

Packing Out

Rob Davidson

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On the third morning, Jon stayed inside the tent, spiraled deep within his sleeping bag. He would linger as long as possible, avoiding the cold and drizzle. Outside, he heard his father working around the fire pit, boots scuffling across soggy ground, the busy clatter of pots and pans. Campfire smoke drifted through the tent, light and musky.

“You alive in there?”

Jon groaned.

“Get your ass up. I’m making breakfast.”

Rain splattered the tent shell in bursts, like buckshot. Ten minutes later, his father barked again. The eggs would be ready and he damn sure better be out there to eat them.

“Can I eat in the tent?”

“No food in the tent! You know that.”

Jon was slow to pull himself out of the sleeping bag, slow to look for his duck boots, slow to don his rain pants and jacket. Maybe he could just skip breakfast, though when Dad cooked you had to eat or he took it personally. Not like Mom. She hated cooking now, no longer nagging if he left a meal half-finished.

By the time he managed to pull himself out of the tent, food was on the table. Reconstituted scrambled eggs, two sausage links, and half of an English muffin. A dollop of margarine sat off-center, melting into the warm bread.

His father waved a spatula at him. “Sit down and eat.”

“I have to pee.”

“You haven’t peed? Christ, hurry it up! I’m soaked to the bone out here cooking, and you haven’t even taken a whiz!”

Jon scampered a few yards down the path leading out of the campsite, towards the pit latrine. He lowered the waistband of his rain pants with a thumb. Urine foamed on the spongy earth, steaming in the damp air. How quiet this little dell in the woods was, covered in fern and moss. A sanctuary of sorts, a world of blankets, covering the ugliness.

He returned to the campsite and slid into place at the table. Across from him, his father's plate was already empty. Jon nibbled at his food. The sausages were cold. The eggs were tasteless and rubbery. His father pointed to a small bottle of Tabasco on the table. Jon soaked his eggs in the fiery red sauce and did what he could to choke it down without meeting his father's gaze.

After eating Jon made his way down the hill to the lakeshore to collect a pot of water for washing. The lake was flat as glass, covered in a silvery mist. He crouched on a stone spit, studying it. He envied such stillness; he ached to feel such peace. But it was impossible. All the shadowy stuff churned inside him, a desperate, roiling mess. He felt one way about it in the morning, and another in the afternoon. Nothing could be settled, it seemed.

He closed his eyes. *No dark things.*

His father had his tackle box open on the picnic table. He held up a bright yellow bucktail jig. "Wash those dishes, then grab your rod."

"Fishing in the rain?"

"You want to waste another day sitting in that tent?"

At least it had been dry. He'd read about Huck and Jim on the river, two friends on the run, fleeing a desperate, stultifying world. Best part of the book so far. He wished for it never to end, but he knew it would. Things always fall apart.

His father produced his fishing hat, with its enormous visor like a duck's bill. He cracked a goofy grin. "Those fish are hungry. The rain actually helps!" Jon nodded as his father recited the familiar facts—cold fronts and barometric pressure, insect behavior and organic runoff. Yes, the

fish would bite. Yes, you know more than I do. Yes, I'll do what you say. It was their oldest ritual, the one thing that hadn't changed after the divorce. It was certainly the reason Jon was there with him now. Fishing and blood. What else did they have?

He'd stalled and resisted, procrastinating his packing until his mother finally shouted that unless he had his pack filled by bedtime, she was going to take every damn piece of electronics in the house and bury it in a box in the back yard for a year: iPod, iPad, iPhone, 3DS, and X-box.

"I don't have an iPad."

Her finger jabbed in the air like a lance. "Go to your room!"

She sat in the chair opposite his bed as he packed, texting on her iPhone. Blue light flickered across her face.

"I don't see why I have to go," he growled.

"This is him reaching out."

"It's crap."

"Only if you treat it like crap. It could be great."

"Five days in the woods? Tell me how that's great."

Busy with a text, she was slow to reply. "Male bonding."

"What a joke."

She lowered her phone, holding his gaze for a moment. Then the blue light returned.

Jon folded his arms. "You don't care."

"I do care. But I don't have a say."

"Which is totally effed." He studied the jumbled mess of clothing on his bed. None of it made sense. "I'm just this thing you pass back and forth, one more thing to fight over."

She sat silently, thumbs thrumming across the iPhone screen. Sometimes he wanted to smash it right out of her hands, screaming at her to look at him, to touch him.

“He says you turned on him. He says you kicked him out.”

The phone finally fell to her lap. “Did he tell you that?”

“Is it true?”

“No.” She ran a finger along the edge of her smart phone, as if caressing it. “I can’t believe he said that.”

“I overheard him telling someone.” Jon searched his laundry for a sock, the missing partner to the one in his hand. “Will you and Dad ever get back together?” The eagerness of his question embarrassed him.

She looked at him with wet, red-rimmed eyes. “Baby, I’ve told you.”

“But I still don’t understand.”

“I can’t,” she whispered, slowly shaking her head. “Maybe someday you’ll understand.”

He threw the single sock into a corner of his closet, forever an orphan. He might understand if his parents would talk to him. They exploded in each other’s faces, screaming out how they felt about one another, but all they ever did with him was circle around a thing.

His mother was wounded and scared, he knew that. Still, he’d hoped for reconciliation, that she could at least imagine the possibility. Now, perhaps for the first time, he understood that it was beyond her imagination. She had no imagination. Like a forest after a ravaging fire, it would be months, years before she returned to life.

Wadding up the remaining clothes on his bed, he began jamming it all into his pack, everything helter-skelter.

“It won’t fit like that,” his mother observed.

“I’ll make it fit.”

“You won’t find anything.”

“There’s not as much to sort out as you think.”

They fished in a cove carpeted in lily pads and banked in slender green reeds. They sat in opposite ends of the canoe. Jon cast into deeper water, while his father worked the shore. Wary of startling the fish, they remained silent.

In late morning the rain weakened to a drizzle, and by noon it had stopped. The clouds lightened. Soon there were patches of blue sky poking through. Jon felt the warmth of the sun on his neck. They removed their rain jackets. His father rolled up his flannel shirt sleeves, exposing his muscular forearms, covered in a skein of black arm hair. Within the past year, the silky tendrils on Jon's own arms had thickened and grown longer.

His father turned. "What're you looking at?"

"Your hairy arms."

He laughed. "Yeah, just you wait. Your grandpa was a hairy son of a bitch. Runs in the family."

"Tell me about him."

His father made a short cast and reeled it in. "Hard guy to get to know. He worked the ore boats. Wasn't around a lot."

"I know that," Jon said. "Did he take you fishing?"

His father smiled. "He did." He spoke of his favorite memories: long, lazy afternoons trolling for walleye, shore casting for trout, or netting smelt. "That's why I do this with you. Sort of a tradition, you know?"

Jon nodded, then reeled in his line. His plug was fouled with stringy weeds. He cleaned it, then began carefully sorting through the tackle box, searching for the right lure. It was time for a change.

Back at camp, they strung lines between trees and hung their wet clothing to dry. Jon's father lay down in the tent for a nap. Jon returned to his book. He read the scene where Huck, confronted by slave catchers, lies to protect Jim. Later he feels guilty for not having done the right thing, yet he knows that handing Jim over would've been just as bad. There is no correct answer, it seems. Right or wrong, both carry a cost. So how do you choose? *I was stuck*, Huck concludes. *I couldn't answer that.*

Jon sat up in his camp chair. He read the scene a second time. Amazing, he thought. There it was, right there. His mind felt electric; he couldn't sit still. He walked down to the lake and gazed across the water, rippling with waves, the sunlight sparkling, almost holy, beacon from an undiscovered country. One day he would go there.

In the late afternoon, they again set out to fish, this time on foot. Jon worked a tiny cove far from their campsite. He found a clearing between two ancient fir trees and stepped to the shore. He knew the smaller pike would be in shallower water. The larger pike would be out in the middle and along the points of the cove. He used a red-and-white Dardevle spoon, casting up high. Just before the lure hit the water, he jerked back on the rod, snapping the line so the lure slapped the surface, a trick his dad had taught him. It attracted bigger pike, triggering their feeding response.

He was at it for forty minutes with nothing to show. Mid-autumn was a funny time to be fishing for pike. It depended on what the muskies were doing in the lake. Muskies swam in the deeper, colder water and when they moved out the bigger pike would, at this time of year, move into that deeper water. He might need to be out in the canoe. He might need to be fishing for something other than pike. He might need to be on a different lake. Or on a wholly different adventure. Maybe floating down the river on a raft with a friend.

He checked his watch: four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon. He was tired and hungry, hadn't bathed in three days, and the mosquitoes and black flies were eating the living shit out of him. But hey, this was his dad's idea of "guy time," getting away from it all, the big step back. They were supposed to be getting to know each other again, re-bonding.

Whatever. A bunch of bullshit. Wow, his dad felt guilty for walking away from the family. He took a week off work to bring his son up to the Boundary Waters... in fucking October! They had the place to themselves, however many millions of acres of lake and forest, but that just meant the mosquitos had nobody else to pick on and you could pretty much count on rain.

His thoughts were arrested by the sound of a loon calling from across the lake, its wail piercing and plaintive. The sound lingered in the trees, at once the most beautiful and the most mournful thing he'd heard in these woods. He longed to hear it again, and a few minutes later he did. Now farther away, the song was quieter, softer. A haunting echo, the memory of a song.

Actually, when his father had made that comment—that Jon's mother had turned on him—it had been to one of his girlfriends, Vicky or was it Gwen. (None of them stayed around for long.) The two of them sat out in the kitchen one Saturday night, drinking and talking, their voices loud. Jon lay in his bed in the narrow utility room, hastily converted to a boy's bedroom, the back half haphazardly piled with boxes. When his father said it, Jon knew it was a lie. He also knew his father believed it. There was no version of the story where he was plainly at fault, where he accepted blame.

The next morning Jon rose early. The house was quiet. He walked down the hall and peeked into his father's bedroom. Janice—that was her name—lay stretched out naked beside his father. Jon stared at her back and bare ass, dimpled with fat. Her skin looked flabby and pasty white, nothing like the glossy skin he'd seen in the pictures on his father's computer.

Jon stepped back. A board creaked. His father's eyes flew open.

“Close the fucking door!”

Jon slammed it shut and threw his old man the finger.

Several times Jon swore it would be his final cast, but he cast again—eternal hope of the fisherman. When the pike hit, he knew it was big. The fish took line and Jon heard the drag on his reel and tried to slow it down as the fish swam toward a log. Jon worked the fish in, thrashing, to the shore. The Dardevle was pinned tightly into the lower jaw, bristling with heavy teeth. Jon removed the lure with a pair of longnose pliers, a gift from his father on his eighth birthday. He strung the fish through the gills and immediately set out for camp.

His father was down along the shore, cleaning a small-mouth bass. Blue-gray innards sat in a small, wet pile. He sawed off the fish head with two vigorous strokes of the knife. He smiled when he saw Jon’s catch.

“Atta boy! Now we have a meal. You clean that up and I’ll pan fry these suckers.”

Jon scaled the pike, then gutted it. He tossed the offal along the shore for the gulls or raccoons. He rinsed his hands in the cold, clean water. He brought his wet, glistening fingers to his nose, savoring the smell of the lake: earthy and damp, fresh but also a little musty from the reeds and lily pads and leaves. The odors of camping—lake water, wood smoke, fish frying up in the pan—these might be his favorite things about it, what he would remember best.

He stood before the lake, studying its coves and outcrops. Trees crowded the shoreline, ablaze in autumn oranges, yellows, and reds. So many hidden areas, secluded spots. It was oddly comforting, when you thought about it: you can’t see the entire lake all at once, a case of limited perspective. He liked knowing there were hidden pockets, safe spots where you might hide from others.

Last year, during the divorce, his parents were constantly shouting and throwing things and slamming doors. Mom lay in bed half the day, sobbing. Dad was gone a lot. When he was

home he sat alone at the kitchen table under the fluorescent light, drinking Jim Beam out of a jelly jar, lame '80s rock music playing on the radio, staring sullenly at the dark brown oven door like it might open up and tell him something, answer some question about why, about who was to blame, about what to do next. But the oven never had anything to say, never opened its mouth, cold because no one had bothered to cook a meal in weeks. All they ate was crappy take out. For once Jon could eat whatever he wanted: KFC, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut. His mother let him eat in the living room with the television blaring. Just clean up your mess. She couldn't be bothered.

A horrible year, one long opera of tears and shouting, but mostly silence. Three people in their tiny, one-floor house each pressed into a different corner, alone. A terrible stillness, heavy as a stone, pressing down on each of them. Until one of them left.

And then, gradually, things changed. His mother started to clean the house again. She read Jon's report cards. His third quarter grades were poor. In the thick of the fighting, with neither parent paying attention, he'd quit doing homework. He skipped days, feigning illness at home or playing hooky, wandering in the trees along Congdon Creek or walking out to Como Park, napping on a picnic bench. What difference did it make?

His mother was shocked. She knew she'd dropped the ball, but what the hell was this? Jon made some remark about no one else caring, so why should he.

"You want to repeat sixth grade? Because if you get another quarter of this, that's what'll happen."

"Who fucking cares." A stupid thing to say, but he was trying to hurt her.

She narrowed her eyes. "It better be you, baby."

He walked up the narrow, winding path between the ferns, climbing the short hill to their campsite, perched on a bluff overlooking Arrowhead Lake. His father had a fire going, a thin blue spiral of smoke rising into the birch and maple canopy. The clouds had cleared off, leaving a

brilliant teal afternoon sky. On the table stood an aluminum flask. Dad was in a jolly mood, whistling as he tended the fire. The bass lay on a plate, split into two clean filets. In a bowl beside it, corn meal with a pinch of red pepper.

“Nice catch,” he said, looking at Jon’s fish. “I dated a Chippewa girl once. She sucked the heads and ate the eyeballs.”

“When was that?”

“Years ago.”

“You still dating Tanya?”

“No,” he said, sharply. “Too much work.” He poked at the fire with his stick. “Your mother seeing anyone?”

“She says she’s through with men.”

He laughed. “Yeah, we put her through the ringer. Me first, and now you.” He picked up the flask and drank, lips narrowing as he swallowed. “How ’bout it, huh? That storm blows in, three straight days of rain, but then we get this one nice day. Not even one. Half a day.” He slid the flask into a pocket of his vest. “Are we fucking camping, or what?”

“We are fucking camping, Dad.”

Already his speech was changing: a little louder, a little slurred. Jon had only been down at the shore, cleaning fish for twenty minutes. But then his father probably had the flask with him all afternoon. It was their last night in the woods. Why not tie one on? The rain might have sucked, but at least his dad had been sober.

Jon de-boned the pike, then cut it into small filets, which they covered in corn meal and dropped into a hot pan. The meat cooked quickly, turning white. They ate it with a dash of Tabasco. The fish tasted of the lake, a little earthy. Baked beans were next, syrupy and sweet, the perfect follow-up. After that they felt full and content. They sat around the fire as the afternoon light faded, dusk slowly rising out of the shadows. His father sat in his camp chair licking his

fingers and sipping from his flask. Jon kept mixing lemonade, going heavy on the sugary powder, leaving a sediment in his cup. Camping was the one time he drank the stuff.

“How’s your mother doing?”

The question surprised him. “I don’t know. Better, I guess.”

“Glad to hear it.”

They listened to the gentle crackling of the fire, which needed tending.

“You think about her?” Jon asked.

“All the time. We talk, probably more than you know.”

Jon dug a fingernail into the nylon fabric of his camp chair. “About what?”

“You, mostly.” His father sat quietly for a long moment before turning to him. “We lost something, each one of us. But it won’t do any good to wish for it back.”

“But if you’re talking, maybe—”

“Jon,” his father cut in, sharply. “It ain’t coming back.”

Jon swirled the last sip of lemonade, then poured it into the fire. It sizzled on a log. “You’re mad at her. You think she turned on you.”

“Why would you say that?”

“I heard you talking to that woman, Janice, in the kitchen.”

His father screwed up his face, thinking. “The fuck you listening in on me for?”

“I wasn’t. You were talking loud, you and that drunk bitch.” He sat back in his chair, huffing.

“The walls in that place are pretty thin.” His father looked down into the fire. “It was a mistake having her over. You’re not ready for that. That was stupid of me. I’m sorry.”

Jon studied the endless dance of orange flames flickering up and down, swaying side to side.

“I’ve made a lot of mistakes, Jon. Your father isn’t a perfect man. You know that now.”

“But Mom never turned on you.”

His father sat back, exhaling loudly through his nose. “No, not exactly.”

Jon wanted to ask, *Not exactly as in, she did or she didn't? Speak clearly to me for once in your life.* But he said nothing, aware that his father had said more in the last five minutes than he'd said in the last five years, and equally aware that he was now finished speaking.

A minute later, his father stood from his chair, cleared his throat and spat into the fire. “You go down to the lake, get us some water for washing. I'll burn these scraps in the fire.”

Jon grabbed the pot. For once he was glad to have a chore, a reason to walk away. At the shore he stood still, studying the ochre clouds streaking the evening sky. The trees were aglow with a special light, beautiful but fleeting, fated to disappear. He thought he might cry. Something was broken inside him. The sadness and fear were there, had always been there, probably always would be. He'd seen it paralyze his mother. But it didn't have to. It could become something else. The question was where to place your hand on it, how to control it, how to make it into something other than a wild horse trampling you.

Jon breathed deeply of the cool breeze blowing south, across the water. His eyes traced the contours of the lake, soft now, half-covered in shadow. His thoughts, like his heart, were a jumbled mess. He longed for the solace of reading, to disappear again into his book. Not only to escape; there were answers there. When Huck discovers that Jim has been recaptured and sold back into slavery, he weeps for his lost friend. He's devastated. But eventually he acts. Out of sadness comes a stronger resolve, a will to change, to help others, to focus on someone other than himself. It seemed as good a place as any to start.

A large black bear emerged out of the woods along the inland shore, perhaps a quarter mile across the lake. Even at that distance it appeared huge, plump and round, with its distinctive tan snout. Jon was electrified at the bear's appearance. He watched it rout along the shoreline near a campsite they'd considered before settling on the island site, which would be more private. The bear sat back on its haunches and lifted its nose into the air, holding it aloft. Then it walked forward, into the lake, and began swimming for the island.

They sat in the clearing, waiting. The packs had been hastily strung in the trees, a dozen feet overhead. His father sat at the end of the picnic table. It probably smelled our campfire, he said, and was coming to have a look. These bears were pretty tame, used to dealing with campers. Easy to scare off. Just let him handle it.

Jon was nervous. A bear was nothing to mess with. They were on its turf, not the other way around.

And then it was there, entering the campsite from the trail that led up from the shore, its black hair glistening and wet. They hadn't heard a thing, not one sound.

Jon's father stood and picked up the soup pot and metal spoon. "Stand up straight," he said. "Stay behind me and a little off to the side. Don't turn your back on him." He started banging the spoon on the pot and shouting at the bear to scram, buzz off, get the hell out of there.

The bear stood still on the edge of the campsite, regarding them, then moved forward, slowly, head low, sniffing. Jon and his father backed off, giving it space. It moved to the table, nosing around the fire pit, where it found something on the ground.

"Damn, those fish scraps."

"Didn't you burn them?"

"I dropped the plates. I thought I picked it all up. Now he thinks we have something."

He stepped forward, banging loudly on the pot and shouting.

"Dad! Be careful."

"I've done this before."

The bear sniffed around the perimeter of the fire pit, moving slowly, indifferent to the camper's clamor. Jon felt tight and nervous, his body stiffening with fear. Yet his father appeared loose, almost like he was having fun. He pounded and hollered, whooped and shouted. The bear continued its methodical search, sniffing along the tent, back around the picnic table, and then across the clearing before pausing at the foot of the tree bearing their packs. It sat back on its

haunches, sniffing up in the air, then raised itself up on its hind legs, placing one paw on the pine tree. Erect, it stood six feet tall, its movements oddly human.

“Oh, no you don’t!” his father barked. “You don’t want to do that!”

“Is it going to climb the tree?”

“He’s thinking about it.”

His father stepped forward. The bear lowered itself to the ground. It rolled its head, turning towards them, making a strange kind of huffing sound. His father stomped a foot and roared.

“Dad!”

His father was screaming now, banging ever more quickly. He stepped forward again.

The bear rose like a black wave, knocking his father flat to the ground and tousling him, teeth bared, before charging into the blackness of the forest, through the brush. Gone, vanished. The forest was eerily silent.

His father lay on his back, flat on the ground. He groaned. Jon darted forward, dropping to his knees. Blood dampened his father’s shoulder. “I can’t feel anything,” his father said. “Is it bad?”

Jon breathed quickly, in sharp, shallow huffs. He couldn’t speak, frozen in disbelief and fear. This terrible, unimaginable thing had just happened.

“Jon, look at me. Tell me how bad it is.”

Jon blinked, staring down at his father. “I can’t touch it.”

“You have to. You have to bind it up, clean it.”

Jon picked at his father’s torn shirt, saw the blood already soaking the shoulder. He moved the fabric and saw the open wound—two or three gashes, like he’d been slashed with a knife. There were more along his right rib cage and forearm. In the minutes that followed, Jon did his best to clean and bind the wounds, following his father’s instructions. His dad seemed remarkably calm and clear, though he said it was beginning to hurt. He wasn’t sure he could sit up yet. Jon

dabbed at the wounds, cleaning them, then applied a crude compress, wrapping it all with a couple of shirts.

“We have to break camp,” his father said.

“Is it coming back?”

“No. I challenged it, which was stupid. He spooked and ran. He’ll wait a good while before coming back. We need to leave at first light. I gotta see a doctor.”

His father lay in the tent, head propped up on some bags, his arm in a sling and his side and shoulder wrapped in the make-shift bandages. He directed Jon’s actions, telling him what to pack and where to put it. The entire break-down of the camp was now on Jon’s shoulders. His father couldn’t help. The initial numbness and shock of the encounter gave way to a rising sensation of sharp, burning pain. Even rolling over made him cry out.

Jon checked repeatedly for cell phone reception, but they were out of range, just as they had been since leaving the outfitter four days ago. The stark fact of their isolation terrified him; his back and shoulders were tight and stiff. Adrenaline coursed through his body in rude surges. It helped having chores to do, the packing and stuffing and cleaning up. Just keep moving. Push aside the fear, which could swallow him. He mustn’t let it.

It was agreed they would break camp at dawn. Crossing the lake in the dark was too dangerous, and anyway they had two portages on their way out that could only be managed in daylight. They would spend the night in the tent, set an alarm, and be off first thing.

Jon couldn’t sleep. He listened to his father’s labored breathing, the wet, close snorts and snores. He worried his father might die. That possibility hovered before him like an inscrutable, black shadow. He would not, could not look upon it. He must turn his mind from it. But to what?

He worried the bear might return. It would be angry. It had tasted blood.

The wind increased. The tent’s rain cover and sides flapped noisily—so thin, just two layers of nylon. No protection at all if a bear attacked. Suddenly, every aspect of their situation seemed

stacked against them. The darkness, the wind and rain, the bear. What stood between them and disaster? Nylon. Nothing.

The temperature started falling. The rain began softly at first, then steadily increased, drumming on the tent. His father slept fitfully. The unzipped sleeping bag Jon had draped over him kept sliding off. His breathing was labored and heavy. Jon wanted to wake him, to ask if he was all right, to ask if they were going to make it out of there. It seemed impossible, a long day of canoeing and portaging. How was he going to do it alone? Would his father be able to walk? Their situation struck him as increasingly desperate. Doomed. The fear rose again, racing through his mind in mad circles. He wept, he couldn't help it, but then he felt better. He closed his eyes and concentrated on his breathing, something his mother had taught him after his first panic attacks, right after Dad moved out. In, out. Just breathe.

When the alarm sounded it was still dark. Jon didn't think he'd slept at all, not for a single minute. And now it was time to do this, to step out into the wind and rain and move everything down to the water. Rousing his father proved difficult. He appeared groggy. Jon wrestled rain pants onto his legs, then ordered him to sit up. His father moved slowly. Overnight the pain and stiffness had increased. Just sitting up made him cry out, a sharp, piercing, primitive wail, almost child-like. Such naked vulnerability terrified Jon. His father was more seriously wounded than he'd thought. Panic washed over his body, stinging like acid. He felt powerless, incompetent. There was nothing he could do, yet he understood there was really only one thing to do, and it started now.

He got his father out of the tent and sat him at the picnic table, a raincoat draped over his shoulders and head, then proceeded to break camp. He didn't wait for instructions. His father was no longer capable of giving instructions. He sat, head drooping, listing to one side, half-asleep.

The canoe loaded, Jon cautiously led his father down the path to the shore. He arranged the packs so that his father could sit in the bottom of the canoe, leaning back. Jon pushed off from

shore, climbed into the stern, and began paddling. He needed something to aim for, like a big pine tree or a rock outcrop on the far side of the lake. You aim for your mark and you just keep paddling, telling yourself you're going to get there, one stroke after another. The scuffed wooden blade of the paddle slices into the lake, wind and water offers resistance, yet the boat moves forward. It's almost an act of faith.

Out in the middle of the lake the chop got so heavy it splashed over the bow, spraying them. The canoe rocked violently and Jon feared capsizing. His father's rain jacket blew off, but there was no way to help him. Jon paddled toward shore, where the water was calmer, but this would make their trip longer. His upper arms, neck and back burned with the effort, yet he must continue.

They reached the first portage and Jon unloaded the canoe. He got his father situated on the shore, resting under a large maple, its crown a fiery auburn. Item by item, he conveyed the load from the shore of Arrowhead up and over a steep hill, walking along a narrow forest path to the shore of Hunger Lake, a quarter of a mile away. The packs were heavy and after four trips there and back, his back ached. He felt exhausted, yet still there was the canoe and also his father.

He lifted one end of the canoe and rolled it over, upside-down, then backed himself towards the middle, lifting it along the gunwales until the center span's shoulder pads were in position, and then, crouching, he lifted the rear end off the ground and stood, the canoe now balanced on his shoulders. Walking up the steep trail with the enormous canoe proved taxing. He was red-faced, his head and torso covered in sweat by the time he crested the hill. Mosquitoes buzzed mercilessly around his neck, face, and ears. At the shore of Hunger Lake he had to rest for ten minutes and catch his breath. He tried his father's cell again. Still no reception.

He walked back to get his father. He was half-asleep, dozing under the tree. Jon roused him. His father was shivering. He had trouble standing. He felt dizzy, nauseated. Jon guided him slowly along the path. His father started panting in short, rapid breaths. His feet slipped on the soft, spongy loam of the pine-shaded forest. They paused several times, but it seemed he could

never catch his breath. He just wanted to sit down and rest. But after five minutes his breathing had not slowed and he felt no stronger. Jon pleaded with his father to stand. They had to keep moving.

“I don’t think I can,” his father said.

“You have to,” Jon said, his voice hardening with an impatience that surprised him. “I can’t leave you out here.”

“No, you can’t.” His father sat broken on a rock, head drooping. “I’m sorry, Jon. God damn it, I’m no good.”

The sound of his father’s weeping arrested Jon. He closed his eyes, felt his own tears brimming. There was something surreal about all of this, but there was no time to puzzle over it. They still had two lakes and a second portage to cross. He had to get his father back to the outfitter on Eagle Lake today, by sundown. It was already noon. Jon thought his way through the next stages of their journey, estimating how long it would take. God damn it, they could do it! He could make it happen. He was already making it happen. The truth of it washed over him like a cool wave.

“Come on, old man. When we get to the lodge I’ll buy you a big beer.”

His father chuckled. “They won’t serve you!”

“They will after they hear about this.”

He got his father up on his feet and they shuffled along the path and down the hill to the lake shore. Jon made himself a quick PB & J. His father wasn’t hungry, but Jon made him sip water. He loaded the canoe and got his father positioned, tucking in the edges of the rain coat he draped over him. He hoped his father would stay dry, but in this weather it was a vain wish.

“That’s the best I can do,” he said.

“You’re doing it,” his father mumbled. “You’re a good son.”

A cold, driving rain pelted them all along the length of Hunger Lake. Jon's hands were red and raw, his cheeks burning. His father's jacket blew off again, but Jon couldn't stop paddling to fix it. The floor of the canoe was awash in rainwater. He knew his father was soaked, miserably wet and cold.

When they reached the shore of the second portage, his father was half-unconscious. Stepping out of the canoe he lost his balance and toppled over into the muck. Cursing, Jon dragged him onto the dry shore. He unloaded the canoe in the rain, arranging the packs in a line in the order that he would carry them. He beached the canoe and rolled it over, upside down. Dirty water funneled out, soaking into the rocky ground.

Jon knew the portage from Hunger to Eagle Lake was shorter and flatter, just ten minutes one way. The trail was wider and better maintained. But he looked at his father, who sat curled up against a tree, muttering, confused, asking where they were, and he knew there was no time to waste. The packs would have to stay. Someone would come back for them. Jon carried the canoe to the shore of Eagle Lake, then double-timed it back for his father, who inexplicably had removed his rain jacket and fleece sweater. The garments sat in a puddle at his feet, covered in mud.

"What are you doing?" Jon hurriedly redressed his father as best he could. "Dad, wake up! You have to wake up now." But his father was not waking up. He was still breathing, however. Thank god.

Kneeling, Jon slowly pulled his father onto his back. His dad was out cold, pure dead weight, no help at all. Jon staggered to his feet, nearly toppling over, but held his footing. Somehow, he made the portage, shuffling, staggering down the trail, grunting and huffing and cursing the Boundary Waters, all species of bear, and every damn mosquito in the state of Minnesota. At the trailhead, Jon lowered his father into the canoe. He fell forward, unconscious, like a bag of meat.

For one raw second the terror of what they faced shot through him, but it was easier now to push it down. There was a single immediate thing that must be done. He must cross Eagle Lake

as quickly as possible. Once he got his father back to the outfitter's lodge everything was going to be all right, and this nightmare would cease. He pushed the canoe forward into the water and began paddling. He would not slacken his pace or pause. He told himself he was a machine. Never in his life had he felt so singularly focused on one thing, one goal, one destination.

3

Jon sat in a kitchenette outside the lodge's tiny triage room, a blanket draped over his shoulder. His hand cradled a half-warm cup of cocoa. In the next room, medics counted out a cadence as they performed CPR on his father. They'd had difficulty finding a pulse after the canoe touched shore. His father wasn't breathing.

Jon checked the cell. Still no coverage, even at the lodge. Someone had called his mother on the land line, but she hadn't picked up. They left a message. He didn't know what else to do but wait. A few minutes later a helicopter arrived with a great, thunderous chopping of the air. A doctor, flown in from Ely, rushed into the triage room. The door was shut after him.

Someone handed Jon another cup of cocoa, though he hadn't finished his first. Down the hallway, two staff members spoke in hushed tones.

"The bear attacked last night, around sundown."

"Between storms."

"They set out at dawn from Arrowhead Lake."

"Arrowhead to Hunger, that portage is no joke. How'd he get his dad over that ridge?"

"I think he carried him."

"And a canoe?"

"He paddled solo across three lakes. I know."

Jon wished someone would talk to him, ask him more questions. He didn't like sitting alone at the table, waiting. He felt a curious mix of exhaustion and anxiety, simultaneously ready

to collapse and bracing for whatever came next. He needed to keep it together, like he'd been doing. That was the main thing now. Focus on that.

Several minutes later the door opened and the doctor emerged. He drew a chair up beside Jon. The doctor was young, with a lean, angular face and a short, closely trimmed beard.

"Your father slipped into cardiac arrest out on the lake," he said, "long before you touched shore." CPR had been administered for over thirty minutes, but it was simply too late. The doctor put a hand on Jon's shoulder. "There's nothing more we can do. I'm sorry."

In the terrible silence that followed, Jon focused his gaze on the cup of cocoa cradled in his hand, staring at the chalky sludge, little powdery balls lining the rim, undissolved.

"He's dead." The words felt hard on his tongue.

"You did everything you could."

A phone rang down the hall, an urgent clanging. Someone answered it. "Yes, yes, he's right here." A young woman appeared in the hallway holding a green receiver attached to a long, curly cord, hopelessly tangled.

"It's your mom."

Jon stared at the phone as if it were some strange, foreign object. He felt a stirring deep inside, something bubbling and boiling. Not fear, exactly. He knew fear. That's what he'd felt out on the lake. This was something new, something harder. He wasn't sure what it was, not yet. He only knew it was just beginning, its urgency measured by the pounding of his heart and the racing of his blood.

The woman gestured with the phone. "Jon, can you answer it?"

He must be the one to tell her. Exactly what he'd say, or how he'd say it, he didn't know. He simply saw that this was the next step, and he must take it now. He cleared his throat, pushed back his chair, and rose to accept it.