

BIG J

a short story

That morning on Lac La Croix I had cooked our breakfast pancakes and everyone was done, so I poured all the remaining batter to fill the frying pan, aiming to flip the whole thing, the grand finale, airborne and catch it in the pan. The morning was cool, but the sun was climbing into a pale sky. I placed three more short sticks on the fire and sat back against the log bench to watch the batter edges bubble up. A Canada jay hopped across the clearing to nibble at crumbs. Irish rolled up the tent and toted it down to the shore. The Kid had just finished eating and was messing with his personal zip-bag. Carl, in his Madras swimsuit, basked on rocks high above our campsite.

I had just lifted the frying pan and was steadying myself for my Grand Pancake Flip when I heard Irish call “Hel-lo!” to someone from the shore below.

Lifting my chin, I yelled, “What’s up?” and listened for an answer. Nothing. I heard the echo of a paddle’s clang against a canoe gunwale. I placed the skillet and giant pancake on the campfire grate and made my way downhill toward Irish and the narrow landing shelf of shoreline rock. A canoe glided into the shallows toward us. To my right and behind me a thicket of trees shaded the cozy harbor. The canoe, carrying two men, slid gently sideways to the landing rock. Irish knelt to steady the near gunwale. Meeting others, trusted fellow adventurers in the wilderness, was a pleasant rarity.

“Welcome!” Irish grinned, a square face of dimpled cheeks. “You’re the first people we’ve seen in three days! Where’re you headed?”

The stern paddler, a tall, rope-muscled guy with a dark beard, stepped onto land. He wore a long knife at his belt. The bowman, younger-looking with a sandy buzz-cut, smiled up at us.

“We saw the smoke from your fire,” he said. “Thought we’d take a look.”

The tall bearded guy appraised what he could see of our campsite and our two canoes.

“Campsite’s cool,” he drawled.

I remembered my flapjack. “Whoa! Gotta get my cake!” I ran back to the fire and returned with the pan and my smoking pancake to the water and our new friends.

Something about what I saw snagged my innocence. Something seemed out of place. I wondered what I wasn’t understanding. Buzzcut had moved next to Blackbeard on the shoreline ledge. The Kid sauntered down and stood next to Irish. Big J had disappeared somewhere.

Late in that summer of 1961 four of us campers—Irish Campbell, Kid Tilly, Big J and I—had set out from camp on a week-long wilderness canoe trip with Carl Duke, our counselor and trip guide. We’d paddled and portaged our two canoes and camping gear from lake to lake northward to the Basswood River, portaged past its series of thundering falls, and made our way west the length of sawtoothed Crooked Lake, through waters the umber of pond olive tinged with blood by the decay of vast forests of fir, spruce, cedar, and pine. Four days in we were camped on a rocky island point open to the breezes of Lac La Croix, within sight of the Canadian border.

I was thirteen, new that summer to Camp Voyageur. Irish and The Kid were fourteen, Big J maybe older, and Carl would be a senior at Northwestern. Carl was tough, gristle-strong, and unflappably kind. Like ballplayers of that era, he chewed a little pellet of tobacco while he worked and could spit without pausing the rhythm of his comment, stride, or paddle stroke. I’d

met Irish, rusty-curved fireplug, on the train coming up from Chicago and had glommed onto his friendship as a butterfly holds to a leaf in a squall. In later life Irish would be an academic, a history teacher, but he had boarded the Soo Line to Duluth carrying three smuggled issues of *Playboy*, and for sharing my mother's chocolate chip-oatmeal cookies he let me become closely acquainted with Miss June, Miss May, and an all-star revue of ladies featured in Irish's well-thumbed December issue.

Big J—his actual name was John Chamberlain, but nobody ever called him that—was strange. Today we'd probably say he was autistic. The day I first arrived at Camp Voyageur my new friend Irish pointed him out to me. At first I couldn't see him. Irish had to guide my gaze by sighting an arm past my right ear. Still unable to find him, I wondered if Irish were playing me as the butt of a camp joke ("There he is—can't you see him?") until I caught a flare of reflection from Big J's spectacles. I squinted past my friend's finger and there he was, motionless and skinny among a stand of white birch saplings between cabins 5 and 6, standing in a white t-shirt and khakis with a canoe paddle as a staff in this right hand, reading a book held in his left. He showed the woodland markings and camouflage instincts of a white-tailed deer or a walking stick.

Anytime he was spoken to or even felt noticed, Big J would seize up, fists balled next to his chin, his face a contorted, grinning mask of fear. For J it was an act of courage to respond to "Hey, Big J, how're you doin'?" He loved basketball, and spent hours by himself practicing a four-foot bank shot, cannoning shot after shot against the camp's plywood backboard, contracting into a gleeful knot when one happened to go in. His tetanic spasticity made him strong, but Big J was tragically vulnerable, fragile as a kite in a hailstorm. He hovered safely

outside the periphery of normal activity, an exaggeration of the fears that haunt all of us—of insecurity with strangers, of failure at uncertain attempt, of being misunderstood and mocked. Despite all this, J's awkward eccentricity earned him a gentle respect from the other campers. As a member of the camp community, I felt proud he was granted this dignity. Adolescents can be pack-hunting wolves, and perhaps, had Big J shown any attempt at self-defense, he would have been devoured, but he did not.

The one guy who picked on Big J was Ned Tully, who called himself "The Kid". The Kid was by nature arrogant and hostile, a predator in fancy shoes. Meanness was his defining genius. He called Big J "Spazz" or "Shiverlips," sometimes "Retard."

Irish was Big J's and Kid's cabin-mate in Cabin Six. He told me what happened that morning when J got up, shed his pajamas, pulled a clean pair of underwear out of his trunk, and found animal dung smeared on the inside. He froze and stared, eyes and mouth agape, at the soiled u-trou. His eyes darted left and right. He dropped the underpants on the floor. Still naked, he reached for a clean pair. It, too, was shit-smeared. They all were.

Kid stood across the cabin, spectating. "What's the problem, Shiverlips?" he sneered. "Didn't your mother teach you to wipe? No wonder you smell like shit!"

Shaking, hands fisted against his chest, naked Big J scrambled out the cabin door. He missed breakfast. Carl, his counselor, found him a half-hour later, huddled in a ball on an Adirondack chair way out at the fire circle. Carl wrapped Big J in towels, found him some clean clothes, and walked him to the nurse's cabin. After talking with Buck Ewing, the camp director, Carl found Kid and took him to the eight-foot-high pile of firewood logs behind the fire circle, where he told The Kid to make a neat stack of the logs. Then Carl climbed on top of the pile and

threw logs down to him—at him, some kids said—until he'd stacked them all. The Kid wasn't around much for a couple of days after that. I wondered if he would inflict some new cruelty on Big J or if he'd back down.

Now Kid, Big J, and Carl were with Irish and me in far from civilization in the Boundary Waters wilderness. The Boundary Waters is uninhabited back country, reserved for people crazy enough to choose the hard work and privations of canoe tripping over the comforts of home. Out on the trail everyone needs everyone else; not only do the paddling and carrying require each person's effort, but the small community needs to get along. So far, The Kid hadn't stabbed our team in the back.

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In years since, each time I've planned another canoe trip, a friend would ask, "Isn't it dangerous out in the middle of nowhere?" I tell them that's part of the adventure, preparing for the unexpected, aiming to get along on nature's terms. "But what if you run into other people? Can you trust other people?" I tell them that anyone who's gone to all the trouble of paddling and packing his or her way into the wilderness is interested in the same things I am: natural splendor, solitude, physical challenge; we're like a fraternity of wilderness lovers. That's what I tell my friends. But I know differently.

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Blackbeard said, "Nice lookin' canoes." He ran a finger along one's gunwale.

"You bet," said Kid.

"Ours has a shitty split, leaking like hell. We'll take yours," said Buzzcut.

I said nothing. Where was Carl? This seemed like a counselor matter.

Irish stepped forward. “We need them,” he said. “We can patch yours.”

“Where are the rest of you?” Blackbeard scanned up the island’s rise, past the shore’s overhanging growth of birch and spruce, toward our campsite. I didn’t move. I wanted to tell him Carl would be coming, but maybe the less he knew, the better. It made no sense for these guys to take our canoes. Why were they being assholes?

“And we’re taking your tent, too.” Buzzcut jerked the tent roll Irish had packed from the ground and pushed past Irish toward me. I retreated a step. “And your food.” Irish stood frozen, elbows bent, his hands open as if ready to draw pistols from holsters.

“Hey!” yelled Kid, grabbing Buzzcut’s arm, spinning him around. Buzzcut’s boot heels teetered on wet granite at the water’s edge. I backed away another step. “You can—“

But the moment he’d seen Kid move Blackbeard had shot his left arm toward him and curled his right hand to his own waist. Faster than I could react, he’d grabbed the back of Kid’s t-shirt collar in one hand and swung his long knife into position against the front of Kid’s neck, pulling him backward and off-balance, Kid’s beefy shoulders against Blackbeard’s chest. Kid released his hold on Buzzcut’s arm and, feeling the knife’s blade, stopped fighting. An oozing thin line of blood appeared from a cut on his neck. My mouth fell open and I sucked in a sharp breath.

“Jesus, Caleb,” Buzzcut said to his partner. “Do we need that?” He looked alarmed.

Carl came jogging down the path from the campsite shirtless in his swimsuit. I didn’t think he’d seen what had happened. He spit as he stopped, and yelled, “Hey! What’s going on?” Then he saw Blackbeard, Ned and the knife. “Hey! Let him go. What gives?” Carl’s face was a sudden knot. Thank goodness he was there.

Carl, who was built like a Voyageur of old, thick with strength, stepped past me and froze confronting Blackbeard, who held Ned at the far end of the stone waterline platform. Irish and I faced the lake. Buzzcut stood to my left, facing Irish and the four-foot-high bluff of rock and trees at Irish's back. I felt a puff of cool breeze lift from the lake.

At that moment I thought of Carl as not just our camp counselor, but as our father. His attention was riveted on Blackbeard, Kid, and the knife, so he was taken by surprise when Buzzcut drove into him from his left, ramming him down hard onto a jagged boulder, then kicked the side of Carl's chest and jammed his boot down on Carl's back. "We're taking your canoes and gear," Buzzcut told him. Carl groaned. I stood still, every muscle tensed, my fists balled, facing Buzzcut and, at the end of their canoe, Blackbeard, and The Kid. I wanted to help but didn't know what I could do. Should I tackle Buzzcut? Blackbeard still had a knife on Kid, who was afraid to get up.

With his boot on Carl's back, Buzzcut sneered, "We're taking what we want. Don't fuck with us." He glanced at Blackbeard and lifted a hand, the way we did when we told our pet dog to stay.

It all seemed impossible, unreal. I wanted to somehow be brave. I extended my own hand, palm up. "Look," I tried to reason, "you don't need our stuff. We're not causing you any trouble. You can leave us alone."

"I'm gonna like this one," growled Blackbeard. He dropped Kid and took four quick strides toward me. I staggered backward, but he pulled me to him by my shirt with his big hand. He leaned his face down almost to my nose, and angled his long knife toward my left eye. His breath was sour. I didn't breathe. My stomach clenched bile into my throat.

Around me, I could sense everyone freeze, all in a line next to the low bluff along the shore. Carl lay prone with Buzzcut over him, watching. Kid had struggled to his feet, his right hand at his neck. Irish stood between them, weaponless. Blackbeard's knife pointed to my eye.

I didn't see him at first. I don't know when or how he got there. Motionless in the birches above the landing area clearing, he had remained unnoticed. But I saw him now, tall and angular, in khaki and grey, hidden in front of me, directly behind Blackbeard. Big J stood with his arms fully extended overhead, his canoe paddle pointed to the mid-morning sky.

Slowly at first, mechanically, Big J brought the paddle blade edge-down in an accelerating arc into the crest of Blackbeard's head. A gunshot sound. Blackbeard fell toward me as I spun away and his body collapsed to the ground like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

In a continuation of his swing, Big J looped the paddle around and swung it with surprising force horizontally into Buzzcut's neck, below his ear. Buzzcut, too, fell in a heap. I heard him gargle, struggling to breathe. I don't think Blackbeard moved.

Irish clamped his hand around Buzzcut's wrist and snatched his knife. I grabbed the one Blackbeard had held and gave it to Carl. Carl looked to Big J, standing visible now before the line of trees. J was hugging himself and his paddle tightly with both arms, shaking, shivering. Excitement? Terror? Pride? Happiness? With Big J, they all looked the same. Maybe he felt all of them at once. Maybe, for J, they all felt the same, just overwhelming.

I scrambled up to Big J and slid an arm around his back. He tottered with me down to the stone shoreline platform. What he had done was amazing, shocking. Perfect. "You saved us, John," I said. His grin squeezed his eyes shut. His whole body was rigid, quaking. Kid came

over, looking pale and shaken, and said, “Awesome, man. You are The Very Big J!” He nudged J’s shoulder with a fist.

I stood next to trembling J and the suddenly giddy Kid. Irish stood over Buzzcut, tense and guarding. Nobody spoke. Both of our villains lay supine. Buzzcut held his neck and spit blood. Blackbeard wasn’t moving at all, and his head was bleeding. Breeze rustled lakeside leaves. Wavelets slapped the granite shore. I let out a chestful of air. Maybe it was all going to be okay. I wasn’t sure.

Carl smiled at Big J, stepped forward, and grasped his hand. “Thank you, John,” he said, and J shook his hand, eyes squeezed shut, bowing his head a little, his face a rictus.

Carl coughed twice, then took charge. “Kid, are you OK?” The Kid touched his neck and nodded. “I’ll get some first aid ointment on that,” Carl said. “Irish and Pete, get the ropes. We’ll clap these fucking pirates in irons.”

We took ropes from the utility pack and helped Carl tie Blackbeard’s and Buzzcut’s hands and ankles together in a hog-tie behind their backs. My hands wouldn’t stop shaking. Blackbeard was out cold and there was a lot of blood from the gash on top of his head. Buzzcut struggled, but Irish sat on his chest and I wrapped up his legs. We used lots of line. Irish had to stop to wipe tears from his eyes, and then I did, too. Irish made sure the knots were solid and secured the link between their wrists and ankles to a big downed log. It looked awfully uncomfortable, tied up that way, mean and harsh, but I wasn’t going to say anything. I was happy they couldn’t move. Then Carl wrapped canoe-repair duct tape over the knots and around their wrists and ankles.

Big J was seated at the water's edge, legs crossed and arms wound around them so he was like a ball. Kid seemed kind of frozen, just watching what was going on.

After Carl had found the first-aid ointment for Kid, I put some on Blackbeard's gash and started to bandage his head with a handkerchief. There was sticky blood all over, but the bleeding had about stopped. His eyes were closed. I watched his face for several moments. I wondered if he was breathing. I put my ear close to his mouth. Nothing. I looked up, still leaning close to him.

Carl was sitting on a boulder, looking down, rubbing a hand through his hair. "Carl," I said. His head snapped up. "Yeah?" He looked worried, tense.

Then Blackbeard coughed a wet wad of phlegm in my ear. I jerked away from him and he moaned and turned his head. His eyes were still closed. I got to my feet, trying to wipe the mucus out of my ear. "I thought maybe he was dead," I said.

"I guess not," said Kid. "Get it? I guess *snot*." He guffawed. I felt like he was laughing at me. None of the rest of us laughed.

Carl stepped to Blackbeard, squatted, and pushed up one of his eyelids. Blackbeard pulled his face away and grunted. He coughed again. "Fuck off," he mumbled

"Open your eyes," Carl said. His voice was even, neither gentle nor harsh. "Look at me."

Blackbeard opened an eye. It danced for a moment, then found Carl's face. I was watching over Carl's shoulder. The guy's eyes looked straight and fine to me, except I remembered looking at those eyes minutes earlier when he had the point of that knife next to my own eye.

"You're gonna live," Carl said, and his tone suggested that the alternative might have been preferable. He spit tobacco juice onto Blackbeard's shirt.

Irish, who'd been double-checking Buzzcut's bonds, stood next to us. "What do we do now?" he said.

"Let's finish packing up and load the canoes," Carl said. I'll put the canoes in the water for loading. Pete, you okay to finish bandaging his head?" I nodded and returned to that little task.

Then Carl turned to Big J, still huddled in a shivering knot. Gently Carl said, "J, can you make sure all the fishing gear gets down here?" Without a word Big J unfolded, stood, and moved up to the campsite. I had the impression he was relieved to be given instructions, or maybe to know how he could help.

As though there were nothing strange about all this, as if we merely needed to do the tasks at hand, Carl looked past sullen Buzzcut to the strangers' canoe and said, "Let's get their sorry tub on land."

Irish looked at Kid, tipped his head toward that boat, and walked toward it. Kid moved to help. Over his shoulder Irish said, "What are we gonna do with *them*?"

Carl rubbed a hand over his mouth and chin and turned to look out across the broad lake. I thought he probably wanted a fresh plug of chew in his mouth. All of us paused to listen. He squinted and rubbed the top of his head. "There's a Canadian Ranger Station at the east end of Lac la Croix, north of where we came in." He shrugged his shoulders, still thinking. Then he turned toward us, catching each of our gazes. His voice sounded confident now. "We'll leave these two here. We'll take their leaky canoe with us and tell the Ranger what happened. The Mounties can figure out what to do then. My job is to get you guys back to camp."

We broke camp and loaded the canoes. Big J scoured the campsite to make sure the fire was dead and nothing was left behind. Kid stacked Blackbeard's and Buzzcut's gear near the water.

Carl, Irish and I moved the two young men into the shade, about six feet apart, below where Big J had stood to swing his paddle. Blackbeard drowsed and Buzzcut stared at us. He didn't say anything. Carl woke Blackbeard and gave each of them a drink of water. Carl told them, "You may get loose after while. Go ahead and try to swim somewhere. We're miles from the nearest trail. I hope the wolves find you." He put Big J in the bow of one canoe and Kid got in the middle with his back against a pack. Carl took the stern and pushed off from shore, trailing the attackers' canoe.

I left a full water jug for the prisoners. Then Irish and I stepped to our canoe and got in, I in the bow. I paused to look back. Blackbeard slumped slack against a log. In a hoarse rasp Buzzcut yelled, "Rot in hell, you bastards!" Then we stroked away from shore into Lac La Croix, beginning the long haul to the Ranger Station and from there back toward Voyageur, three days away.

It felt good to be away from those guys, out on the dark water's silver surface. I paddled hard, one pull after another, switching sides at Irish's call every twenty or thirty strokes, enjoying the solitary exertion. Sunlight glittered on the waves. Two loons swam off to the right, then dove. I watched my blade enter the water at the start of each stroke, diving into the lake's invisible black depth, and, for a while, thought of Big J and the way that paddle had come down on Blackbeard's head and into Buzzcut's neck.

It took most of an hour to explain everything to the Canadian Ranger. Using the big Quetico Park map on the wall, Carl showed him where we had been camped. The Ranger kept asking questions and wrote down notes while we talked. He wanted us to stay with him at the station, but Carl told him we were going on and that they could find us at Camp Voyageur. The Ranger

couldn't really force us to stay—he wasn't exactly a cop, and he had two villains to worry about. “Another party reported their food stolen,” the ranger said. “These jaspers could be the same ones who did that. I'll radio to take them into custody.” We pushed off for home.

That night, after we'd made camp and eaten dinner I stood at the waterline of Crooked Lake to brush my teeth. Surrounded by forest, water, and ancient stone, I breathed in through both nostrils and filled my chest with the cool scent of pine and juniper. I closed my eyes to listen to the quiet I already loved, the North Woods symphony of clean breeze through tall trees and waves lapping against shoreline rocks. “Primitive” is a word that carries a connotation of foreboding danger; “pristine” seems too orderly and sterile; but the limitless North Woods wilderness into which Camp Voyageur encroached was pristine in its wildness and primitive in its elegant antiquity.

We were boys. Amazingly, it would take only a day for the dead-serious aftermath of evil to yield to a rush of celebration the rest of the way back to camp. Kid led the way in reliving the drama while we paddled and made camp, spinning the grisly terror we'd endured into a shimmering legend of courage and sharp thinking culminating in Big J's heroism. In our teenaged daylight on the long way back to camp I felt triumph and pride. Alone each night, curled in my sleeping bag, the tent surrounded by immense primeval darkness, the stillness startled from time to time by the small thumps and rustles of forest chipmunks and martens, the occasional hoots of owls and the mournful wails of loons, those moments on Lac La Croix returned to me in their full horror.

Later, police officers would come to Voyageur to ask us questions, and we all, each of us, told our story. We were not only figures in a legend but witnesses to crime, and the exciting theater of that responsibility captivated Irish, Kid, and me. The Kid reveled in telling the cops, just he as loved to relive for other campers, how that knife at his throat was like an electric shock, and that he was sure he was going to die. Carl rubbed his hand through his hair and focused on Big J's lion-hearted, perfectly calculated, astonishing deliverance with those two swings of his canoe paddle.

Big J, as usual, was mute. Any mention of his heroism twisted his face and hands into what I imagined was gleeful embarrassment. Had the experience changed him? Was he proud of his great moment? I couldn't tell for sure; J's world was frightening every day.

But something had changed in me. Paddling, stroke after stroke, sliding the canoe forward through the quicksilver cool water, I could focus on the sky's rippling, brilliant, sapphire reflection off the lake's ever-moving surface. The sun's warmth and my rhythm with the canoe cradled me. But below the shining surface the opaque olive-black of each wave's shadow reminded me of unknown perils in the deep water. Danger, mystery, monsters hiding in the deep. Innocence was not protection. Trust risked betrayal. Faith in goodness was a choice, a risk.

I would trust again, and believe in others. But there is always the dark water.