

Rowing in the Dark

The summer we moved to Horseshoe Pond, we had no money for electricity. Daddy built a bonfire every night to cook our hotdogs, potatoes, and coco. Justin played the harmonica, and we sang favorites like “Michael Row Your Boat,” “Kumbaya,” and “Jacob’s Ladder.”

Everyone went to bed early. Mama, Daddy, and baby Gretta in one bed and me, Justin, and Sandra in another. So snug was I between my older brother and sister that I almost wished we would never get electricity. I knew Mama wanted it bad, though, when she kissed us goodnight, the set of her jaw flickering with the candle she carried, leaving a trace of cinnamon as she closed the door behind her.

One day in late fall, before morning, I woke to a loon calling out on the pond, sad like they do. Sandra knelt on a chair in front of the window, her thick brown ponytail askew on the back of her white nightdress. I took her hand. “Looking for the loons?” Daddy said they’d soon be heading to the ocean for winter. I would miss them.

“You should be asleep,” she said. Then Justin was awake and all three of us peered out the window. We could just make out the old abandoned rowboat. In it sat a small, hunched figure. I shivered.

“Is it Mama?” Justin asked.

Sandra nodded, eyes never leaving the window. As the sky lightened, we could hear Daddy downstairs rattling the woodstove and the thunk of a log he tossed in. The back door slammed and there was Daddy outside, almost like he was in two places at once. Baby Gretta bounced on his shoulder.

Mama had drifted out from shore a little ways. Daddy sat down at the pond edge with baby Gretta between his knees and took off his boots and socks. Gretta was wearing Daddy’s black watch cap—it hid her whole face. Daddy stood up with her and waded in knee-deep until he was close enough to hold her out to Mama. She didn’t take her at first but finally reached out and snuggled Gretta against her chest and buttoned her camel

hair coat up around her. It was the nicest clothes Mama owned, and we knew it came from a life before us. Daddy had no coat, just the flannel shirt. His legs must've froze while he sat in the boat, facing Mama.

They looked up to the sky, gazing at the sunrise. After the full sun showed herself, Daddy got out and pulled the boat up onto the shore, giving Mama and Gretta a bumpy ride. In no particular hurry, they headed back up to the house, Gretta on Mama's hip, Mama and Daddy leaning into each other.

"Where was she going?" Justin asked.

"Don't be silly," Sandra said. "There's no oars."

Sandra got into bed and I climbed in beside her, then Justin. I drifted off to sleep, half-dreaming that I was the one buttoned up inside Mama's coat.