

On Black Lake

By Alexander Saxton

NARRATOR:

You know, I've seen the video. There was a good six months there, where she watched it almost every day, desperately searching for a clue, any kind of hint. All for nothing, obviously. I think we all knew that, the neighbours. But we'd sit with her while she did it, so she wouldn't have to be alone.

And even though not much happens in the video, just thinking about it sends the shivers along every nerve in my body.

I remember the day, too. The lake was like glass, and the faded greens and tans of the pines and dead maples trees across the water were reflected so clearly you felt you could reach out and snap off a branch more easily than you could with the real thing. From up high, like she would have been in the cabin, the water was perfect and blue. But when they made their way down the cedar stairs to the dock, they'd have seen that the water was stable, and so hazy that you couldn't see deeper than a hand's breath.

Now the lake, Black Lake, it's a little glacial tear in the Precambrian rock near Gravenhurst. This was the second weekend of April, and the morning they arrived at the cabin that weekend, I'd had to use an edging tool from the garden shed to break up the last crust of ice on the dock, and knock it into the water to drift away, shrinking in the bright cold sun. But even though the water sent a shock up the spine when you placed a hand beneath the surface, it was a still and sunny day, and they decided to go kayaking.

They wrestled the kayaks, first the blue one, and then the yellow one with the missing seat, out from under their tarps in the carport, and used one of the paddles to scrape out the cobwebs and the curled-up dock spiders. Then, with a little more difficulty, because she wasn't a big woman, and because her father was starting to get on in years, they wrangled the kayaks down the staircase, to the dock.

That's when the video starts. The first thing you see is her face, the camera pointing up as she holds it around waist level. One of those go-pros. There's some jostling and the screen goes black for a moment as she fixes it to the front of the kayak.

HIM: Phew. That was a lot of exercise.

HER: Guess we don't need to go kayaking now,

They both laugh, and then decide to go back upstairs to sit and have a cup of coffee, looking out at the lake. She leans in to turn off the camera, and then they're back, wearing warmer clothes. It had been below zero that morning, and though it was warm and sunny, there was always the chance the temperature would drop again. She's wearing wool socks, running shoes, two pairs

of tights, and a jacket. He's wearing long-johns under a bathing suit, and an old grey sweater with a picture of two butt cheeks and the caption 'bum inspector'. I remember the old man had a lot of sweaters like that. She tilts the camera in his direction, and talks into it.

HER: And everybody just take a moment to appreciate dad's clothes ...

HIM: What?

HER: Nothing..

HIM: Are you laughing at how I'm dressed?

HER: You? Never.

They put on their life jackets, and he dips a hand in the water, flicking away the drops with an exaggerated shiver.

HIM: The water's high. Never seen it this high before.

HER: No, me neither.

HIM: If we go over to the marsh at the far end, maybe we'll be able to find the spring.

HER: Sure,

Black lake's supposed to be fed by a spring in the rock, and since I was a teenager, I could remember her father had insisting the spring was located in the wetland over at the end of the lake with no cabins. I don't think he had any evidence for this belief. It was just one of those notions that people get.

By that age, he was a little shakier than either of them liked to acknowledge, so she helps him down into the kayak while trying as much as possible not to seem like she is. Once he's away, she drops hers into the water and clambers in, sitting on a spare life jacket in lieu of a seat.

As she brings her boat around, you catch a glimpse of him already away over the water, arcs of crystal droplets catching light as the black silhouettes of his paddle rise and fall, first on the left, then on the right, then on the left, then on the right.

The video goes quiet once they're on the water. Even though noise carries out there, there was scarcely any to be carried that day. Just the soothing liquid percussion of paddle dipping into glass.

HIM: Look,

She snatches up the camera and turns it- a black bird wings low above its obsidian reflection at the far end of the lake.

HER: (quietly)What is it?

Even though she's barely speaking above a whisper, he hears her clearly from forty feet away.

HIM: I don't know- a cormorant, maybe?

HER: It's big to be a cormorant.

HIM: Too dark to be a goose. Too heavy to be a heron.

The bird doubles back and rises, disappearing in the dimness of the distance, the darkness of distant branches.

HIM: I think I know what it is,

HER: What?

HIM: I don't know, I don't remember the name of it, but it's a kind of bird, that lives around here. I've heard of it before. Oh, what was it called?"

But he can't remember, and she puts the camera back on the kayak's nose.

In silence, they steer their way across the open belly of the lake, to where the rocky shores cinches in, then curves away again, growing marshy.

Even though it's cold, it's clear the sunlight is intense: prickles of sweat are starting to form around her forehead. The sun is very bright: even under her sunglasses, you can see her squinting against the crowding sunlight.

On the rocky shores of Black lake, the trees are mostly jack pine and birch. Along this patch of shore though, they give way to smaller, scrubby pines, and to some kind of dead tree, pointed and branchless, that angles in rows against the sky like dipping lances. She and her father make their way along the banks here, and the black shadows of these bleached trunks rippled over her kayak as they go.

HIM: Here,

Says her father. You can hear him the splash of him slowing himself and changing direction with a cross-bow draw. She turns the camera again to show a blue path of open water among the bramble tussocks at the top of the lake.

HER: This has never been here before,

HIM: I told you how high the water was, It has to be up almost fifteen inches.

HER: Well, do you want to go in?

The way's narrow. Sticks and brambles and waterlogged trunks edge in on it from either side. He looks up at her wearing a big grin.

HIM: Sure do! Come on, I think I can hear the spring further in.

You can't hear anything in the video, though. She says she couldn't hear anything either. Only the sound of their paddles, his overloud voice, and the stillness of the lake and forest. Before she can answer, he's already driving down the channel, using his oar to push himself along from tussock to tussock, churning up the water with silt. He turns a corner and disappears through stalks of dead shrub, and she replaces the camera, then shoves in after him, every cracking branch her kayak crushes against deafening in the audio. After she makes the turn, you can see behind her that the channel has widened again. They drift side by side for a moment. On the left and the right, pine-topped bluffs of pink-veined granite loom over the marshlands. No breath of wind disturbs the calm.

HIM: (loudly) it's so tranquil,

She doesn't say anything. Tranquil isn't the right word, though. At least in the video, 'eerie' feels closer to the truth.

The waterway narrows again. A sunken log lurks just below the surface, and they have to use their paddles as levers and pry themselves over it.

HIM: (laughing) It's this way, I can hear it!

HER: Really? I can't hear anything.

HIM: No? It's just ahead- you'll catch it in a moment.

They clear another one of those logs, half sunk like crocodiles, and squeeze through a winding and even more narrow section of waterway. Snapped-off, branches rise up out of the water and smear her kayak with slimy mud. Some of the stalks are topped by dead flowerpods, which disintegrate into little curls of green-gold pollen when disturbed. I don't know what kind of plant they are, and I've lived up here my whole life.

HIM: Aha!

And a few seconds later, she pushes through after him, into another open section of water. Again, they're floating side by side.

HIM: The spring's just ahead- Can't you hear it yet?

But you can tell as she paddles in a slow circle that they've come to a dead end, a still pool ringed with those pointed dead trees, and beyond them, higher and closer, the looming stone bluffs, with their unwhispering pines.

HIM: I can hear it just ahead, There has to be a way through.

But they can't find one. Even under the glasses, and through the glare, you can see something like relief cross her face.

HER: Well, maybe the water will be higher next spring.

HIM: ...yeah, Maybe...

HER: Come on, let's get back. I'm getting tired

HIM...Yeah.

As she turns her kayak and starts to fight her way back up the channel, you can see him scanning one last time for any way through. His body language changes: he slumps- It's as though he's been filled with a warm wind up until now, but now he's hanging slack and empty.

HER: Let's go.

It's clearly harder going on the way back. On the audio you can hear him panting behind her. In the heat of that bright, too-bright sun, a rill of sweat glimmers down from her temple to the edge of her jaw. She gets stuck on one of the sunken logs, and it takes her four, five, six wrenching motions to get past it. More of the dead pods burst, and when she catches a lungfull of pollen, it makes her cough from deep in the chasm of her chest. More struggle, more sweat, more brambles snapping against her until she finds another calm stretch and drifts through it, catching her breath.

Sudden, from the stillness, the great black bird hurtles overhead. It bursts from the nowhere offscreen to hurtle over her shoulder, so fast that your only impression is one of churning umber wings, acceleration, a localized tempest. For that terrifying fraction of a section, it's so close overhead that she could nearly touch it, reach up and brush two fingers against the storm. That quickly, it's past, winging up into the bleached blue sky, and silence returns.

HER: Dad! There's the bird!

She turns in her seat: but her father isn't there.

HER: Dad? DAD?

The marsh is silent. No matter how many times I've seen the video, I've never been able to pinpoint the moment when you stop being able to hear him.

HER: Dad? Are you there? Can you hear me?

She turns the kayak.

HER: Dad!

She fights her way back down the canal, calling for him into the thickening silence. Her voice grows hoarse. Behind her, the bluffs loom above.

HER: DAD!

She arrives back at the dead-end pool, with its dead, pointed trees standing sentinel, silhouetted against the sky.

Her father is not there. His kayak is not there. No trampled tussocks or broken branches give any indication of somebody dragging away a boat.

HER: Please,

She turns her head, and the too-bright sun catches against the tearstreaks on her face.

HER: Please!

Her own echo is all the silence gives her.

HER: Please, give him back.

But there's only quiet.

And then... from the stillness, just beyond the dead end pool, you start to be able to hear it, and you can tell from the growing look of horror on her face that she can, too.

A new sound on the audio track: the lilting trickle of water flowing from a spring.

Her father was never found. And after the police finished combing the woods around the swamp, they detained her for as long as they were allowed to, and kept her awake, and told her all the bad things that would happen to her in prison if she didn't confess to her father's murder, and cut a deal. But in the end, Habeas Corpus won out, and they let her go, and she went back to the world, to try and figure out how to live.

In the town, half the people still think she was a murderess, and that she killed her father for, what, the inheritance? People up here don't have inheritances. And so she moved to the city, and then to the United States, and a while after that, we stopped hearing from her.

I don't go out on the lake much anymore, especially not up to the top end of the lake. I still have dreams sometimes, where I'm in the video, and the sun's so bright it fades the whole world out to grey, and just in the distance, just beyond my reach, there's a little sound of fresh water running, and I want to go to it, I want to go to it more than anything.

After that, I'll wake up in a cold sweat, I'll cross the room to my window, and I'll look out at Black lake, blacker in the 3AM darkness, and I'll pull the blinds shut.