



Summer Reading

New fiction & poetry

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Boat Trouble

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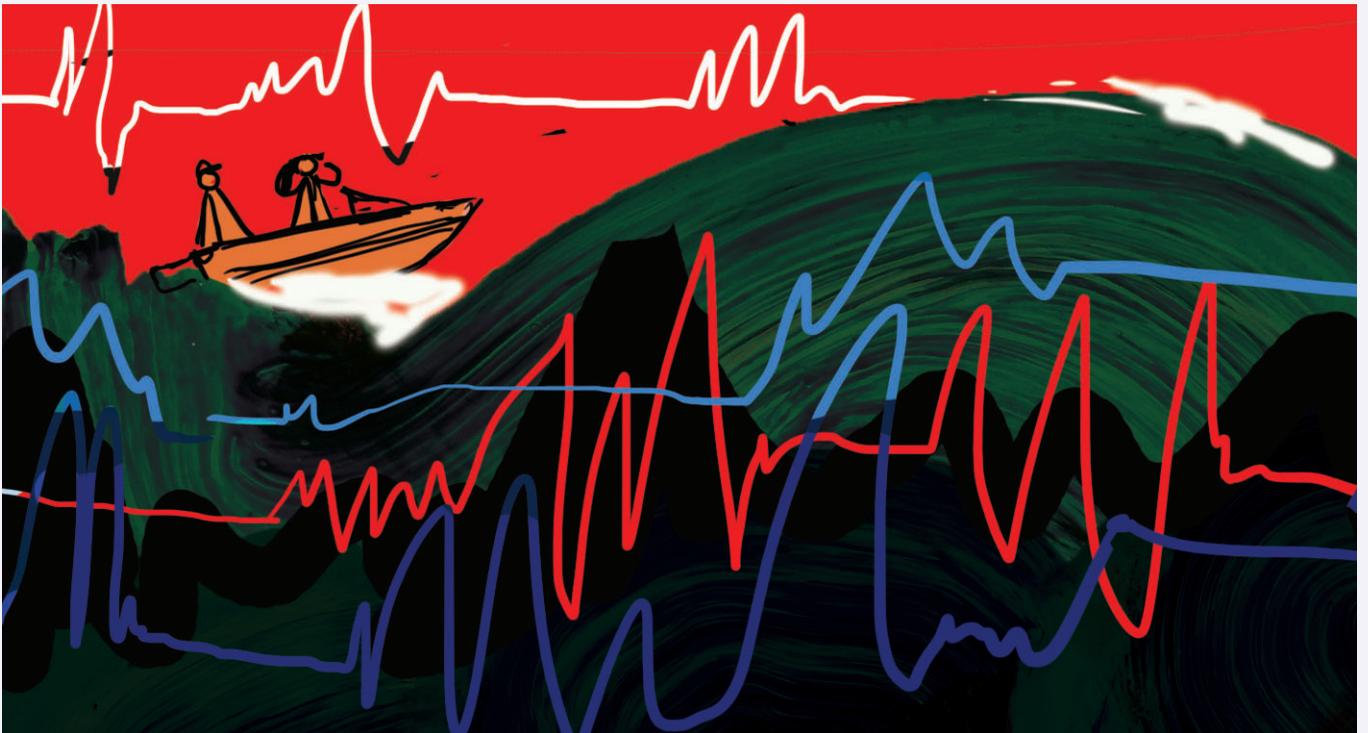
THERE WAS NO MOON the night they ran into boat trouble. The delicate crescent had set at five minutes to eleven while they drove up the lonely northern highway. The late summer night was warm, about seventy degrees, with a dew point of 17.7.

She sat beside him in the car dreading what lay ahead. His determination to return to their island. Her caution regarding Georgian Bay, the home of her girlhood. In good weather, the boat trip would be a fifteen-minute ride, not far in terms of the geography of the hundred-mile coast: a rugged kingdom of granite rocks and pine trees and thousands of shoals lying under the surface like sharks waiting for boaters too reckless to care where they were going or too innocent about the north to be aware of what was hiding in the water.

The south shores of the bay had been the territory of her country-doctor father. He'd ranged up and down its waters in his motor launches or water taxis, stepping onto docks to tend to pregnant women, or getting out of his Oldsmobile convertible to operate on summer tourists lying by the side of a gravel road after a collision. He called the bay the Great Refrigerator because it acted as a source of cool air in the humid summers, the hot months of July and August that brought thunderstorms and some of the most frightening lightning strikes in the world. Her father would have been dead set against their boating to the island on a night without a moon.

But François was a city boy used to getting his way. One of the "cijits", as Jim, the marina owner, called the city people. Short for "city idiot." François had spent his childhood on the streets of Paris, and he underestimated the dangers of a place where the wind and the water were against you, throwing the full force of nature in your face.

He had wanted to go on when they arrived at the marina dock. She tried to dissuade him. She said they should sleep at the lodge, but the lodge was full, and a beach party was already underway,



the drinkers staggering around their bonfire, raucous and beligerent. He raised his eyebrows when she said they could sleep in the car. He was going. He'd got his wind up. He cited the week's supply of perishable food in the trunk: the fresh pickerel, sweet corn, and milk. He was practical that way.

They'd done it once before. Gone out on the water at night in their fifty-year-old wooden Giesler and managed to make it home by inching their way along the inlet, looking for recognizable trees and rocky outcroppings.

As she stood on the dock, she felt the wind freshening. There would be a chop out in the Open, which was the name the locals used for the water that lay beyond the pine islands by the shore.

Fifteen miles out lay the Western Islands, where the lighthouse squatted on a core of volcanic rock as round and big as a giant mushroom; its watchtower was made of limestone, and so was the lightkeeper's house, where he lived with his family from the breakup of the ice in April until the freeze-up in December.

During a bitter November gale, when the lightkeeper had said the waves were too high to bring his sick boy to the town hospital, her father had replied: *Well, you'll have to cut the appendix out yourself. It's not hard, because it lies close to the stomach wall.* The lightkeeper made his son drink half a bottle of whiskey, then he cut open the belly with the kitchen knife while her father gave him instructions over the ship-to-shore radio, his voice as calm and unflappable as if he were God talking to Abraham and Isaac. The boy survived.

Ahead of her, the water was an inky depth; above, the sky was a pitch-black vault, another unfathomable mystery. Even a new moon wouldn't help them tonight.

Out on the inlet, the silhouettes of the pine-lined islands would look identical on an evening like this, with a stiff wind in your face, and the waves crashing against the rocky shores of the islands.

Long ago, the owner of their rented cottage had named his island Lure, hoping to entice suitors for his daughters by giving them the small narrow strip of trees and rock near one of the most treacherous parts of the route north. The *Small Craft Guide* described that section of the coastline as "low, sparsely wooded and very irregular. It is studded with innumerable islands and rocks and is without prominent landmarks." *Without prominent features. Very irregular.* The lack of distinctive landmarks would make it hard to find their way in the dark.

François was getting into the boat. She reasoned, she shouted, he turned a deaf ear. If he went out alone he might drown. All her years growing up on the bay told her that. Her heart sad, she climbed into the old cedar-strip Giesler, felt it lurch slowly past the other boats in their slips, the wash from their motor making the other boats rock up and down. This would be her only moment of confidence, the only moment when it seemed things might work out for the best.

She and François had met at a yoga retreat in the Bahamas. At first, she hadn't liked him. He was too sure of himself. Then she hurt her ankle in a yoga exercise, and he brought meals to her cabin, where she lay in bed with her foot elevated on pillows. His kindness went a long way, and after an eighteen-month, long-distance courtship, she had invited him north. She had felt strong and capable making their campfires and showing him how to light the Coleman lantern. The holiday was a test. If he could cope in her old landscape, she'd know he was solid.

The ancient outboard laboured slowly now toward the open water, surrounded on both sides by the granite islands and the jagged outlines of the pines on the shore. She thought of her classes back in grade school, of cutting out the silhouettes of pine trees and shorelines on black construction paper, reassembling the landscape of Tom Thomson. She could take any of her clumsy homemade silhouettes of pine trees and arrange them this way or that, and the shorelines would all look more or less the same.

Already, she was preparing for the crash. The words of Jim, the marina owner, came back to her: *That old Giesler won't last another summer. It's just dry sticks left, no better than kindling.* She felt the fragility of the boat as they bounced on the small waves, its sturdiness, too. The keel was covered by a strip of aluminium, a defense against the rocks. That was something to be thankful about.

She was counting on several signposts to guide them: the channel marker that signalled where to turn left if you wanted to go to the paddle tennis court belonging to one of the cottages on the inlet. And the sudden gap between the pine trees after you passed the buoy.

They passed the channel marker but she couldn't see the gap that signaled open water. They were travelling close to the north shore of the inlet. Hugging the coast, or so she thought. François was oblivious, thinking about what he wanted, not seeing what lay ahead, or how hopeless their situation had suddenly become.

As he went to make the turn into the narrow channel near their small island, an unrecognizable frieze of pine trees and rock appeared on the horizon. She could tell instantly that they were turning into waters neither of them knew. She could hear the ominous rustling sound of waves breaking on a nearby reef. They were not in position to approach the narrow gut that led to the dock of their rented cottage.

Get out of here, she shrieked. *This isn't our island!* He turned the boat around too quickly. There was a sickening crunch.

The boat was stuck on a shelf of rock that lay just below the surface. The bay was at a low point in its hydrologic cycle. Some people thought the water level was low because of the dredging that took place hundreds of miles away on the St. Clair River. It meant more shoals were now exposed than ever before. Later, she would look up those rocks in the *Small Craft Guide*: "Boaters approaching from the south should follow the range out to the Tizard Rock light buoy; then make a course of about 020 degrees to pass close south of the green can buoy, and then steer to pass south of the two green spar buoys marking the edge of Hang-dog Bank. From there, continue East North East, taking care to avoid the rocks which lie close to the North West..."

They hadn't followed the advice of the *Small Craft Guide*. They had plunged recklessly on in their watery world that every second was growing more alien and dangerous.

François shut off the motor and hoisted it up; then he hopped out of the boat, pushed it off the shoals and hopped back in, and they set off again. He was quicker and nimbler than she was. The ankle injury still kept her from jumping in and out of the boat. Her role was to guide, to stay as calm as her father talking to the lightkeeper over the ship to shore radio.

Two minutes later, there was a muffled grinding sound as they struck a second set of shoals. The words of the marina owner rang in her head again. What if the wooden sides of the boat splintered? The water was still warm enough, although it was rough.

She could hear the waves on the shoals again. It was a shame they couldn't use their cell phones so far out on the water. But they could make it to the south shore of the inlet if they had to do it. They were strong swimmers.

One thing was sure: they would lose all their valuables. Drivers' licenses, phones, and groceries would sink to the bottom. Maybe she and François would, too, if the waves were big. Stop thinking like this, she told herself. They had a chance. The marina owner had said the old boat wouldn't last another summer. That meant it might just get them through one more night.

While she waved their flashlight and cried for help, François jumped out and pushed the boat off the shoal. It was late August. Not many cottagers were up. But on the far shore of the inlet,

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a light flickered on. It was near midnight and someone was up. Go over there, she said to François and pointed in the distance.

He did what she said. He was all contrition now; he saw that he'd made a mess of things. The coast guard would arrest them if they were spotted driving at night with only one flashlight in the boat and a single small red running light in the stern.

They were approaching the island with the cottage. It was high up on a cliff, and they were heading straight for it, in fact. She told him to turn the boat, but it was too late. Crunch, again. Sure enough, they had hit another shoal a little ways out from the high rocky side of the island. This time they were stuck fast, the propeller lodged in a nest of rocks. François jumped out and tried to free the motor, but it wouldn't budge while the waves were pushing their rocking, swaying boat hard against the cliff.

She could tell he was getting tired. He moved less quickly now. Without warning, he began to yell and curse.

You can't lose your temper, she said. You have to stay calm or we won't make it.

Then he did something she didn't expect. He jumped between the boat and the cliff while the waves were smashing against the Giesler, the force of the water shoving the old tub sideways against the rocks. François must have thought it would be easy to push the boat with the cliff at his back, a city person's mistake. Nobody was strong enough to fend off the force of the waves with the weight of a 350-pound boat rocking against him.

What if he slipped on the rocks and fell into the water? He might hit his head on the gunnel as he went down, and the blow would render him unconscious. It would be hard, no matter what, to fish him out.

Elaine tried to push against the cliff with a kayak paddle, but the rubber paddle bent like a noodle against the rocks. She threw it down helplessly.

She screamed at François to get out from behind the boat, but he ignored her. The night felt wilder now. The wind was up, and

the waves hammering the boat were bigger and more forceful. His face streaming with water, François kept trying to push the boat sideways against the waves.

I can't keep this up, Elaine, he shouted.

Miraculously, a light appeared at the top of the cliff. A woman with a strong commanding voice yelled at François to move to the front of the boat. She screamed at him a second time and he obeyed, managing to reach the bow of the Giesler. He had listened to a stranger's voice but not to Elaine's.

The woman shinned down the cliff to the water's edge.

I saw you waving your light, she yelled so they could hear her above the noise of the waves. The boat was trapped like a small-mouth bass on a fishing line, caught fast between the rocky shoal and the cliff.

Their rescuer shrieked at François to grab the bow rope. It was hard to hear his response above the thundering boom of the water, but she thought François yelled okay. He and the other woman grabbed the rope. Pulling, half-swimming and half-walking over the slippery rocks, they tried to haul the boat while the waves washed over it, drenching the inside each time. They couldn't drag the Giesler off the rocks. They pulled, but it didn't budge. Then a huge roller crashed down and soaked the three of them. François and the woman with the loud voice heaved on the bow rope again and this time, the old Giesler floated free.

The woman with the loud voice told François to get into the boat, and he heaved himself over the gunnel and onto the floorboards. He looked exhausted. The woman pushed them out into the channel. She called, *Good luck*, aiming the bow of their boat away from the shore.

The motor started up again. Wonder of wonders. They were suddenly gliding across the surface of the inlet, heading for safety, away from the rough waters.

The wooden boat had sprung a small leak, but otherwise, it was intact. Those old Gieslers had been built to last. The next day, after François had apologized for his foolish stubbornness, they took their rescuer a bottle of wine. The woman said they had been far out in open water when she first saw their light. The old Giesler had been way past the monster rocks, the worst shoals on the bay.

In Elaine's estimation, she and François had gone only two hundred yards or so past their island. Two hundred yards? Try two miles. The sensations of fear and panic from the night rushed back, and she was in the boat again with François fighting the waves. She felt herself straining to see in the pitch-black night and she heard the gruesome sound as the old Giesler smashed into the rocks, the roar of the waves breaking over the half-submerged reefs.

It was she, Elaine, the capable one, who had lost her bearings. She had thought south was north and north was south. In her confusion, had she told him to go farther out in the Open? The mystery of where she and François had been depended on latitudes and longitudes, and it had been too dark that night to chart their travels. Out on the open water, they could have been anywhere. Two fools under the starless heavens.

Years later, after she had left François for someone else, she still thought of that moonless night. It felt like a warning: *Never go out in an old boat on a night where there is no one to see you or hear you.* And yet she sometimes missed his stubborn ways, and the urge to tame his recklessness, and how indispensable she had once felt. 🐻