

## My Own BWCA Version of Spielberg's, "DUEL"

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This story takes place in the BWCA during June of last year, 2007. This is the first time that anyone will be hearing the story; I've never shared it. Partly because I wanted to get my thoughts down in writing for accuracy and partly because the full impact of my described experience doesn't lend itself to repetition. For those reasons I wanted to only go through it once. Here it is.

Driving up from a western suburb of Chicago to run Grandmas Marathon the day before, I entered the BWCA at Crane Lake to the access point-12. I had heard a lot of stories as to how bad crossing Crane Lake was as well as traveling down Loon River, due to the shuttle and other private motorboats allowed there. I must say that to a person, my kayak and I were treated with nothing but respect. I spent the next few days traveling up near the Indian village on Lax La Croix then making my way back down through Slim Lake and finally East Loon Bay. I tried to cross Loon Lake in the afternoon to make my way to a west side campsite for the night but never made it. The wind and waves were so fierce I nearly found myself in the water several times. Barely making it to shore I beached the yak and walked to a spot near a point where I found the winds so strong that I had to kneel to keep from being blown over. I made it back to the yak and reversed direction for the first campsite to wait it out. The winds fell late in the day but I stayed in camp til the next morning before trying to give my Loon Lake crossing another go.

If you know the area you might agree that the contiguous shape of Loon Lake, Loon Lake Bay and the Little Indian Sioux River appear to form some sort of tilted X-chromosome shape. At about 7:30 the next morning I departed my Loon Lake Bay campsite, making my way to the center of Loon Lake, traveling westward back toward Loon River. It was an awesome morning. Clear, slight winds, with bright sun warming squarely on my back as I entered the center of the lake, which is roughly 2-miles by 2-miles,

populated with a smattering of islands. At this point I noticed a motorboat about a mile or so west coming east toward me. I really didn't give the boat a second thought until about 30 seconds later when it appeared to be heading right in my direction. My next thought was the boat would likely move to the north leg of the chromosome near Beatty Portage as that was the only place a motor boat could head for within the guidelines of motor restrictions there. All my following thoughts began to pick up momentum as well as magnitude.

At the half mile-mark I can hear the engine and clearly see the bow breaking the water. I say 'clearly', because the bow is the only part of the boat visible, coming at me as if I'm virtually, reeling it in. Wait, it's moving north - No, it's moving south - No again, it's still coming right toward me. WHEN is this guy going to see me? Does the boat see me now? It must. Is it trying to terrorize me in some perverted way? It's working!

At the quarter mile-mark, the boat, something like an 18', blue-over-white Lund, is moving at me at about 25mph. Mind you, this is 36.6 feet/sec or something just around 36 seconds 'til impact' at that distance. At this point my mind is making the transition from what-if to what-now, while I continue to ask myself, WHAT IS THIS BOATER TRYING TO PROVE? With attention to haste, my paddle is out of the water and being frantically waved through every type of movement to alert or otherwise ward off the evil spirits of the oncoming disaster. NO LUCK. It's still coming and there's little I can do. I'm thinking it must be headed for me on purpose - there's no way it could not see me. It just keeps getting closer. 100-feet, 50-feet, 25-feet, STOP!!!!

Before I continue, a few words on prayer. My personal sidebar on prayer is that I use it, or some form of it, to give thanks for what I have. Food, shelter, running water and opportunities in life are all contenders on a daily basis. Prayer for the sake of getting out of a jam has always struck me as a bit disingenuous - but hey, that's me. Each to their own spiritual devices.

Meanwhile, back at the aquatic ranch, the slow motion, dance-of-death

begins in Ernest. I can't tell you what I was thinking but I can with certainty tell you what I was not thinking. Let me list some in temporal, ascending order:

- 5) The meatloaf sandwich that Marilyn Gilmore gave me in third grade when I forgot my lunch.
- 4) Mile-26 of Grandma's Marathon several days earlier.
- 3) A guy I saw on Crane Lake with a beer in his hand giving me the 'thumbs up'.
- 2) The dulcet tones of the actual Loon Lake Loons (they were no doubt wisely, far from ground-zero).
- 1) The floating train wreck that was unfolding right before my very, denying eyes.

Within the 20' space it appears that the center of the bow may spare me. My yak is pointed right at the moving boat. It starts to cross on my left side. So close that I have to pull my paddle, aligned with my boat, over my head for clearance and protection. The near sides of each boat come to within an inch, generating a small 'spurt' of water in between about the size and shape of my thumb. There is no wake to hit me. I AM THE WAKE. And then I see him, the man behind the curtain, or in this case the man and dog behind the curtain. Things are unfolding as if time is ceasing to exist, nothing seems real. It was my own BWCA version of Spielberg's classic, "Duel" – and yes, I was playing the part of Dennis Weaver. As I'm close enough to lick the side of his boat I'm studying the apparent look of ambivalence on his face. He looked to be in his late 60's. First the face of the man, then the face of the dog, with the same uninterested look. I studied them both and could only wonder, why have they done this?

The stern of the boat passes, slow motion turns back to real time and a second later I hear the roar of the motor drop to an idle. My next thought is OK he's coming back for more – this time I'm ready for him it's going to be one hell of a fight. As I dropped my paddle from over my head into the water to complete the fastest turn of my life, the mystery revealed itself. That

warm sun I mentioned on my back was not too far off the horizon. The winds had chopped the water to create a 20° swath of blinding sun. I had been moving directly away from it, while my seemingly evil terrorists were motoring directly into it. I could hardly see his boat now looking up. There was just no way he could have seen me looking down into that glare. He didn't see me until our faces were 4 feet from one another.

The boat, man and dog sheepishly drifted toward me. I had tears streaming down my face. Not from fear, not from joy, not from sorrow, simply byproducts of some strange, hormonal-synaptic meltdown. I had to remind myself to breath normally because whatever jagged breaths I took didn't seem to be doing much to clear my head. The man looked stunned. "I almost killed you" he said, in a slow and disbelieving manner. "You must think I'm a real sh-head". I paused, still partly stunned, partly trying to work that breathing thing out, and partly thinking, hey –I'm not dead! It dawned on me that his stunned look was one that was holding back his own tears. Whereas I was liberated from death he was left with the recent memory of almost taking one, albeit by accident. I went from wanting to kill, to feeling sorry for the poor guy. In between my frequent, personal realizations of still existing on the planet, I ask him where he was going and what his dog's name was. As it turns out he and Sawyer, a grown white lab, were on their way to do some fishing. Through the small talk I really felt bad for the guy. I could see the realization of what had just happened building in him as we spoke. At some point we both understood that there was really nothing to add so we parted ways on thankful terms. Later on I imagined what might have happened if I had been moving perpendicular to the motion of the boat, a couple of feet over. I may not have been split in two, but the upper body from head to pelvis would be hopelessly shattered along with several, vital organs. That said, I don't even want to THINK about what shape the yak would be in! Oh, the humanity.

I thought about this event not just for days but for weeks after I got back home. As I said I kept it to myself, meditating one might say, on what had

happened. I wondered if he did too. A couple of things to take away from this. 1) Never assume someone can or will see you. 2) Anti-glare glasses are a plus. 3) Yet another use for signal flairs at the ready. 4) Remember this story the next time you feel the early morning sun warming you back.

That's it! Thanks for the cathartic opportunity to share my tale, not to mention exposing the kindness of Marilyn Gilmore to a broader audience. I learned something, hope you did too.

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