

## A River Story

The hushed murmur of voices reached my eager ears. Straining even in sleep to hear the first sounds of morning, I had slept lightly waiting for the morning to come, and now it had finally arrived. Trying not to wake my older sister who was asleep on the lower bunk, I scrambled down the ladder on our bunkbed. The door to our room was open a crack and I slipped through into the living room, and I saw my dad and older brother Adam were already up, dressed, and having breakfast. I begged, “don’t leave without me!” Adam grinned, and with a twinkle in his eye he said, “better hurry Squirrelly-Girl.”

Mom took me to the bathroom and dressed me in long johns, a sweater, insulated coveralls, warm wool gloves, and a hat. Exiting the bathroom, I saw that Dad and Adam were already outside, loading the canoe into the beat-up red Ford truck that was our faithful friend in those days. I hurried to eat my breakfast and, glancing at the clock, saw that it was 4:00 AM. I finished breakfast, pulled two pairs of wool socks on, and thrust little feet into brand new rubber boots.

Once outside, I was glad to be bundled up so warmly because the cold December morning registered below zero on the porch thermometer. Adam boosted me into the middle seat of the truck, and we were off. Leaning against Dad, with the truck heaters going full blast, I could hardly believe that I was finally going. Growing to be six took such a long time and getting permission to go check the river trap-line had taken almost the entire trapping season, yet finally here I was going to the river for the first time.

The truck bounced down the rock road to the river, yet it was still dark, and the stars were shining when we arrived. Sitting on the bank while Adam and Dad unloaded the canoe and gear, the soft strong rush of living water reached my ears and I could smell the clean crisp scent of the river. After everything was stowed, life jackets were strapped on and we were suddenly in the canoe floating down the river. It was the gray twilight before dawn, and the silence was so loud that you could feel it in your bones.

Making no more noise than a single wild creature, Dad and Adam obeyed this unwritten law of silence, and their homemade oak paddles dipped swiftly in and out of the water like a water spider's legs. Sitting in the bottom of the boat, I saw, smelled, and felt the water rush under the thin blue skin of the canoe. The day itself was cold, so cold that the edges of the river were tinged with ice, so cold that the droplets of water froze on the gunwale of the canoe, so cold that steam rolled off the river like an immense white cotton blanket.

As the miles rolled by, I began to be, like a single raindrop, a small part of the river. As we kept her secrets and continued to respect her, the river forgot that we were not a part of it. Like all the deer, raccoons, and other creatures that it had seen over the years, it accepted and then forgot us. At last, as we were forgotten, I forgot myself and became part of the silent river. The day flowed by swifter than the very river itself, and soon the sun had set, and twilight enveloped us three wild ones and hid us beneath it. As we reached the last turn and shallow place in the river, a single doe deer stepped into the stream and drank. The canoe slipped up only five feet from the doe. Lifting her head, she, like the river, regarded us, accepted us, and forgot us.

The next stretch of stream revealed the boat ramp off on the right. After the canoe was loaded into the truck, we began our long bumpy road homeward. The wonder of what I had seen played through my mind again and again. The rushing calmness, the acceptance and forgetfulness, but above all else the silence. A silence so loud that it practically shouted in the language of the river, and was so strong that even there, in the cab of the truck, it had not yet been broken.

Then Dad stirred bringing my mind back to the present. He asked, "how did you like being on the river today?" I met his eyes, smiled, and simply said "I love it!" And he understood all that I did not say, so grinning he replied, "I'm glad." Then I curled up in the seat, my head on Dad's shoulder and fell asleep, but from that evening until today, I can hear the river in my dreams, and it's calling my name. It knows my name, and its name is written in icy runes on my memory forever.

Faith Collins