-two.

I sit down on her right side, where her good ear is: she's stone deaf in the other. The hearing in this good ear and her sense of touch are her last two contacts with the outside world. For a while we believed she could still smell; we'd bring bouquets — scented flowers only, roses and freesia and phlox and sweet peas — and shove them under her nose.

"There!" we would say. "Doesn't that smell nice?"

She would say nothing. Throughout her life she lied less than most people, a great deal less: you might even say never. On occasions when a lie might have been called for, she would provide a silence. A mother of a different sort would have said, "Yes, that's just lovely, thank you so much." But she did not say that.

"You don't smell anything at all, do you?" I said at last.

"No," she said.

She's curled up on her side with her eyes closed, but she isn't asleep. The green wool blanket is pulled up to her chin. The tips of her fingers stick out: wizened fingers, almost entirely bone, closed into a little fist. Her hands have to be opened up and massaged, and that takes some doing because her fingers are clenched so tight. It's as if she's holding on to an invisible rope. It's a rope on a ship, a rope on a cliff – some rope she absolutely has to cling on to, so she won't fall overboard, so she can climb up.

She has her good ear against the pillow, shutting things out. I turn her head gently to the side so she can hear me.

"It's me," I say. Talking into her ear is like talking into the end of a long narrow tunnel that leads through darkness to a place I can't really imagine. What does she do in there all day? All day, and all night. What does she think about? Is she bored, is she sad, what's really going on? Her ear is the single link to a whole world of buried activity; it's like a mushroom, a brief pale signal thrust up from under the ground to show that a large network of interconnected threads is still alive and flourishing down there.

"Do you know who I am?" I say to the ear. It even looks like a mushroom.

"Yes," she says, and I know it's true: as I've said, she doesn't lie.

It's my function on these occasions to tell her stories. The stories she most wants to hear are about herself, herself when younger;

herself when much younger. She smiles at those; on occasion she might even join in. She's no longer voluble, she can't carry a plot, not all by herself, but she knows what's happening, or what happened once, and she can manage a sentence or two. I'm hampered in my task because I can play back to her only the stories she once told me, which are limited in number. She likes the exciting stories best, or the ones that show her in a strong light – getting her own way against the odds – or the ones with fun in them.

"Do you remember the boys at the Lab?" I say.

"Yes," she says. That means she really does remember them.

"Their names were Cam and Ray. They lived in a tent. There's a photo of them with their feet sticking out. Do you remember those ones? That summer?"

She says she does.

It's hard for me to picture what my mother was like at that time. No: it's hard to picture her face. Her face has had so many later versions of itself laid down on it, like sediments, that I can't seem to recover that other, earlier face. Even the photos of her don't correspond to anything I can recall. I remember her essence, however: her voice, what she smelled like, what it felt like to lean up against her, the reassuring clatter she would make in the kitchen, even the sound of her singing, because she did used to sing. She once sang in church choirs; she had a good voice.

I can even remember some of her songs, or parts of them:

Blow, blow, sweet and low, wind of the western sea;

Come from the something or other ta tum,

Over the something or other ta tum,

Blow him again to me,

While my little ones, while my pretty ones, sleep . . .

I used to think she was singing from happiness, but in reality she must have been singing to put us to sleep. Sometimes I wouldn't go to sleep, though I would pretend to. Then I would raise myself up stealthily on the pillow and peer through a knothole in the wall. I liked to watch my parents when they didn't know I was doing it. "I'm keeping an eye on them," my mother would say, of boiling eggs or baking biscuits, or even of us, her children. Simply being watched, then, had a protective effect, and so I kept an eye on my parents. It made them safe.

My older brother was restless; he had projects, he wanted to be up and doing, he had things to saw and hammer. He needed glasses of water, and then he'd want to know what time it was and how long it would be until morning. My mother must have sung her songs out of mild desperation, hoping to fence off a small portion of the evening for herself. If she succeeded, she would sit at the table with the kerosene lamp on, playing cribbage with my father.

On some evenings he wasn't there. He'd be working late at the Lab and would come back in the dusk, or he'd be away on collecting trips for weeks at a time. Then she'd be alone. She would spend the evenings reading, while the owls hooted outside and the loons mourned. Or she'd write letters to her distant parents and sisters, describing the weather and the events of the week, though nothing about her feelings. I know this because I myself received similar letters from her, once I'd grown up and moved away.

Or she'd write in her diary. Why did she bother with these diaries? She and her sister made a bonfire of their diaries the night

before their double wedding, and it was a custom she kept up throughout her life. Why set words down, just to destroy them? Maybe she saved the diaries until Christmas so she could put the main happenings of the year into her Christmas messages. Then, on New Year's, she might have erased the old year and started again. She burned letters too.

I never asked her about her reason for doing this. She would only have said, "Less clutter," which would have been part of the truth — she liked to clear the decks, as she put it — but not all of it.

I can remember what the back of her head looked like while she was writing, silhouetted against the soft light of the lamp; her hair, the slope of her shoulders. But not her face.

Her legs, though — I have a clear image of those, in grey flannel slacks, but only at one time of day: late afternoon, with the sun low in the sky, the light coming in yellow shafts down through the trees and glinting off the water. At that hour we would walk along the hillside overlooking the lake to where there was an unusual object. It was a small cement plinth, painted red. It was only a lot-line marker, but at the time it seemed charged with non-human powers, like an altar.

This was where we would wait for our father to come back from the Lab. We would sit on the warm rock, where there was a patch of reindeer moss, brittle in dry weather, soft after rain, and listen for the sound of the motorboat — for this we would have to keep very quiet — and I would lean against my mother's grey flannel legs. Also her leather boots. Possibly I remember the intricacies of these boots — their creases, their laces — better than I remember her face because the boots did not change. At one moment they vanished — they must have been thrown out — but until that time they remained as they were.

This ritual – the walking along the hillside, the uncanny red plinth, the waiting, the leaning, the keeping very quiet – all of this was surely what caused our father to appear, silhouetted against the sun, getting bigger and bigger as the boat neared our dock.

Once in a while a couple of the boys at the Lab would come back with my father to our house and have dinner with us. Most likely the main part of the dinner would be fish. The only other choices were Spam or corned beef, or bacon, or – if we were lucky – something made with eggs and cheese. It was the War, anything in the way of meat was rationed, but fish were easily come by. My mother – when she still had hold of the plot – used to say that if they were expecting company she would just take a fishing rod down to the dock and make a cast or two. That was all it would take. She could catch enough pickerel for dinner in half an hour.

“Then I’d whack them over the heads,” my mother would say to her later friends – her city friends – “and presto! Then we’d throw the innards in the lake, so the bears couldn’t smell them.” She’d be showing off, just a little: the friends thought she’d been crazy to go way up there into nowhere with two small kids. They didn’t say *crazy*, though, they’d say *courageous*. Then she would laugh. “Oh, courageous!” she would say, implying that it hadn’t taken courage because she hadn’t been afraid.

Maybe Cam and Ray came to dinner, and had fish. I certainly hope so. The two of them are characters from a novel, a novel I’ve never read. I have no real recollection of them, but I fell in love with their pictures when I was twelve or thirteen. Cam and Ray were much better than movie stars because they were more real, or their photos were. I had no word for *sexier*, but they were that as

well. They looked so full of life, so adventurous and amused, the two of them.

They’re upstairs now, in my house. I took them into my care along with the rest of the photo album once my mother had gone completely blind.

All the photos are black and white, though the earlier ones have a brownish tinge; they cover the years between 1909, when my mother was born, to 1955, when she seems to have given up on the whole idea. Between those years, however, she was meticulous. Despite her letter-burning and diary-destroying, despite the way she covered her tracks, even she must have wanted a witness of sorts – a testament to her light-footed passage through her time. Or a few clues, scattered here and there along the trail for anyone who might be following, trying to find her.

Underneath each photo is my mother’s careful handwriting, in black ink on the grey pages. Names, places, dates. At the front are my grandparents in their Sunday best with their first car, a Ford, standing proudly outside their white-sided Nova Scotian house. Then there are several aging great-aunts, in print dresses, the shadows cast by the sun deepening their eye sockets and frown lines and making little moustaches underneath their noses. My mother enters as a ribbon-covered baby, then changes to a little girl in a lace-collared dress and ringlets, then to a tomboy in overalls. The sisters and the brothers have appeared by then, and grow larger in their turn. My grandfather sprouts an army doctor’s uniform.

“Did you have the 1919 flu?” I ask my mother’s ear.

A pause. “Yes.”

“Did your mother have it? Did your sisters? Did your brothers? Did your father?” It seemed they all had it.

“Who took care of you?”

Another pause. "Father did."

"He must have been pretty good at it," I say, because none of them died, not then.

An interval, while she considers. "I suppose he was."

She fought against her father, whom nevertheless she loved. He was a stubborn man, she used to say. He had a strong will. She told me once that she was too much like him.

Now my mother is a teenager, joking around in a line of girls at the beach, wearing suits with long legs and striped tops, arms around one another's shoulders. "*Sweet sixteen*," says this seaside girls' group. My mother is in the middle. The names are written underneath: *Jessie, Helene, "Me," Katie, Dorothy*. Then a similar one, winter this time, the girls in scarves and jackets, my mother in earmuffs: *Joyce, "Me," Kae, "Fighting the Storm"*. In those early years of her photo-pasting, she always refers to herself as "Me," with quotation marks around the word, as if she's citing some written opinion to the effect that she is who she is.

Another view: this time she's nose to nose with a horse, holding the bridle. Underneath is written: *Dick and "Me"*. The stories about the horses are popular with her now, I can tell them over and over. The names of the horses were Dick and Nell. Nell was easily spooked, and got the bit between her teeth, and ran away with my mother, and she slipped out of the saddle and might have been dragged to death, and then I would never have been born. But this didn't happen because she held on — like grim death, as she used to say.

"Do you remember Dick?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember Nell?"

"Nell?"

"She ran away with you. You held on like grim death, remember?"

Now she's smiling. In there — at the end of the long dark tunnel that divides her from us — she's off again on that wild gallop, over meadows, through orchards of apple trees in bloom, clinging to the reins and the pommel for dear life, her heart going a mile a minute with terrified joy. Can she smell the apple blossoms, in there where she is? Can she feel the air against her face as she rushes through it?

"Never leave the barn door open," her father told her. "If the horse bolts, it'll head home to the barn and you could get crushed against the door frame going through." And look, she paid attention, she didn't leave the door open, because Nell draws to a standstill in front of the barn, quivering and sweating and foaming at the mouth, eyes rolling. My mother unclenches herself, lets go of the reins, descends. Both of them calm down. A happy ending.

My mother loves happy endings. Earlier in her life — earlier in my life — any story that didn't have such an ending was shelved by her as quickly as possible. I try not to repeat any of the sad stories. But there are some stories with no endings, or none I've been told, and when I come across them in the invisible file of stories I haul around with me and produce during my visits, my curiosity gets the better of me and I pester her because I want to know what happened. She holds out, though. She's not telling.

People she loves — people her own age — a lot of those people have died. Most of them have died. Hardly any of them are left. She wants to know about each death as it happens, but then she won't mention those people again. She's got them safe, inside her head somewhere, in a form she prefers. She's got them back in the layer of time where they belong.

Here she is again, in winter clothing – a cloche hat, a coat with a turned-up fur collar, the flapper style: “Me,” *Eating a Doughnut*. Some girlfriend must have taken that, during her college years. She earned those years, she worked for them, she saved up. The Depression was in full spate, so it couldn’t have been easy. She chose a college far away from her home so she wouldn’t be watched over and restricted by her father, who’d thought she was too frivolous to go to an institution of higher learning anyway. Then she was relentlessly homesick. This did not prevent her from speed skating.

There’s a gap of several years, and now she’s getting married. The wedding group is arranged on the front porch of the big white house, decorated with garlands made by her sister, the youngest of the three. That sister cried throughout the event. The second sister is part of the wedding, because she’s getting married at the same time. My father in a short back-and-sides haircut stands with feet apart, bracing himself; he has a thoughtful appearance. Aunts and uncles and parents and brothers and sisters cluster together. They look solemn. It’s 1935.

At this point in the photograph captions my mother stops being “Me” and identifies herself by her initials – her new initials: Or else she leaves her name out entirely.

Here comes her married life. Some of the key events are missing. The honeymoon was an escapade by canoe, a watercraft my mother had never dealt with before but soon mastered; there are however no pictures of it. Soon my brother materializes as a bundle, and then all three of them are in the woods. They live in a tent while my father builds them a cabin, in his off-hours, when he’s not at the Lab. My mother does their cooking over a campfire and their washing in the

lake, and in her spare time she practises archery – here she is doing it – or feeds grey jays from her hand, or makes a blur on the film as she splashes into the freezing cold lake.

The cabin was already built by the time I was born. It was board-and-batten and had three bedrooms, one for my mother and father, a small one for my brother and myself – we had bunk beds made from two-by-fours – and one for guests. Most of the views of it I have on file in my head are of the floor, which was where I must have spent most of my time: on it, or close to it. I have an audio file, as well: the wind in red pines, a distant motorboat approaching. Beside the front door was a piece of metal: my mother would hit it with a spike to announce that dinner was on the table. I can hear the sound of it whenever I choose.

That cabin is gone now. It was torn down; someone has built a much fancier house in its place.

Nevertheless, here is my mother, standing outside it, feeding a grey jay. She’s far from the world of horses and Fords and floral-patterned aunts by now. The cabin can be reached only by a narrow-gauge railroad or the recently built one-lane gravel road, and after that by boat or trail. All around is the forest, scraggly and vast and bear-infested. Out on the lake – the cold and perilous lake – are the loons. Wolves howl sometimes, and when they do the dogs in the tiny village whine and yelp.

The Lab has been built by now too. It was built before the cabin was. First things first.

Cam and Ray must have been special, because there are a number of pictures of them. They appear on the Lab dock, and in their tent, and sitting on the steps of the log Lab building. In another picture

they have bicycles. They must have brought the bicycles on the train with them, but why would they have done that? There was no place in the forest where you could go bicycling.

But perhaps they bicycled to the village along the raw new gravel road. That would have been a feat. Or perhaps they're on a collecting trip, somewhere with flat trails, because their bicycles are loaded with gear — packsacks, bundles, duffle bags, with soot-blackened billy tins hanging from the sides. They stand balancing the top-heavy bicycles, grinning their wartime grins. They have no shirts on, and their tans and muscles are on display. How healthy they seem!

"Cam died," said my mother once, when she was looking at these photos with me, back when she could still see. "He died quite young." She'd broken her rule about not telling unhappy endings, so this death must have meant a lot to her.

"What of?" I said.

"He had some condition or other." She has never been specific about illnesses: to name them is to invoke them.

"What about Ray?"

"Something happened to him," said my mother.

"Was he in the War?"

A pause. "I'm not sure,"

I couldn't resist. "Was he killed?" If he had to die too early, this seemed to me to be a suitable way. I wanted him to have been heroic.

But she clammed up. She wasn't going to say. One dead boy was enough for that day.

The last time my mother went through her photo album — the last time she could see it — was when she was eighty-nine. My father

had been dead for five years. She knew she was going blind; I think she wanted to have one last look at everything — at herself, at him, at those years that must have seemed to her now so far away, so carefree, so filled with light.

She had to bend over so she was close to the page: not only was her eyesight failing, so were the photos. They were fading, bleaching out. She sped through her earliest life, smiled at herself among the girls in bathing suits, then smiled differently at her wedding picture. She lingered over the group picture of the boys at the Lab, gathered together on the dock. "There are the boys," she said. She turned the page: my father was gazing up at her, holding a stringer with a huge lake trout on it.

"I didn't mind catching them," said my mother, "but I drew the line at cleaning them. That was our arrangement: he always gutted the fish." They did have such arrangements — who did what. I'd grown up thinking of these as laws of nature. It was news to me that some of these arrangements had been set in place by her.

Then she mentioned something she'd never told me before.

"One summer," she told me, "an Indian came to the Lab."

"An Indian? You mean one of the Indians from the lake?" There were such Indians; they trapped and fished, and drifted by in canoes once in a while. People didn't have much gasoline during the War. Nowadays the Indians have motorboats.

"No," said my mother. "An Indian from India."

It would have been like my father to have taken on this incongruous assistant. He wouldn't have seen any difficulties for such an Indian, because there would have been none for him. Anyone who was serious about beetles was a friend of his. But what if the Indian was a vegetarian Hindu? What if he was a Muslim? There was always bacon, up there in the woods. If it was smoked it

would keep for a long time, and was useful for frying things: eggs, if any, and Spam, and fish. Then you could rub the grease on your boots. What would a Muslim have done about the bacon?

"Was he nice?" I said. "The Indian?" There were no pictures of him, I was sure of that.

"I expect so," said my mother. "He brought his tennis whites. And a tennis racquet."

"Why would he do that?" I said.

"I don't know," said my mother.

But I knew. This young man from India must have thought he was going to the country – to what was meant by that word, once, in other places. He'd had in mind an English country house, where he could do a spot of shooting and riding and have tea on the lawn, and stroll among the herbaceous borders, and play some tennis.

He must have had an education to have qualified as one of the boys at the Lab, so he would have been from a wealthy and well-placed Indian family, with a lot of servants. The family would have thought him eccentric to have taken up the study of insects, but still, many of good family in England – such as Darwin – had done so in the past.

They had not however done so in a wilderness of this kind. How had this young Indian man wandered so far afield, across to a new continent and then right to the edge of the known world?

"What year was it?" I said. "Was it during the War? Was I born yet?" But my mother couldn't remember.

It was around this time – when she was still walking, when she'd begun to fall down – that she told me another thing she'd never told

me before. She was having a recurring dream, she said; the same dream over and over. It frightened her and made her sad, although she didn't say this.

In the dream she was alone in the woods, walking by herself beside a small river. She wasn't exactly lost, but no one else was around – none of the people who ought to have been there. Not our father, not my brother, not me; none of her own brothers and sisters, or her friends or parents. She didn't know where they'd gone. Everything was very silent: no birds, no sound of water. Nothing above but the empty blue sky. She came to a high logjam across the river; it was blocking the path. She had to climb up on the slippery logs, hauling herself hand over hand, up and up and up, toward the air.

"And then what?" I said.

"That's all there is to it," she said. "It wakes me up. But then I have the same dream all over again."

One question to ask would be about the dream – why was she having it? I used to wonder that. But the other question – one I've thought of only now – would have to be: Why did she tell me about it?

Another strange thing. Tucked into an envelope with some loose photos of the lake, and the rowboat, and the Lab – those not selected for pasting – I found a few pages from one of her diaries. She had not burned each and every page, therefore; she had saved a few. She had chosen them, torn them out, preserved them from destruction. But why these? I studied them carefully, but I couldn't figure it out. No dramatic events had occurred, no responses of any note had been recorded. Was it a message, left so I could find it? Was it an oversight? Why save a page with nothing written on it but "*A perfectly beautiful day!!!*"?

Now it's four years later, and my mother is much older. "We live a long time," she said once, meaning the women in her family. Then she said, "After you're ninety, you age ten years for every year." She foresaw herself getting fainter and fainter, more and more papery, more and more whispery, and this is what has happened to her. She still smiles, though. And she can still hear, through the one good ear.

I turn her head away from the pillow so I can talk to her. "It's me," I say. She smiles. She doesn't say much any more.

"Do you remember Dick and Nell?" I begin. The two horses, usually dependable.

No response. Her smile flickers out. I'll have to pick another story. "Do you remember the Indian?" I say.

A pause. "What Indian?"

"The Indian who came to the Lab one year. When you were living up north, remember? He came from India. He had a tennis racquet. You told me about him."

"Did I?"

No hope for the Indian. He will not be resurrected, not today. I try something else. "Do you remember Cam and Ray? You've got some pictures of them, in your photo album. They had bicycles. Remember them?"

A long pause. "No," says my mother at last. She never lies.

"They slept in a tent," I say, "with their feet sticking out. You took their picture. Cam died young. He had a condition."

She turns her head on the pillow, closing off her good ear. She shuts her eyes. That is the end of the conversation. She's back inside, way back, back in the time of legend. What's she doing? Where is

she? Is she galloping through the trees on horseback, is she fighting the storm? Is she herself again?

The fate of the boys is now up to me. Also that of the young man from India. I picture him getting off the little train, hauling an enormous leather valise, with his tennis racquet in its press under his arm. What would have been inside the valise? Beautiful silk shirts. Fine cashmere jackets. Casually elegant shoes.

He crunches downhill on the gravel, toward the village dock. Then he stands there. His dismay — which has been deepening with every mile he's travelled, through forests and more forests, past bogs where dead spruce stand knee-deep in water, black and naked as if burned, through gaps blasted out of the granite bedrock, past lakes as blue and blank as closed windows, then through more forests and more bogs and past more lakes — this dismay settles over him like a net. His soul feels the pull of the empty space before him: of the trees and trees and trees, of the rocks and rocks and rocks, of the bottomless water. He's in danger of evaporating.

Clouds of blackflies and mosquitoes are already attacking him. He wants to turn and run after the retreating train, calling to it to stop, to save him, to take him home, or at least to a city, but he can't do that.

From the Lab — not that he knows yet where the Lab is — a motorboat has set out. Not a launch, nothing fancy. A crude wooden boat, handmade. He's seen similar boats, but not in rich places. The boat grinds toward him over the flat water, which glares with the light from the descending sun. In the boat sits a man who is obviously a peasant: stubby in shape, wearing a battered felt hat, an old khaki

jacket, and — he now sees — a peasant's wide but crafty grin. This is the servitor sent out to help him with his valise. Perhaps the country house with the lawns and tennis courts is concealed in the forest, around that hill, or the next one, the other one more or less like it.

The man in the boat is my father. He's been chopping wood, and after that — having bailed out the boat, which has a slow leak — he's had a short, sharp wrestle with the motor, which is started by pulling on a greasy piece of rope. He has a two-day beard; tree sap and oil darken his broad hands and splotch his clothing. He cuts the motor, leaps onto the dock, hitches up the boat in one motion, then strides toward the Indian, grimy hand outstretched.

The Indian man stands paralyzed: it's a crisis of manners. Surely he cannot be expected to shake the hand of this manual labourer, who is now welcoming him, and heaving his valise into the filthy boat, and manhandling his tennis racquet, and inviting him to dinner, and promising him a fish. A fish? What does he mean by a fish? Now my father is saying he's sure the boys will make him comfortable in their tent — a tent? What sort of tent? Who are these boys? What is happening?

I sometimes think about that Indian man and his northern ordeal. He must have gone back to India. Surely he would have high-tailed it for home as soon as he could get decently free. He would have had a story or two to tell, about the blackflies and the log-cabin Lab, and the two young barbarians with their bare feet sticking out of their tent.

I give the parts of the barbarians to Cam and Ray because I want them to have more of a story — more of a story than I know, and more than they probably had. I give them the task of jollyng along the deracinated but educated Indian, slapping him on the back perhaps, telling him it will be okay, it will be fine. They'll take him

fishing, give him some fly dope, tell him a few bear stories. Maybe they'll fix up a sleeping place for him inside the Lab itself, so he won't be so jittery: the first sound of a loon at night can be a shock. They'll show him their pipes; then they'll show him their bicycles as well, making a point of their own foolishness in having brought such next-to-useless vehicles into the forest so he himself won't feel like an idiot about the tennis racquet.

All of that will give them something to do. I want them to step forward, out of the ranks of the extras. I want them to have speaking parts. I want them to shine.

There they are now, set in motion. The two of them are bounding downhill to the dock at the Lab; they greet the Indian man, they take his hand and help him out of the boat. The sun is low, the clouds in the west are orangey pink: tomorrow will be a fine day, though possibly — says my father, heaving the leather valise out of the boat, then clambering onto the dock and squinting at the sky — there will be some wind.

Cam picks up the valise; Ray is lighting his pipe. Someone has made a joke. What about? I can't hear. Now all three of them — Cam, and Ray, and the elegant Indian — are walking along the dock. My father follows behind, carrying — for some reason — a red metal gas can. The red stands out brilliantly against the dark green of the forest.

The Indian man looks back over his shoulder: he alone can sense me watching. But he doesn't know it's me: because he's nervous, because he's in a strange place, he thinks it's the forest, or the lake itself. Then they all climb the hill, up toward the Lab, and vanish among the trees.