

## Just Around the Bend by Mirren Litchfield

Anticipation floats in the air; thick, like honey. The air is sticky too, as often happens at the end of the school year when summer break is right around the corner. And this hot, sticky air, this anticipation, this excitement, it's all through the house.

The dog's mood changed as soon as the first suitcase was laid out to be packed. She knows we're leaving soon and she doesn't want to be left behind. Of course, we're bringing her too. But, just in case, she's sitting there whining making herself obvious beside all the packed bags. Dad comes back in and the dog jumps up. He grabs two more bags and heads outside again. Once the van is loaded and the old canoe is tightly strapped to the roof, we eat dinner and head to bed. We wake up in the early hours to drive through the city before rush hour begins. We're on our way to the lake.

The sun rises over the 401 and I listen to the sound of cars passing. I vaguely remember my mom helping me stumble out of bed and into the car. I think I drifted back to sleep shortly after we pulled out of the driveway. Now the warm buttery rays of the rising sun are filling up the van. Behind us the city skyline is a silhouette against the bubblegum pink sky, but the intense pink colour is fading fast. My mom turns around in her seat. She stage-whispers so as not to wake my younger brother and older sister, "Still a while to go. But we're going to stop for breakfast soon." At the mention of food my stomach grumbles.

Five minutes later we pull over at the ON-Route. After everyone takes a bathroom break, my parents order their double doubles and some breakfast sandwiches to go. Back in the van, I chomp down on mine, but the plastic-like cheese and rubbery egg make me gag so I give it to the dog. That makes the poor girl happy.

My parents' playlist is perfectly predictable: lots of Canadian bands, heavy on The Hip. We all sing along but there is no avoiding the inevitable boredom of this journey. The morning stretches and the sun creeps higher in the sky. The van is getting hot and stuffy and the sickly-sweet, tree-shaped air freshener barely masks the smell of stale air.

Time drags but telltale landmarks whisper that we are getting closer to the lake. We turn off the main route and hit the winding roads. After fifteen minutes of this I'm starting to feel sick. "Look," my sister suddenly cries, "there's the house with the blue roof!" We all know that, once we pass it, there are only a few more turns until we have the lake in our sights.

Everybody keeps shifting in their seats and craning-their necks to be the first one to see the lake this summer... We are so close! One... Two... Three... Four... and there it is! "I see it!" we all shout, almost in unison.

In that glimpse before the road takes yet another turn, I can see the dark blue water reflecting the sun, making it sparkle.

Surrounded by lush greenery, the lakeside cottages begin to emerge. Now we round the last bend and the whole lake stretches out in front of us. My dad eases off the gas pedal and

rolls into a parking spot near the village dock. We push and shove to get out. I hop to the ground and the crunch of gravel fills my ears.

I take a deep breath, letting the scent fill my nose. Perfection! The smell of pine trees and boat gas mingles with the smell of fries from the local burger joint down the street. We unpack the van and bring the bags over to the dock. We know the drill. I put on my sunglasses and lifejacket.

Other families are unpacking their cars, loading their boats and bringing their belongings down the lake to their cottages. My mom walks to the slip to get our little boat as I do a last check of social media on the marina's wifi. We don't have any wifi at the cottage so my sister and I usually volunteer to boat back here once a week or so to pick up milk and eggs and to catch up online with our friends in the city. In past summers, interest in our lives back home faded with each week we spent here. At the beginning of each summer, I can't imagine that ever happening again but, somehow, it does. I finish posting on Instagram just as my mom arrives with our boat. With five of us, the dog, the canoe, and most of what we'll need for the next few weeks, it is obvious Mom will have to make two trips. My dad and I jump in with a few bags and the dog and join my mom for the first trip down the lake.

The wind whips our hair and the water splashes up and sprays us. The dog stands at the front of the boat and her ears flap in the wind. Her stance is like a carving mounted on the front of old sailing ships. When she tires of that she stumbles across our groceries, popping the bags of chips and squishing the loaves of bread. She leans over the side to drink the splashing water.

When we finally arrive at our old dock, I cannot stop grinning. My dad starts opening up the cottage and connecting the water, and my mom heads back to the village to get my sister and brother and the rest of the bags. I enter the kids' bedroom and a cobweb gets caught on my face and my mouth. Mouse poop is scattered across the kitchen countertops and the cottage feels unused, musty and cold. My job is to open all the windows and let the fresh air in. After I open the second window, the air swooshes in and the dead flies on the kitchen table go for one final flight. The second boatload arrives with the canoe towing behind and soon enough we are all busy cleaning and unpacking.

After an hour or so, although we're still supposed to be helping, my brother, sister and I sneak away, throw on our bathing suits and go for a swim. The water isn't cold, I try to convince myself, it's refreshing. The dog, as always, is reluctant to get in the water but my brother sneaks up behind her and pushes her in. She remembers what she's doing and starts splashing around. The kids next door invite us over to jump off the roof of their boathouse. We climb up the ladder and take running jumps into the deep water. I sprint as fast as I can and take flight!

Later that afternoon, CBC Radio 2 flutters in and out of range in the background while we play cribbage and wait for my parents to finish making dinner. After dinner, we waltz our way down to the dock to watch the sunset. It is a clear night and I can tell that the sunset is going to be beautiful. But eventually the bugs are too ferocious and we abandon our plans and rush up the path to screened-in safety. As we climb the front stairs, I can just smell the smoke and roasting marshmallows from some nearby bonfire.

We all settle down to read by lamplight but eventually someone yawns. It's contagious and it's obvious that we all need sleep after such a long day. I brush my teeth, then crawl into the bottom bunk. The sheets are cold but I know they'll warm up soon enough. The dog comes into the room and jumps up on my bed. She sits on my feet as if she knows I want her to warm them up. She's exhausted from all the running around. Her life in the city involves much more sitting. I guess that's the same for all of us. More rushing around but less actual moving.

I'm getting sleepy looking out the window, watching a firefly glow in and out between the stalky grass with the bright round moon high in the sky. I feel myself drifting off. Like a photograph negative, the moon becomes the sun in my dreams as I reluctantly close my eyes. A summer of swimming, boating and spending time together is just around the bend.