

Lights Out at Summer Camp
By Lauren Rantala

Long days on the lake at summer camp always make it easy to fall asleep in your cabin at night. Your favorite PJs and fuzzy socks still smell like the laundry detergent from home. The cotton sheets and quilted comforter are warm and toasty even as the temperature cools outside. A quiet snore comes from the bunk above you. Your best friend is already in dreamland. A light, but steady gust of air from the standing fan in the corner gently blows at the top of your head. It reminds you of the breeze at the lake. The same breeze that pushes the water inwards to form waves. You breathe deeply with the water, taking breaths as the waves are pushed towards the shore. You exhale as the water pulls backwards into the lake. As you breathe in, the smell of fresh water and green trees fills your chest. The clean air coming off of the trees touches the top of your head before it moves down to your shoulders. You notice a soft petal from a purple Wild Lupine flower on your shoulder before it falls to your belly button, then to your knees, then your big toe. Wild Lupines are common flowers here. The tiny vibrant purple petals cover tall stalks, surrounded by long, rounded green leaves. Like tiny jewels covering a field, the purple flowers seem like they could be sewn into a fancy dress or adorn a king's crown. But for now, they cover the grass near your cabin, just for you.

The clean air covers the night sky now, only interrupted by twinkling stars. The stars look different here than they do at home. Here, they are center stage. These stars are easy to see above the camp, shining down on all the different cabin roofs. Campers love to wish on them, including you. There are so many stars in this wide, black sky- each camper could make every wish they could think of and there would still be stars left, waiting to be wished upon. Moonbeams lead you back to the moon itself, hanging over the lake. These beams are a little different from the light coming from the stars. They don't shine as much as they glow. This delicate glow drapes over and in between the treetops, serving as a night light for all the forest creatures. Crickets softly chirp their lullabies, sending the animals of the peaceful forest into a deep slumber. Even the minnows in the lake move slower, drifting off to the cricket's sweet song.

Sitting atop the lake water, a fluffy baby bird rides on the back of his mother. He is cozy and safe as he floats through the bobbing waves. He rocks back and forth like a sleeping baby held in a slow moving rocking chair. His mama sings a lullaby of her own- a call that has been said to have inspired Ojibwa Native American flutes. It is distant, but beautiful as it reaches your ears and rests inside your heart. The loon's musical call is only one of the things that make it special. As the baby loon sleepily opens its ruby red eye, he snuggles into his mama's feathers. The white feathers around his mama's neck form a necklace over her checkered white and black body. A Tsimshian story from Alaska recalls that a loon once restored a blind man's sight and was rewarded with this beautiful white necklace. Mama wears the feathered jewelry very well. Baby's grey fuzz will one day match his mama's beautiful pattern. But for tonight he is happy to be inside of what feels like her long, warm, soft coat.

Mama is so strong that carrying him securely is an easy task. Unlike other waterfowl who float like little sail boats atop the lake, loons have solid bones instead of hollow ones. This makes the loon a strong swimmer and an excellent diver. The European name for a loon is in fact "The Great Northern Diver." Loons are able to open their eyes underwater with ease, revealing a different world. An underwater world full of lazily swaying seaweed and resting schools of small fish. Loons can dive deep into the quiet waters of the lake. They glide up to 180 feet into the lake's depths. Most of the time, loons will return to the still surface of the shallow water after one minute of diving. But sometimes if the mood strikes, a loon will be underwater for as long as 15 minutes. Unlike fishermen on land, the loon is able to see fish firsthand, making them the most excellent fishers on the lake. A family of loons eat very big meals together. They eat well over a ton of fish over a one year period. After such a big meal, it's no wonder baby loon is now fast asleep. His full belly moves in and out with the breath of deep sleep. Mama feels his chest rise and fall against her soft feathers as she continues to swim at a consistent pace. She is an excellent swimmer. Her feet are farther back on her body than other birds making it difficult to walk on land, but giving her the grace to glide through the still and wavy fresh water of the north. Lake water gracefully passes over her webbed feet and down the shore where a family of beavers make their way toward a dam.

Several beavers gather wood from one side of the forest and swim their way back to the dam with it in tow, ready to add it to their construction materials. The dam is made from many different kinds of wood, some of which include trees cut down by the beavers themselves. The beaver has very strong teeth, able to cut through tree trunks. Inside the wooden dam it is warm and cozy, perfect to relax after such a demanding task. A beaver pokes its nose from the dam's entrance and perks its head out into the night air. He has other plans for tonight. It's his night off. He wades into the water, leaving a V shaped trail behind him. His flat tail propels him forward like the rudder on a motorboat, as his webbed rear feet easily paddle through the lake water. Although he can swim as fast as 5 miles an hour, for a scenic, slow ride such as this he moves slowly, enjoying the stillness of the lake. A large rock in the shallows of seaweed reveals itself. Perfect. The beaver grabs several loose pieces of seaweed and makes a custom seat cushion. He will wait here to watch the sunrise from the best seat in the house.

The Long Car Ride Home

By Lauren Rantala

Your eyelids feel heavy as it starts to drizzle. The post office was the last errand you had to run with mom. It has been a long day. The quiet hum of the car remains uninterrupted by mom's cooking podcast. A woman's soft voice comes through the speaker. Your eyelids are even heavier than before. She lists ingredients as you close them: Two cups flour, two tablespoons sugar, two tablespoons baking powder, three tablespoons butter, three fourth cups milk, one egg, a pinch of salt. Whenever mom listens to cooking podcasts it means a delicious experiment is soon to follow. From the sound of it, in the next few days the whole house will smell like cinnamon rolls. The soft cotton of your sweatshirt nestles against your skin. You snuggle into it.

Mom turns the windshield wipers on. You hear them start moving against the water sliding down the windshield. Back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth. One half cup white sugar. One half cup brown sugar. One tablespoon ground cinnamon. The drizzle becomes a light rain as the car passes by treetops and telephone lines. The humidity from the heavy, dark clouds meets the gentle heat rising from the asphalt of the road. Tap tap tap. Droplets hit the pavement, cooling it down.

Mom turns the steering wheel in her hands. It slides between her fingers as she skillfully maneuvers. The wheels on the car listen to her instructions. You feel the car turn into your neighborhood. Mom looks forward to a nap on the couch. She is a creature of habit which means she always follows the same routine. She will fill a tea kettle and heat water on the stove to make a cup of her favorite tea before curling up on the couch. The couch is her favorite spot in the house, especially on a sleepy day like today. There are many cozy blankets to choose from along with soft throw pillows, perfect for resting your head. But nothing is as good as falling asleep in the car. You feel the car turn into your cul de sac. One cup powdered sugar. Four ounces cream cheese. One fourth cup butter. One half teaspoon vanilla.

Mom pulls into the driveway where dad's car is already parked. As the car stops, you hear mom get out. Dad walks out to greet her before quietly opening your door. She motions for him to stay quiet so as to not wake you. You pretend to be in a deep sleep so he'll carry you to the house. He unbuckles your seat and lifts you up into his arms. He smells like Irish Spring and the cologne mom bought him for Christmas. A very grown up gift. As he steps through the front door, bringing you into the foyer, you feel the air change from muggy and wet to clean and fresh. The smell of your favorite dinner is coming from the kitchen. Dad must be listening to mom's podcasts too. He places you gently on the soft couch, covering you with a fuzzy blanket. Mom opens a kitchen cupboard revealing a deep blue tea kettle. She turns the handle of the kitchen sink. Water hits the bottom of the tin kettle and quickly fills to the very top. She puts it on top of the stove and turns the knob.

While mom waits for her tea, she softly whispers with Dad about the different techniques he used to cook your favorite meal. He whispers back to her. Just as the water begins to boil,

before the tea kettle whistles, mom takes it off the stove. An herbal chai tea bag is placed in her mug. She pours the hot water over the bag. Its color and flavor seep into the mug's contents. The gentle aroma of chai wraps around you on the couch as she takes a seat beside you and rubs your back. She turns the muted TV on. You hear the volume slowly reveal itself before it finds its resting place at a low mumble. Soon it's replaced by the deep breathing of your sleeping mother. Dad smiles as he turns the TV off once again and finishes up in the kitchen.