

Love in the Afternoon

by Paul Hargreaves

There's a woodpecker nearabout, tock-tock-tocking into the furrowed bark of an ancient hemlock and sinking narrow shafts into the softwood where a midday meal of plump larvea awaits. The breeze off the lake wafts hints of resinous cedar and the funk of still damp moss and, in the upper reaches of the poplars and birches, its discourse with the leaves is secretive and seducing.

Down below, in a clearing bedded thick with russet pine needles, I pull down the canvas flap of the bunkie tarp. Laura is already tucked under the fawn-coloured sleeping bag, a come-hither look in her eyes and a naked arm outstretched.

"What took you so long?" she asks. She seldom asks me that when we're done, but today I feel ready to protract the glory, to tease out its rise and fall like the lingering chords of a Debussy pastorate.

I drop my pants and summon my finest Cuban Scarface impression. "Say hello to my little friend," I say.

"Not so little," she says, one eyebrow coquettishly raised. I drop in and snuggle up close, entwining my legs with hers. The coolness of afternoon cotton against my skin and the warmth of Laura's naked embrace evoke in me something elemental and savage.

"Where are the kids?" she asks — more of an inventory check than a statement of concern.

"Prowling around in the woods," I say. "Bronzed savages on an epic voyage of discovery." ?I cup the cheeks of her lovely backside and pull her in closer.

"You told them to stay clear of the lake, right?"

"They know how to take care of themselves," I say. But we both fall silent, unconsciously tuning our ears to the voices of the hinterland. There's only the wind and the hungry woodpecker. ?"They're fine," I say.

There's a roped off area in the shallows for unattended swimming and there are strict injunctions against hiking near Dead Man's cliff. Nobody has encountered wildlife bigger than a chipmunk ?and even the canoe is a safety model — a foam-lined hull with thick outriggers that make it untippable. Says so right in the brochure.

Laura combs my chest hair with her fingertips, the soft pressure of her nails trailing faint red marks in the underbrush. "C'mon, big boy," she urges, pulling me up. I, of course, require nothing more in the way of mating calls; the bull elk in me rises up, the great grizzly rears and my inner beast roars a bellowing cry of conquest. It has to be the inner voice because the neighbour's cottage is, after all, just a few paces beyond the canvas, on the other side of the poplar thicket.

"What's that noise?" Laura asks, her palms flat upon my chest. I hear nothing.

"What's what?" I ask. But it's there, dammit; I hear it now — hurried little footsteps. Down crashes the mighty woodland wapiti. Blake knows exactly where to find us.

"Mommy, can I have cheesesticks?" he asks as she pulls the sleeping bag around her neck.

"Where are your brothers?" she asks.

"I don't know. Can I have cheesesticks PLEASE," he says, remembering the abracadabba of all things good and wonderful. Laura shoos Blake outside, lifts the canvas flap and peers down toward the lake. The canoe is gone and the dock is bare, other than the heap of sun-bleached lifejackets.

For all the time it takes her to get ready on a workday morning, Laura is able to clothe herself with breathtaking and heartbreaking speed when motivated.

"Why don't you stay here," I implore, invoking the faint hope clause, "and hold the thought. I'll go look." But she's already pulling on a sweatshirt and zipping up her jeans, all in a quick-step dance of dazzling sensual tragedy.

"Daddy will get you the cheese," she yells back as she bounds down the path to the water's edge. Immediately thereafter follows the shriek of horror.

I'm there too, in the time it takes to pull up boxers. Rounding the path, I see the untippable canoe overturned in the middle of lake's still waters and no children in sight. I crash onto the dock at full speed and make a shallow running dive off the end board. I'm a strong swimmer, but it still takes a few minutes to get there. I dive under the upturned canoe and, through the gauzy filter of underwater eyes, I see two pairs of little white legs dangling and kicking. I surface into the hollow bubble of the hull where the boys are hanging from the gunwhales, all sodden smiles.

"Daddy," Tommy says as I toss back my soaking bangs, "Check out how cool this is!" The play of sunlight dancing on the wavelets sends spectral shards of kaleidoscopic light into the blue-green depths. I drop down and resurface outside, shout back to the dock that everything is OK. Laura practically collapses as Blake trots up, still exploring the possibility of cheesesticks.

I drop down and rejoin the boys inside. I'm ready to chew them out but I see the light of innocence and of wonder in their eyes and decide instead to embrace the moment, hanging with them beneath the canoe. We watch the play of light and note its shift as clouds roll by, see curious fishes flashing their scales below us, and talk about the times when I was a kid summering on this very lake. Suspended in their magical world, with the sunshine of discovery dazzling the deep blue of their imaginations, I almost believe I'm there again.

