



Contentment can be an elusive bastard, but every so often it musters up its random generosity and throws you a bone — a transcendent moment when you're neither longing for the past nor pining for the future. I'm talking pure, unadulterated satisfaction in the now. I had such a moment today. A connection with the universe of epic proportions. But like even the best T1 modem, such connections can be tenuous at best.

I was in a canoe in Voyageurs National Park in northeast Minnesota. It was early in the morning and the surface of the water looked more like glass than any kind of flowing liquid. The sky was a shade of blue that if captured on film would be criticized for being excessively Photoshopped. Combined with the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness to the east, this massive chunk of Minnesota is less a land of 10,000 lakes, as the state's motto proclaims, and more a lake of ten thousand lands. Water is king, and short of a private helicopter, some form of floatable transport is your only option for exploration.

At my feet was a backpack full of camera equipment and a brown paper bag containing my lunch. I also brought along a map detailing the myriad of islands within the park. I planned to use it more for orientation than to reach any specific destination. Being in the midst of a semi-voluntary break from employment, for this, my summer of freedom, I was going to paddle in any old direction that looked inviting.

I was amazed at how easy it was to glide across the water, and before long I was beyond earshot of the motorized boats racing into and away from port. The local weather had called for conditions to remain constant throughout the day, prompting me to paddle with the carefree knowledge that I had hours to just float from island to island.

There's something quite hypnotic about the cry of a loon. It's all at once eerie, sultry, melancholic — aesthetically romantic. My desire was to slow down, stop paddling and just float. I was alone in a human sense, but very much a part of something more. Life was all around me as I inched closer to a marshy area of Spunghe Island. I had reached my moment of contentment and was overjoyed to be alive and well and in Voyageurs National Park. A familiar question popped into my head; what had I done to deserve this? The world

is toiling away in office buildings and construction sites across the globe and I'm here floating among the reeds in aviary heaven. For a moment, I thought of my former boss, the one responsible for my unemployment, and wanted to send him a postcard of thanks. That was followed by a desire to call my friends Jon and Annabelle back in New York and ask, "Hey, what are you guys up to? I'm just sitting here on a lake listening to the mournful cries of a loon?"

It was then that I knew the heart of my moment had passed. I was still enjoying myself immensely and knew that this would continue

The Rescue

An idyllic day of canoeing in Voyageurs National Park takes an abrupt turn for the worse.

for the remainder of the day, but once the desire to run and share became part of the equation, I knew my moment was tainted. It's the reason I don't take snapshots or even, on such trips as this, travel with other people. My desire then is to get verification of a moment's worthiness through the photo, or the other person. The feeling I was enjoying was only possible via solitude. Sure I had my camera, but I wasn't using it to record a moment or a memory. I had it to shoot wildlife and I wasn't even going to pull it out of my bag until the light was perfect in another nine hours or so. I beached the canoe on East Deere Island and enjoyed my lunch atop a rocky outcropping. Life couldn't get better.

It could, however, get a whole lot worse.

It all started with another of Minnesota's famed locals, the mosquito. But using the word mosquito in the singular, of course, is preposterous. Minnesotans get a kick out of referring to mosquitoes as the state bird, but it's not just the housecat size of the things that struck me, it was the bulk of their numbers. If the horde was at a certain angle to the sun, you could see a dense cloud of millions. Seeing them, however, was the only salvation. At least then you could start paddling in the other direction. Until, of course, you saw a similar horde in that direction and had to turn again, until eventually you're no longer at the angle that allows you to see and you unknowingly enter the front fucking door of Mosquitoeville.

==== by Sean Crane ====

From Dante to Woody Allan, hell has been described in a lot of ways. The only thing I'm certain of is that it somehow involves mosquitoes — in particular, the Minnesota variety. I just hope no small children were in earshot as I tried to escape one horde and then another until my priorities changed and it was no longer about escaping the horde but more a matter of individual feats. Biting of the arms became okay, while keeping the bugs out of my ears, eyes, nose and mouth was life's sole objective.

Eventually, the wind began to pick up, perhaps because I was now in the middle of what seemed like a vast sea, and the mosquitoes, for the most part went their separate ways. I took the opportunity to head for the nearest shoreline. As I got to within 20 yards

of land, I slowed down to survey the area for mosquitoes. There were plenty around to be sure, but none of the massive hordes. I sat on a rock, ate an apple and cleaned the dead mosquitoes from my pants and shirt. The ones that had lost themselves within the tangle of my hairy arms were a little more difficult to dispense of, but eventually, the job done, I got back in the canoe.

The wind that had an hour earlier saved me from the wrath of the mosquitoes was now wreaking havoc on the water. I looked skyward and saw a blackness beginning to darken the clouds. A slight panic took hold as I turned my gaze toward my feet and the backpack full of camera equipment. The decision was easy — time to head home. I had my moment of contentment, brief as it was, and therefore I justified that I had gotten my money's worth out of the canoe rental. There was no way I was going to get any in-focus shots anyway with the current conditions. I pulled out the map and tried to figure out where I was. No clue. I saw what looked like a sign on a distant island and began paddling. If I could read which island it was, I could figure out my route back.

I consider myself a fairly strong, healthy man and to the best of my knowledge, I have better than average canoe skills. This made it all the more frustrating that, for the life of me, I couldn't get the thing to go straight. Not only had the wind reached gale force status, all of a sudden there was a current. Where in the name of god did that come from?

After much trial and error, I figured out that if I paddled backward, the canoe would go where I wanted, then turn perpendicular to my destination and then right itself again. I'm not sure of the technical reason for this zigzag pattern, but I began digging at the water furiously with my paddle, making very little ground as I went.

Eventually, I was close enough to the island to pull out my binoculars and have a look. The sign I had been paddling toward was a dead twig. Anger, depression, it was all there as I slumped over in the canoe. The loons were nowhere to be found. Two speedboats went buzzing by, almost capsizing my pathetic canoe. I let out a few more screams that no decent person should have to hear. Regaining my composure, I decided that I would creep along the shore to my right. My compass indicated this to be south. If it wasn't the mainland I was staring at, I would eventually get to there by moving past and around the island.

That's when I saw waves breaking. I didn't know waves could break in a lake. You could actually surf these things.

I accepted the fact that I was definitely going down and began plotting the best course of action once I capsized. I didn't mind so much going into the water — it was the equipment that I needed to save. Perhaps I could just jump in the water now, I thought, leave the backpack on board and swim to shore dragging the canoe. Before I could carry through on any of this idiocy, however, I saw a distant fishing boat and decided that that was the best plan. I would humble myself to ask for help.

I began the backward zigzag, this time even slower as I was working against what could best be described as a tsunami. About thirty minutes later I had made it about halfway to the boat. With renewed vigor, I continued paddling, head down for another fifteen minutes. When I finally looked up, I saw the back of the boat as it sped off in the other direction.

Did they think that I was going to scare all their fish away? Were they anti-social? Why didn't anyone realize the gravity of my situation?

After a multitude of other questions ran through my head, my thoughts turned to spending the night on one of the islands. That wouldn't be so bad. All I had to eat was one package of Wise Wheat Cheddar Cheese Crackers and about half a bottle of water, but that was enough to wait it out until the morning. And besides, the lack of food smell lessened the possibility of a bear attack. The optimistic side of my brain was clearly grasping for straws.

Of course, the questions remained — could I make it at least to

shore without capsizing? The boat now seemed to be rising and dropping six feet with each wave. Paddling became very difficult as I was concentrating more and more of my energy on capsize prevention. I dropped the paddle and decided to let the current take me to whatever island it desired.

That's when I saw another motorboat of fisherman come into view. They were only about fifty yards off. Piece of cake. What strength I had left, I gathered for this, the final push. When I was within yelling distance, I asked in which direction the port was. Desperate as I clearly was, I still wanted them to be the ones to offer assistance, which I figured they most certainly would when they saw my predicament.

They just pointed and continued to cast their rods.

Was I that close to shore that they knew I could make it? Was it normal to be canoeing in a hurricane? Was I some sort of seafaring pansy? Was this a posse of Field and Stream thugs? I concluded that I must be close.

They pointed in the direction I had been paddling for the last five hours, which I took as a good sign. I told myself, it must be just around that bend. With new hope, I zigzagged away. One of the women in the boat kept her eye on me as I went and eventually yelled, "you'll want to keep close to shore. Otherwise you'll never make it. The waves are really big." Even with all my prior concern, having never flipped a canoe before, I wasn't quite sure how difficult it really was to do. Canoes do wobble quite a bit and I had felt for quite some time that capsizing was a strong possibility, but maybe a canoe is like a Weable that wobbles but doesn't fall down? With her words of warning, I now knew that capsizing was not only possible, but quite probable.

I paddled furiously, but to no avail. By now the current was so strong, and moving in the same exact direction as the wind, that I was actually losing ground. After yelling a few more obscenities, I noticed the fisherpeople coming my way. They were decent human beings after all.

When they reached my woefully deficient craft, they asked if I wanted to be dragged back to shore. "Well, yeah, what the fuck do you think?" was what I wanted to say. "That would be great, thanks," I replied. So began the arduous process of figuring out how to accomplish the task.

Their ringleader, a guy around 60, looked like one of Hemingway's old fishing buddies. With him was what I'll kindly describe as a sturdy 30ish woman as well as a Native American woman, mid-twenties, who remained silent throughout the ordeal. Already they were skeptical because I had two

cameras and not a single fishing rod.

Hemingway and Sturdy Girl were in quite different camps as to how to drag me in. He was in charge, however, and he barked the orders. I just listened and did as I was told. The one thing I did suggest, however, was that they take my backpack and tripod on board the boat. A bit confused, they agreed. Now it didn't matter if I went in or not.

Hemingway untangled a rope for what seemed like half an hour before working it through the side of my canoe. He then told me to hold the rope as we headed for shore. Sturdy Girl protested vehemently about the holding of the rope part. She was right. As Papa started to pull away, the rope began ripping already blistered flesh from my hands. I'm sure he was silently scoffing at my womanly little fingers, as he moved on to plan B.

This time, he pulled the canoe close to the boat and secured it with the rope. As he fired up his engine and we started moving, icy water gushed in from all directions. It was as if I walked up to a fire hydrant on a mid-December day, opened it full throttle and stood there letting its full force pelt away. There would be no capsizing, but I might drown anyway. Sturdy Girl, the only one with any apparent sense, finally suggested I get into the boat. The brilliance I thought as, shivering, I crawled aboard. The Native American mute, by way of body language offered me her coat. I refused, just happy to be aboard, but Hemingway commanded that I take it. God bless him.

We eventually made it to shore. Hemingway took great care as to not flip the canoe and lose my bottle of suntan lotion, which was floating in a foot of water. I was amazed by how far I actually was from port. At the rate I was going it would have taken me a week to get back.

Many thanks later, I took my wet belongings, walked the mile back to my car, returned to my campsite and packed up. I figured that was enough Minnesota for one summer. As I pulled onto the freeway heading south, the sun broke through the clouds, the birds began to chirp, and once again, it was a beautiful day for a transcendent moment.

For more of Sean Crane's adventures,
go to www.seancrane.com.

A foraging moose cow goes about her business, unconcerned with the pathetic display of canoeing going on in her shared wilderness.

