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Softly falls the light of day

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Softly Falls the Light of Day

Wisps of heaven pushed the waves against the side of our canoe; traveling across lakes and forests, I guided the youngest of scouts through the emerald and sapphire pieces of Minnesota, the oldest Boy Scout in our group by two years. By the adults who accompanied us, I had been given lecture upon lecture about my status as a leader to the boys. We would canoe ten miles a day portaging our canoes over one mile landfalls; our strokes felt heavy but touched lightly upon the surface of the water and our spirits lifted into the clouds. Something happens to someone when they are thrown into the wilderness, willingly or unwillingly. Some people adapt to it, others push away an experience they believe irrelevant to their life, and some find a happiness never matched by any material possession in the world. A few people who find the middle of these things are pushed into a state of solitude and contemplation. In this small corner of the world you could not and would not ever complain of weakness, of being tired, nor show your deepest fear of not being strong enough.

I was on my own for the first time without my family, the only one in our group without my father present. I went to the boundary waters as a release from a world that suffocated all parts of my personality. I am an outdoors person; many mornings I can be found grinding the dew beneath my footfalls as I trot towards some undiscovered hill in the cornfields that surround my house. I always enjoyed the time I had to myself in the fields; it cleared my head and refreshed my outlook on the world around me. But an hour or so later, when I returned to my house, a ritual would begin to beat my soul back into captivity. I need forests, lakes, and most of all a change in scenery to find a renewed sense of life outside the one where I feel utterly trapped.

The lakes of the Boundary Waters stretch for leagues licking the base of a horizon bordered by trees, framing the setting sun, jutting upwards, reaching, longing for a piece of open sky. I can never speak of my feelings while in the boundary waters; words only mean more confusion for others. I think it's hard to understand connections with the world; each is different and I cherish my feeling above anything I have felt in my life so far. I lead boys younger than myself through sharp needles and choppy waters. On days when the clouds hung low to the ground and connected with the lakes in the distance, it would rain. Other days the wind would blow so hard our canoes would almost capsize, but we went with confidence to seek an outlet to the lakes and to our lives. Within our group I especially connected with three of the youngest: John, Sam and Luke.

John was my canoe partner and, although much younger than I was, carried the other two boys with an unrecognized inner strength and dedicated his actions to their friendships. John never showed any weaknesses; when a portage called for him to carry one bag he would carry two and prop a canoe over his shoulders. He would then come back for another load. His actions gave others around him a sense of security, a rock upon which to rely.

Sam became the leader of the boys. He was as strong as John but with skills that allowed him to lead the others into any daring situation. The boys never seemed to feel fear with him around. He lead through humor but showed a strong truthfulness in his words. He attended to details and lead with a strong, clear mind and vigorous ambition.

Luke was different, small and jovial he always had a deeper look about him. You could make a joke and he would laugh whole heartedly and true but somehow he was reserved, as if to hide a pain he dare not share. Others could laugh with him easily

enough, but I knew his thoughts darted elsewhere, so different than what his actions would show. I saw a lot of my own qualities, most of all his solitude, and I took to him the most.

I always have felt that these boys have looked up to me in some ways. I was often asked questions and drilled about my life, telling them about things they hadn't yet found. I always had to keep my wits about me around them, and although I was as inexperienced as they were, I feel they never knew it. To this day, watching their friendship during the boundary waters has made me grow into more of a man than I could have ever hoped to become.

Before the trip Luke had trouble finding a group of peers, so I initiated him into the troop, orienting him into the circles of boys. At campouts with the troop he would follow close, clinging to the words I shared with my peers and his future friends, he had open ears and was always willing to listen. Many of the boys came to know him as sort of a ladies man. At school girls were attracted to his boyish grin and thin lava like hair that sprouted all over his head. However, Luke was different and he knew it, he had a lonely quality that he would often let slip around me.

Especially at campouts when we would sit around a campfire, tears coming only from the smoke of the red coals. Most of the boys' eyes were wrinkled, dark and glossy as obsidian underlined with smiles and laughter from the day's events. The fire would reflect off their faces and blaze through their eyes. That inner fire seen beneath their pupils came out as words that spilled into the young, eager ears of surrounding friends. Luke would sit near John and Sam, making an occasional comment but always looking to be contemplating his next move, wondering if it would be the right one. He always went

to bed earlier than the other boys, excusing himself quietly and politely so as to not draw attention to his actions.

He would zip his tent quietly to remain unnoticed, while the rest of the boys and I shared stories of conquering mountains and love, often sitting through periods of intense silence, listening and waiting for the wilderness to teach us something we had not discovered yet. We all had begun to experience something unique while in the boundary waters; a sense of peace inside us all that forced us to come to grips with the world outside of the one we each lived inside of. A unique bond was formed between us on that trip. I remember hoping that each one of these three boys would somehow find the same peace I had found on those nights by the lake side.

Our last day in Minnesota we took to swimming across the lake three miles wide, our life jackets were strapped uncomfortably, chilling our young bodies. No protection could be brought along to protect ourselves from storms that could appear, but we swam along anyway, ignoring any hint of danger. For two hours we swam lazily, until noon, when the sun breached the tops of the trees that surrounded the lake, warming us and the water. It shown directly overhead heating the tops of our bodies, often needing to completely submerge in the water to keep our heads cool. John and Sam swam ahead because they were very strong swimmers. I swam behind to watch over them, occasionally feeling the pull of water as Luke swam nearby my right foot.

We swam to a small island in the middle of the lake to take refuge from the building wind. The cold stones cut my feet with sharp, quick, stinging strokes; I stood ignoring the pain, as I watched John and Sam chase each other over the top of a large daunting boulder. The large rock stood alone, dwarfing the surrounding rocks. At one

time the rock may have stood taller than the surrounding evergreens, however; it looked as if the constant barrage of wind and rain had worn it down into a rounded mass, the sharp edges it once had were battered into rotund corners. Yet it stood gracefully projecting itself all about the small island. I turned to help Luke over the sharp rocks that had cut my feet looking down, then outwards, into the lake at his orange life preserver floating, untouched in the water. It left an eerily growing, round ripple on the surface of the water that was quickly taken over by waves that blew now too slowly over the lake's surface.

I missed the rocks as I dove into the water, but I remember swimming with power and accuracy becoming tired very fast. I reached the spot where Luke's life preserver still floated, bubbles popping on the surface of the water in the middle of the neck hole of the life jacket. Propelling myself underwater, I saw Luke floating a foot down, staring at me, begging for some sort of understanding. I grabbed for his hand but he shook it off frantically attempting to push himself deeper as he flapped his arms downward. I could see what he was doing. Thinking back now I know that so much is unseen within a person close to the edge. There are specific signs, small hints begging for attention when calling out to others. I finally grabbed Luke under his arms and pulled him above the dark lake water; he fought the entire way up.

I swam beside Luke to the shore, his face wet with lake water, his eyes red with tears. We went ashore, I watched him as he sat on the bank staring at the setting sun while I spoke with his father briefly about what had happened. My last memory of that day is Luke and his father canoeing towards some near by cliffs, his father staring worriedly at the back of his head.

Luke did not speak to me any longer after that day; he would just look down as he walked past. I had seen him smile occasionally but only to remain unnoticed to the people around him. I had gone to the boundary waters in August as a scout and had become more attuned to the problems around my own life rather than just the ones within me. I did my best to watch over Luke after that to try and bring him back, becoming aware he no longer felt whole. Many months went by after my time in the boundary waters and I took what I had learned there and applied it to my life in the world I felt then, I was forced to live in. Many of the other boys and I would often talk about times we had while canoeing, but never that day with Luke. It was brushed aside, much in the same way he had forgotten about our time in the lakes together.

On Valentine's Day in 2003, Luke's life ended suddenly, leaving behind many questions and more friends than he knew he ever had. I was told he left no warnings and no signs of suicide but I knew better. He is remembered as a happy boy, always smiling, always cracking jokes and I would never dare take that away from him. But an entire world within a soul can lie beneath a smile. I saw Luke's pain and sadly only learned to smile myself.

Later, Luke's mother told me I had been his protector. She hugged me at the funeral and smiled, I could only smile back, I had known this; he had told me. Our troop sang scout vespers at his funeral, putting to rest the friend we all shared. We stood in two rows down the middle of the room, his friends and family watching us in uniform as we sang to our friend one last goodbye. I stood at the front of the line with John and Sam knowing they too felt the same hot burning inside while singing. Luke was awarded his next scout rank; it was placed upon his chest where he lay, silent. I did not cry while

singing, I held that in. I take a piece of his pain to be my burden and now I wish he would have shared more of it. Our entire troop saluted, the three of us joined through our time in the wilderness, held the salute longer than the rest of the boys, remembering our friend.

The song we sang to Luke is one that is cherished by many scouts, and scout parents alike. It is a song of tribute, to the day and to the people in each one of our lives. I have thought to share these lyrics in hopes all people can gain purpose from them I have. Although I cannot sing these words without thinking of Luke, I sing them out of respect, for my fellow scouts and for my friend.

Softly falls the light of day,
while our campfire fades away.
Silently each Scout should ask
have I done my daily task?
Have I kept my honor bright?
Can I guiltless sleep tonight?
Have I done and have I dared
everything to be prepared?

Luke is gone now but always he reminds me that no person can truly be happy alone. Striving for loneliness, looking for an answer, I have learned we can only find answers, and ourselves, in the company of others. I live my life by that, in memory of his.

