

## Idle Speed Only

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When the sunset sparkles across the water with its siren song, it is nearly impossible to resist. The golden line of ripples simmered on the water and stopped directly at my pier. The pontoon, a brand new one since the old one was resting in the marina boneyard, the new one christened Lolly, a sleek and decked out Sylvan DLZ watercraft, was ready to go. She had completed her maiden voyage only last month and served faithfully every day since. I had done the routine maintenance only that morning, full tank of gas, and the battery light glowed charged. Living on the lake comes with a list of requirements: hot dogs and buns, double-tined sticks, catsup, mustard, firewood in the fire ring, and chairs for lounging in the shade of our ancient maples. But the essential requirement for cottage owners was that all boats are prepared for excursions at a moment's notice, and Lolly was ready. But sunset cruising was tricky. You had to know when and how to come home, and I was confident I did.

“Duke,” I called into a sudden breeze the moment my decision was made. “Dukie,” I yelled, and he lumbered down the steps from the front porch and onto the pier. I opened the door for him, and he stepped across from the pier onto the drifting pontoon. While I cast off, he settled himself beside my captain's chair. I hopped onto the pontoon, fired her up, and put her in reverse, and backed away from the pier. As I righted her in a half-circle, Duke leaned into me, smiled

his doggie grin, and we pulled away into the marked cruising lane defined by orange buoys.

We passed the stucco arches house, and Dianne (two n's she insisted) and Ronald waved from their chairs around the campfire. Their smoke drifted across the lake to us, and Duke and I breathed its distinctive scent, oak logs burning. Many cottages on the lake were dark on a Monday evening, especially those of young couples who still worked in the city. Their foresight of purchasing cottages when they occasionally popped up for sale spoke to their intentions in retirement.

The brick ranch which had been surrounded by graceful oak trees with thick, heavy branches dipping to the ground, now stood unadorned by nature because the owner apparently saw a threat that the trees might fall on the house or something. Anyway, the brick house was now owned by new folks from Ft. Wayne who, perhaps in error, thought they were seeking the respite of a fishing lake.

The Department of Natural Resources mandate of fifteen mile an hour speed limit pleased all of us. It discouraged the skiing crowd from purchasing a cottage, and that pleased us, too. We passed our friend Rose's house all dark at that time since she turned in early to read a book every night. The Gray's cottage boasted the standard for grandparents. Red, yellow, and vibrantly blue water toys floated through the sunset. The straight-line channel approached on the right with its rim of floating algae, an eyesore which had been dredged by man so that it lacked the elements of a natural channel. But when homes posted for sale, they were greedily grabbed up – such as the monstrosity mansion which graced its entrance as we passed.

Duke and I settled in for the ride. We knew where we were going. I slowed the boat to idle and eased into the narrow connecting channel to the next lake. Under the flowing branches of the trees on either side, we glided in and out of its gentle curves, passed the handwritten sign which reminded boaters that the passage was idle speed only, and bobbed into the serenity of a largely unoccupied lake. I pushed it up to ten miles per hour, and Duke toddled to the bow, climbed arthritically onto the seat, opened his mouth, and let his tongue loll and ears flop.

I cut the engine, went to sit beside Duke, and we slowly floated under the very tree where our bald eagle nested. His feathers glistened in the last of the brilliant rays of the setting sun. We gazed to his massive size, his snowy white head feathers, the yellow of his beak, the russet brown of his wings and body plumage, the booted feathers over his orange-yellow feet, and the steel-black, hook-hand talons. His tail was closed, but its silvery white flickered. Duke and I had seen him fish, imagined the lemon-yellow of his irises as he swooped with tail feathers trimmed then fanned, as he plummeted to the water, hit it seemingly at Mach speed, and lifted off with a pike in his talons. This night we would not find him fishing because hunting was for daylight conditions, but just the sight of him gave us goosebumps.

“Ahoy!” a voice called. And the moment was over. I patted Duke, calmed us, accepted the memory that was ours, and turned to a man approaching on the water in a pontoon, a Sylvan L-3 DLZ watercraft exactly like ours. “Ahoy!” he called again. I plastered a welcoming smile on my face.

“Hello there,” I stood up and returned to the captain’s chair and Duke followed me.

The man had cut the motor, and the boat was approaching sidelong as though he intended to open the door of his boat and step onto mine.

“Hi, I’m Curtis,” he smiled. “Everyone here on the lake says to follow you, that you know the lay of the land,” he chuckled at his lame joke. We heard the flap of eagle wings above us as he flew away to find solitude. “Hey, I’m sorry if I chased him away, the eagle, I mean.”

I took a deep breath and nodded.

"It's getting late, you know," I cautioned him. "Do you know how to get back?"

"Uh," he looked to the sky which had quickly darkened and then around his boat to the black water. "I;m not sure," he chuckled nervously.

"Just follow me, at a distance, but close enough so...:" What exactly is close enough for this guy, I asked myself. "Turn on your running lights!" I called over the quickening wind.

"Running lights?" He looked quickly took his seat in the captain's chair. "Running light?" he murmured.

"On the dash. To the right!" I pointed in the dark to its location on my dashboard.

"Okay!" he tapped the button, and the running lights appeared. "All set!" he yelled.

As I reached for the key to start my motor, he yelled again,

“What a beautiful place to live, to learn about Nature,” he must have glowed.

I shook my head, determined that I would rescue him with his dignity intact. He would learn, I suppose. I just didn't know that he would learn it all from me.

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