

Summer in Paradise

by Laura Lapins Willis

We could see Paradise from our back door.

It was summer and whenever we tired of our house, or the television, or of each other, one of us would proclaim, "Let's go to Paradise!"

We'd make a quick change into our swimsuits, grab towels, head outside, load up the canoe, and off we would go.

Paradise. All that lies between us and Paradise is 150 yards of murky pond water, surrounded by lush green trees and overgrown shrubs. Rhododendron, wild azaleas, and mountain laurel bloom along the water's edge.

Tall white oaks, hemlocks, and tulip poplars tower over us. We can see the sky, but not the horizon. And once we'd made the decision to go, we had a well-established plan of action.

As the boys strip down and hunt for their swimsuits. I pack a cooler with provisions: frozen juice boxes, PB&J sandwiches, Triscuits, bananas, and a box of Chips Ahoy cookies.

I am wearing my oldest bathing suit, flip-flops, and a ball cap. The boys are still of an age where they think it is cool to wear their matching trunks. No T-shirts. No shoes. Just two towheads with tan



shoulders, soft bellies, and patterned swim suits. I grab our oldest towels and we head out the back door into the warm summer sun. On our way to the lake we stop to gather the paddles and life jackets. I don't have many rules during the summer, but this one is paramount: no one goes into the water without a life jacket.

"But Mom!" Addison pleads. "I know how to swim!" He views my insistence on the flotation device as doubting his athletic ability. "If you kick a snapping turtle and he bites your toe, I want you to be able to stay afloat." The prospect of pain ends his complaining.

I snap the smallest vest onto Aaron, hand one to Addison and put one on myself. Addison waves a paddle in the air like a drum major as we march down the winding path.

The three of us work together to slide the canoe out of its resting spot in the woods. It is dark green, fiberglass, eight feet long. It is not heavy, but unwieldy. None of us can move it alone. We slip it into the water at the landing. I hold the canoe tightly as Aaron gets in first. He is scared of falling. Addison climbs in next and I hand him our provisions.

As I shove us off from the dock, all ennui evaporates. Something mystical happens when we are on water, bathed in sunshine. Out from under the restraint of a ceiling. Breathing fresh air. Away from interference and distractions (these were pre-smart phone days). The hurried pace that we embraced to get out of the house softens to a languorous mood of deep sighs and relaxation. We are on our way to a better place.

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Our trips to Paradise were part of a magical season for our boys and me. I wasn't working, so we had the entire summer without a schedule.

However, facing three months without anything organized—no preschool or sleep-away camp or daycare —was rather frightening. So I made a plan. We wrote down all the things we wanted to do together and worked our way through the list. Our goal was simply to do something fun every day. Sometimes it was little: get ice cream, pick blackberries, have a picnic. Sometimes they were special occasions: Aaron's birthday party and Fourth of July. A handmade calendar hung in the kitchen with a box of colored markers and stickers nearby. At the end of every day we recorded what we

had done: “Played with water guns” or “Rode bikes” or “Went to the Aquarium.” There was no question about whether we would have fun this summer. The question would only be, how much fun could we manage.

Before making our first trip across the lake that summer, I called our neighbors to get their permission to play in their backyard. They were happy to share the space with us. When I told the boys to prepare for an adventure I wanted to make it more appealing than simply describing where we were going. I decided to give it an exotic name, one that would never be confused with someplace else. I called it Paradise.

Where we are going is easily visible from where we live. But the distance between what happens in each place is vast. By traveling slowly, propelled only by oars and our own strength, anxiety melts as we move from one world to the other. The cool waters lap alongside the canoe. Frogs hop from the marshy edges kerplunking into the lake as we disturb their peaceful days. The geese nesting on the floating dock fly off at the sign of foreign creatures near their property. Grass carp, some more than two feet long, follow the little wake of our boat, their ribbed backbones skimming the water's surface, looking prehistoric and Loch Ness-ian.

Locals call this body of water Running Knob Hollow Lake. And while it is something more than a puddle, it is not a lake. It is a pond just the right size for a canoe or kayak. Our side is muddy and clouded with decades of leaf litter. At our bank, there is a stone wall, an embarcadero of sorts, that holds the water back from the land, a place where water irises bloom yellow in the spring, dragonflies sparkle and flit, and marshy grasses grow wild.

By contrast, the landing at the place we call Paradise is pure white. Long before we moved to the neighborhood, the owners of Paradise took the opposite approach of the man who built our house. Rather than erect a rock barrier, at Paradise they trucked in and deposited tons of sand. Crystalline white quartz fragments stretch from the fringes of the hemlock trees near the water's edge, and well into the lake, so there is an easy approach and a perfect place to gently wade in the water. When you step beyond the sand, the firmament drops off and lake swimming begins. For a timid toddler, an adventurous child, and a sometimes-nervous mother, it is perfect.

A wooden dock at Paradise stretches over the sandy spot. A thrill-seeking boy can run down the dock to the watery end and jump with delight into a six-foot deep pool of cool water. It is an easy swim back to the sandy beach, and a quick climb out to do it again. And again and again.

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We stay for hours at Paradise. Addison running and jumping. Aaron wading and splashing. Sometimes I read, but mostly I just sit, soaking up the warmth of the sun overhead and appreciating the joyful noises my children make. We catch crawdads in the shallows, watch tiny fish swim near us, see the water striders skimming atop the warm surface. Blue and black butterflies dance around us. The neighborhood hawks soar high above the treetops on the afternoon updrafts. We feed cracker crumbs to the fish. Aaron always tires first, getting chilled as the sun sets behind our house. I wrap him in a towel and we snuggle as he sits in my lap, me whispering little songs to him. We make up silly stories. Eventually, Addison exhausts himself too. We all look up and watch the day's sunset reflecting on the clouds overhead, transforming them into magnificent shades of lavender, orange, and pink. Loading up the canoe with the scraps of the day, we shove off again and travel home.

Though our trip is just a few dozen yards, it feels as though we too are traversing days and weeks and years. That summer was Paradise. We were in a place of delight and happiness. It was a transcendent time of youth and innocence and bliss that lives on in our memories, even if we can never recreate the moments we shared. And every time we made the trip, we always landed back in the place where we began. Home.

And yes, we can still see Paradise from our back door.

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published in 2018 on *Mothers Always Write*
1,358 words