

Eric Trethewey

Fishing Blind Lake

In the beginning they travelled in silence. When the three of them had come out of the house to get into the mud-caked '51 Ford, brand new under the layered dirt, the men had seemed to expect he would want to sit in the front between them. But he had climbed into the back instead. It was going to be at least a half-hour's drive over unpaved roads, and though he liked to be up front to see through the windshield where they were going, he didn't want to sit between them.

When they were loading their gear into the trunk, the boy's mother had stood in the kitchen doorway for a moment before walking out into the driveway toward them. She was a pretty woman, aged beyond her years with money worries and her constant fear that the drafty house was always too cold for the children. Her shoulders were slightly rounded, as if to ward off the cold, and crow's feet radiated on her temples. "Good luck," she said to him as she reached out to brush the hair away from his eyes. Her voice sounded even, perfectly normal. Sidestepping her gesture, he pretended to make an adjustment to the fishing rod in his hands. As he cranked the reel forward and back, out of the corner of his eye he could see her wiping her hands on the apron tied around her waist. When, finally, they pulled out of the drive, she waved to them. Standing in the open doorway, she appeared small and fragile beside the house, her apron fluttered by the spring wind. He didn't wave back.

Slouching down in the seat as the car bumped along under the lowering, late-afternoon sky, thunderheads threatening off in the east, he stared off across the brindle fields steaked here and there with furrows of greying unmelted snow. Eventually, he found himself listening to the voices of the two men who suddenly, after ten minutes of driving in silence, had begun to talk about breeding hunting dogs. Their voices sounded natural, matter-of-fact, as if there was nothing in particular to worry about. A wave of apprehension washed over him. Although he had looked forward to the trip for months, it now seemed

that it might not be a bad thing if the rain came down hard, forcing them to turn back.

Long before they reached the turn-off where the logging road going toward the camp and Blind Lake angled off into the high wall of spruce woods, Dave had wheeled off the main road to the left and driven down a narrow lane, so deeply rutted that the underbelly of the car scraped earth and rocks beneath them. The boy saw Phil, up front, wince at the damage he imagined being inflicted below him. But Dave grinned his big, careless grin and said cars wasn't made to last forever, and if he worried about every damn thing that might go wrong with one the mail would never go through. Dave drove the mail on a dirt-road rural route and spent most of his working day sitting right where he was sitting now, hands loose on the wheel, and slewing hell-bent for the end of his route with dust clouds billowing behind him.

Half a mile from the road, at the end of the twisting, deep rutted lane, a large shack stood in the clearing. Someone had started shingling one side a long time ago, it seemed, but had gotten no farther than half-way up to the rafters on one corner. The exposed tarpaper covering the rest of the building was now bleached almost white by sunlight and weather. As the car pulled up in the yard, children and dogs came from nowhere, the children staring sullenly and the dogs barking sporadically without conviction. Although he didn't know at first exactly why they had stopped here, and wouldn't ask, the boy had his suspicions. He even had a vague feeling that he might have been here once or twice before, after dark.

A bald man with large yellow teeth, denim overalls pulled over long underwear, was standing in the doorway bellowing at the dogs, waiting for the men to get out of the car.

"Just the man I'm lookin' for," Dave said as he maneuvered his belly out from behind the steering wheel. The man in the doorway smiled a wide yellow leer. Phil got out of the car also and the two men went into the house, Dave, a big man wearing a cap, moving with a lumbering limp, and Phil, bareheaded, slight and small behind him, and also walking with a limp.

Eddie slouched there in the back seat and waited, staring at the children staring silently at him. He tried to think about fishing, about Blind Lake the way he remembered seeing it the first time, its dark surface glassy and impenetrable under the mist at dawn, but his thoughts kept circling back to the woman in the doorway at home, confused, angry thoughts rising out of a strange, hollow feeling of betrayal.

It seemed like a long time before the men came out of the house and got back in the car. "Good luck," the bald man called from the door-

way as Dave coaxed the Ford around in the small clearing and started out the lane the way they had come, the chassis of the car, as before, thumping and scraping on the high ridge running under them between the ruts.

Back on the main road, the boy sensed that their mood had changed, that they were more talkative than earlier in the day. Eddie knew that Dave and Phil had been boyhood friends and that there had been a time when they had not seen each other for years, maybe since he had been born. Then last summer, Eddie and his family had moved back into the village where Dave and Phil had grown up, and the friendship had resumed. They had all talked about this fishing trip for a long time. But now, he was afraid, the trip had been ruined, for him at least. Maybe the best thing that could happen would be for those darkly banked clouds up ahead to open and pour down torrents until they were forced to give up and turn back towards home.

In the back seat, looking out at the fallow fields, the gaunt ramshackle barns, the boy was taciturn. Sensing his mood, perhaps, Dave turned his head and chuckled. "We're gonna knock 'em dead, son, they don't have a chance of a snowball in hell with *us* on the lake," he threw back. Somehow, in spite of what he knew, Eddie believed him. Dave was a man who made you want to believe him. About some things anyway. But right now, soured, Eddie did not want to have to listen to him and, more than ever, was conscious of his resentment of the way grown-ups often talked down to him.

Phil said nothing, and the boy was glad to sink back into his silent survey of the woods and fields flicking by on either side. Phil, though he could make two pieces of wood fit together so snugly you could barely detect the joint, had a manner of speaking, even when he was joking, that made Eddie suspect his father wasn't really sure of what he was saying. This hesitancy, along with the distance Eddie always sensed between them, made him feel awkward, nervous. Sometimes the feeling was so pronounced that it almost convinced the boy that Phil could not be his real father.

It had still not begun to rain, the clouds seemed yet a long way off, when the car slowed. Dave turned to the right up a narrow track that led past a gravel pit, and over a slight rise into a meadow. When they parked and got out to divide the gear, the air was cold, smelling of resin. Dave shouldered the heaviest pack, the one with most of the groceries. All three of them carried rods in their hands as they set out toward the trees. Because there was no traffic on the main road they had just left, every sound they made reverberated distinctly in the surrounding silence.

On the logging road, tramping in the bush, Dave moved up front, walking fast with his rangy, wallowing limp. The boy had heard the story about *that* a couple of times. Thirteen years ago Dave had accidentally shot half of his left foot away with a .12 gauge shotgun. The boy had heard it said around the village that he had done it on purpose because he was "yellow." He had done it, they said, because he was afraid of going to the war in Europe. People repeated this story as if its truth were a matter of fact, but Eddie didn't know whether it was possible to believe such a thing. He had tried several times to imagine a scene in the woods amidst the blaze of autumn, the big red-faced man with the shotgun in his hand, maybe the double-barreled French-made one with all the tooling that he was so proud of, aiming down at his foot, carefully, so as not to blow too much of it away. The boy couldn't quite see it though, it didn't seem right to him. Maybe it was just better not to think about it. But he couldn't stop thinking about it, especially right now. It wouldn't leave him alone.

At least not until they saw the deer. They had just topped the brow of a low hill running up out of a stretch of bog when they saw her off to their left, in the clearing, broadside to them, poised, looking in their direction. Caught up in the moment, the doe frozen at the edge of the clearing, the curtain of dappled forest behind her, Eddie forgot everything, even that the fishing trip had been ruined. For what seemed like a long time she stood there motionless under the lengthening shadows of the afternoon, until Dave shifted to begin walking again, and then she was gone, slanting off into cover in three regal bounds, her white scut flying behind her.

"You'd never get a shot like that in hunting season," Phil said. Dark bristles were thick on his pallid cheeks and he stood there the way he walked, his head slightly cocked to one side as if questioning whatever he might have heard or uttered, not quite sure that he had understood either.

"Maybe one in five years," Dave grunted, and they moved out again over the slightly treacherous logging road, the spring ice still hard in places where the shadows of the big evergreens had blocked out the sun.

As they walked, Dave in front, the boy in the middle, and Phil bringing up the rear, Eddie could hear his father laboring behind him. Phil had fallen on a patch of ice in the driveway the spring before and fractured his leg. It had not completely healed, and he was limping yet, gingerly navigating around the spots where ice remained, scattered in hummocks along the trail. When, finally, Eddie heard the thud on the ice behind him, he immediately felt sick to his stomach. Turning back,

he saw Phil down on his side, struggling to get up with the aid of a sapling growing within reach of his hand.

Up ahead on the trail, the other man had stopped as well, and was looking back, a half-smile forming on his florid face. Phil got back up, slowly, looking apologetic, as if he were sorry for holding them up and embarrassed that he couldn't stay on his feet. Though he had grown up in these woods, he had been away from them a long time. He must have felt like a greenhorn, the boy thought, and felt awkward as well. Sometimes, he had to admit it to himself, he found himself wishing that his father were more like Dave, so easy and direct, and despite his shotaway foot, sure of himself.

They tramped on in silence. As much as he tried to put it out of his mind, the boy couldn't help wondering how much his father knew about the whole thing. He wasn't even sure, for that matter, that Phil suspected anything. It was funny how one little fact that had been there all the time, even though you managed not to see it clearly, could change everything, could make the thing you thought you wanted most of all turn sour and burdensome. As much as he had looked forward to this trip, now he wished there had been something he could have done to get out of it at the last moment. Everything had changed. After nine slow years in which it seemed that nothing much, besides a few fistfights on the roads, had ever happened to him, he felt himself slipping toward the edge of some new existence that he didn't understand, where things would never again be as they once were.

The whole thing had started that night, a week ago, up at the train station. The weather had been unusually fine for this early in spring, and the evenings had been, for a week, clear and cool without being cold. After supper, while the men had sat yarning on the sacks and barrels inside the general store, boys of varying ages had ranged around the station platform devising their own strategies against boredom. Eddie had been sitting on one end of the shipping ramp, legs dangling over the side, talking to an albino boy that everyone called "Snowball." Not having much to say to one another, they were mostly silent. The stars, clear in the early dark, swarmed across the night sky; the pungent smell of creosote and ash mingled in the thin, cool air.

A knot of older boys over on the other end of the ramp had been talking loud and laughing. Eddie had not been aware that he was listening until the story had taken on a definite configuration in his mind. They were talking about following someone. Some woman had walked up the mill road with a man after dark. Several older boys had followed, spied on them, heard everything they said, and knew everything they had done on the blanket they carried with them even if the

darkness had prevented the boys from actually seeing all there was to see.

In the moment that the knowledge jumped in him, like a flash of heat lightning across the night sky, that the man they were talking about was Dave McBride and the woman was his mother, Eddie felt the ground yaw beneath him. He sat transfixed, paralyzed for several moments before he could do anything. Before he could even think. Perhaps he didn't think. When he finally managed to come to himself, he walked over to the clump of shadows on the ramp, and, without saying a word, hit the boy who was talking. Hit him with his clenched fist right in the spot in shadow from where the words were coming to contaminate the evening. And then, immediately, he turned on the boy standing next to the one who had been talking, hit him solidly, furiously, and knocked him down as well. Although Eddie was oversized and strong for his age, these boys were older and larger. But none of them fought back in the face of his slashing fury, perhaps suddenly realizing what had brought it upon them.

After a moment they melted into the darkness and he was standing alone at the edge of the faint halo of light cast by the luminous dial of the station clock. He wanted desperately to hit someone else and was surprised that the sobbing he heard was not coming from either of the boys he had knocked down but from himself. There was no one else there. No one but himself.

A week later, what had seemed to him that night a monstrous and disgusting lie appeared to be perfectly obvious. Why had he not seen it before? That things were like this? All those times that Dave had been there when he had come home from school in the afternoon. And the nights when Phil had worked late in town. He saw it finally. And as much as he tried to put the whole thing out of his mind, it kept bobbing up to the surface like a fishing cork. Everyone knew, had known, except him—and Phil. And now only Phil, his father, the man everyone thought was his father, didn't know. The boy, slouched in the backseat of Dave's almost new '51 Ford, had repeatedly wrenched his thoughts back to the prospect before him. And though he knew that a hard enough rain would cancel; the trip and free him from this situation that filled him with anger and confusion, he found himself drifting off to an image of himself, at dawn, sitting alone in the boat on the unruffled expanse of Blind Lake, rod in hand, the line trailing out behind in his wake.

By the time they saw the white, weathered slats of the camp's tarpapered walls through the trees, the afternoon shadows had lengthened into dusk. Dave immediately set about getting a fire started in

the woodstove with what scraps he could scrounge out of the bottom of the woodbox while Phil emptied the packs, laying aside food for supper. Eddie, taking the big flashlight, went outside the camp to forage for more firewood, scarce nearby because others had been doing the same for years. He quickly discovered that he had to circle deeper into the bush, far away from the camp, if he wanted to find good wood that wasn't punk or soggy. Eventually, after a half-hour or so spent peering into and feeling around thickets, he had managed to drag out to the saw horse in front of the camp a tall, slender, dead birch, dry as tinder, that he had found standing in a foot of swampwater—he had wet himself to the knees cutting it down—as well as the top and high branches of a big pine that had blown over in high wind. It was heavy going, working in the gloom with no one to hold the light and the moon drifting out only occasionally from behind the scudding clouds, but this chore was almost second nature to him. As he worked he could hear the warm sounds from inside the camp, the clink of pots and dishes and the deep voices of the two men, from time to time breaking into laughter like old friends, as if there were no reason to believe that anything would ever go wrong between them.

When he had finished chopping and sawing the wood into stove lengths, he had seven or eight armloads to be carried into the camp and stacked in the big woodbox between the stove and wall. Inside, it was warm now, and the smell of frying meat filled the room. Dave's big hunting knife, the tip of its blade embedded in the rough deal table, caught his eye. A kerosene lamp fluttered on the table and beside it, between where Dave and Phil, glasses in front of them, sat talking about the Indian who still lived three miles down the track at Stillwater, stood a half-empty pint of rum.

"As soon as you get that there woodbox filled, son," Dave said, "we'll eat."

Later, when he crawled into bed—when they arrived he had thrown his pack on the single bunk against the far wall, away from the table, leaving the double decker against the other wall for the two men—they were still sitting at the table. After washing the dishes they had begun a game of cards. They sat there talking, sipping the rum. Before he drifted off to sleep he tried to think about the next day, the way the lake which was called Blind Lake—he didn't know why—would look when they first saw it again just at daybreak through the birches and poplars, the mist was still hovering above the perfectly still surface. The last thing he was conscious of was the moan of the train whistle blowing off in the distance for the Stillwater jump-off.

He woke up suddenly, frightened. There was a mad roaring somewhere, like a rushing of waters, and the voices of the men were raised, as if in anger. A terrifying, heart-stopped moment passed before he realized that the rain had come after all. The voices seemed to be arguing about something. He was afraid they were arguing about something.

"Ah, for Chissake, let's forget it and get a good night's sleep," Phil said, but his voice was thicker than usual, and uncertain.

"Bullshit," Dave belched, "I know that goddam trail like a horse knows his way to the barn at supper time."

"But . . . the rain . . . ?"

"Fuck the rain," Dave bellowed, "where's my goddam boots?"

Their shadows, in the light of the fluttering lamp, were distorted, grotesquely projected on the wall. They had finished the rum. Dave was insisting on walking the five miles through the woods, in the hard rain, back to the car. He would drive to the bootleggers, he said, and be back in less than two hours.

Phil's resistance came to nothing. Even as he protested, Dave was twisting into his boots and reaching for the cap that almost always covered his sparse sandy hair. In a moment he had lurched out into the rain.

Eddie tried to go back to sleep, but couldn't. And then, unexpectedly, it came to him. What if Dave were not going where he said he was going? Or at least not *only* there? What if . . . ? Eddie cracked his eyelids and stole a glance over to where Phil was sitting at the table, where the lantern fluttered and the embedded knife's extended shadow was projected behind on the wall. He was holding a deck of cards in his hands as if he might be going to shuffle them. But he didn't. He didn't move at all. At first the boy thought his father was glaring at him. But he wasn't. He was sitting there motionless, staring blankly into the dark, a small man, the shadows cast by the glittering lamp eating hollows in his unshaven cheeks and eye sockets, making him look strange, threatening. What was he thinking as he sat there?

Suppose he knows? the boy thought. Suppose he knows, and he knows that I know too? And I haven't told him. His heart hammered in his chest. He couldn't breathe. No, he couldn't know that I know, he reasoned with himself, tried to reassure himself. But though his sudden panic subsided he still felt an uneasy, half-guilty premonition of danger. What is going to happen? he thought, a strange light feeling rising in his chest. Phil's forehead above the blank sockets did not move, but was now touched by shadow, now glowing eerily from the red light gleaming through the cracks in the stove. The boy lay like a stone, opening his eyes after longer and longer intervals. Each time he

saw the same thing, the shadow-devoured lower visage, the motionless forehead glowing fiercely in the glow from the stove, the empty rum bottle, the knife stuck upright in the table. He knew that he did not have to open his eyes to see that scene because it was graven forever in his memory. Is he going to kill me? the boy wondered, fearful but at the same time almost resigned, half-accepting that this was the way it would have to be. It could end no other way.

He was trying to run, but his leaden legs would not move properly, trying to cry out, but no sounds came. The vacant, sightless eyes of the face followed him, opening and closing like the mouths of gasping fish, as if they were at the same time trying to swallow him and begging to be thrown back into the lake. He flailed at them with the pole-axe, but the handle was slick, and he could not control it, the blade kept glancing back at his legs. When he opened his eyes, his body was filmed with sweat. But he realized, with a sense of relief, that he had not cried out. He was aware of the faint snapping of the last embers in the stove, the muted tapping of light, scattered rain on the tarpaper, and the soughing of wind in the big spruces around the camp. He looked for Phil at the table. Involuntarily, he sat upright. No one was there. He looked at the two bunks over against the other wall. His heart jumped in his chest. He was alone. Had Phil gone after Dave? Trembling, half from the chill air, he was about to get out of bed when he heard a noise outside, a step. The door opened. It was Phil. He had nothing in his hand.

"What's the matter, son?" the man said, seeing the boy sitting up in the bunk. "You have a bad dream?"

"Yes," he said. "Where were you?"

"Just out takin' a leak."

Eddie lay back and closed his eyes again. But he did not go to sleep. He was still awake when the squishing footsteps sounded outside. In a moment, the sodden, hulking form of Dave lunged through the door. He stood in the middle of the camp, dominating the room, a dark, spreading pool of water at his feet, a bottle of amber rum in each hand raised in something like a victory salute.

"The goddam rain made the goin' tougher than I woulda thought," he growled, "but here we are; just tell me if this here poison ain't worth waitin' for."

Phil, rising up between the boy, where he lay in the bunk, and the lantern, took a long pull from the proffered bottle and grimaced as he swallowed. Maybe it will be alright, now, the boy thought, maybe they're not gonna fight after all. While the men sat drinking and talking, Eddie listened with his eyes closed, trying to detect in their

words some sign of the reality he had tried to put out of his mind. But it was all the usual good-natured, expansive cursing on Dave's part. And it seemed that Phil acted no differently. He still didn't know.

Would the day ever come when the boy would tell him? Again he felt a surge of that dull, confused anger towards his mother, and a gnawing, unexpungeable remorse for something that he could not have put into words. But it didn't make any difference. He couldn't tell Phil what he knew. They were too much like strangers. He was more certain now than ever that Phil was not his real father and that things would always be the way they were between them. He would have to learn to accept this. Some things couldn't be helped no matter how unhappy they made you.

He wished the two men would turn into their bunks over against the other wall so that they could all get an early start the next morning for Blind Lake. After all, he wasn't dead, and perhaps, tomorrow, they would be lucky enough to catch fish in spite of everything. Outside the rain had stopped, and the only sound was the sorrowing breath of the wind in the tall evergreens and, in the distance, the solemn lament of an owl.