

## TIPPING

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When I was ten, I almost drowned tipping a canoe. Summer camp in nowheresville Maine, mean girls on parade, Visiting Day, four weeks to go.

My bunkmates laughed. They thought I was fooling around. Annoyed at my demanding attention.

My archrival jeered.

The lifeguard, a counselor I'd loved and trusted, shouted, "Cut it out."

Our antics on the waterfront were supposed to not only entertain our parents, but show them how self-sufficient we'd become in their absence. We'd learned how to tip and right a canoe, paddle it to shore, dump out the water, and carry it back to the canoe rack. Like this was a useful, sought-after skill for Jewish American Princesses from Long Island, Westchester, Manhattan, or Philly. Lesson learned, camp tuition worthwhile. Parents happy. Let's have lunch.

Only I'd ruined the morning activity by almost drowning.

My "buddy" and I had stored our paddles under the thwarts, stood up and gleefully tipped the canoe. She swam clear, but one of the paddles had shifted, trapping my legs between the canoe bottom and the thwarts. The canoe turtled, the gunwale pressed down on my neck. I was unable to reach underneath and dislodge the paddle. Flailing, I yelled, "HELP," before I was pushed under.

It was not my cry for help, but the sight of my father tossing his video camera and sliding down the muddy hill in pressed tan slacks and a white Izod shirt that finally got everyone's attention.

Yellow. Bright. Fiberglass. Top of the line.

My father's Old Town canoe was like a shiny trophy, nothing like the metal canoes we'd tipped in camp. You could see it from a distance, he and my mother paddling far away from the dock of our lake house, leaving me behind, waving.

Sometimes they'd paddle out, then come right back in. Other times, they followed the shoreline, and I'd strain to see their tiny bodies seated in the bright yellow dot, so far away, excluding me.

Eventually, they'd return to our lake house—a shack, really—unheated, the bare-boned bathroom more like an indoor outhouse, the walls tilting slightly to the left. Everything was off angle. If you put a marble on the floor, it rolled, before being flicked, to the opposite side of any room.

In the evenings, sitting in the screened in porch, we'd listen to the buzz of neighbors' motorboats, their wakes smacking the yellow canoe against the dock.

"All the Jews in their Jew canoes driving up from New York," a fellow freshman said my first week of college.

He meant Cadillacs, this prep-school WASP in his John Lennon sunglasses. He was funny, cool, bohemian.

His trust fund never came up.

Jew canoe. I'd never heard that term before. My father drove a Cadillac, owned a canoe, was proud of both, though he did not ski.

"Jews don't ski," my grandmother had said.

Maybe not in her time, but in mine, they did. Traveling to their snowy destinations in their canoes.

We laughed as this man, blond and blue and beautiful, pontificated about the difficulties of sharing the slopes with such a nouveau riche crowd. I did not come to the crowd's defense. I had no retort anyway, having never been quick with my words. Scathing, but not quick, and I could not risk scathing. I was not ready to be "other."

"Don't make waves," my father taught me. "It's all a game, anyway."

Suck it up. That way, you could pass in a world that until then you never even knew existed.

Long after I graduated college, my mother—an artist known for her series of still lifes with no life in them - painted a series of canoes. Canoe I, Canoe II, Canoe III, and so on.

I own two of these. In both, the single canoe is lashed to a cleat on a short, white dock. The canoe is gray metal, the thwarts and gunwales glinting in a hazy acrylic sunlight. Calm, benign, forgotten on a smooth, steel blue, horizon-less lake.

There is no story in these paintings. Not individually. They hang lifeless on the walls of various homes, sold, gifted, or given away, remembrances of emptiness, of being tethered to a dock with no one to set you free.

One after the other. Only minute differences that might be noticed if the paintings were viewed side by side, first in order, and then out of order, one attracting the eye more than another without knowing why. But the series is no longer together. Untethered, released unwillingly from the artist, so that the story is broken up, remains unclear, has never been told in one place at one time, certainly not to me, who needed to know.

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