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No Wake Zone

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NO WAKE ZONE

BRIAN ENGELSMA

The stiff, orange blade slowly dips into the cool May water. As I look around, I see large, foreboding trees rising up from the lakeshore like mountains over a plain. Slowly I breathe deep some of that crisp Minnesotan air as I gently roll over the crest of a wave, letting some spray slap me in the face. Shaking my head to rid my face of the frigid droplets, I look ahead to my destination. Not much further to go. Maybe five more minutes and I'll be back in the cove that separates the bay into two parts: one wide open, choppy and teeming with milfoil, and the other quiet, secluded and free to spoil with my presence.

Officially the ice out was more than a month ago, back in early April, but what does that really mean? I remember my father describing it to me once, that all ice out means is that a boat can get from one side of the lake to the other, not that the lake was free of ice. I guess I never really stopped to think about it before; does it count if it's one of those ice breakers from somewhere way up north like Red Lake or Mille Lacs, the kind of boat with a big block engine and a reinforced hull, or does it have to be the kind of recreational boat that people actually use? I guess it really doesn't matter. Either way there isn't going to be anyone out here for a few more weeks anyway. Heck, they have yet to even put those white danger buoys with the thin orange line on their top and bottom, the ones with a bright diamond right smack dab in the middle out on the water.

As I lose focus and begin to stare aimlessly in the distance, I begin to notice I'm an island on the world, and like an astronaut on a spacewalk, I'm almost frightfully alone, except for maybe some waterfowl or something. I'm oddly at peace with this fact. This is really the only time of year I feel at home out here. In a few weeks' time the water will be so overgrown with the branches of drunk, twenty-somethings and high school hot shots that going out on the lake would be a little like taking a vacation to Somalia.

I guess that's why I really like being out here, especially during this time of year; I have somewhere all to myself. Whenever I'm in large groups of people I always feel anxious, like they're all staring at me, waiting for me to do something. If they only knew that deep down all I want to do is scream, scream and find a happy place to rebalance myself. Out here I don't need to worry about feeling anxious. The only things I feel are the stiff paddle in my hand and the sensation of cool droplets jumping out towards me.

Slowly I stretch out a little bit, bending backwards over the seat of the kayak and lifting the paddle high above my head. Twisting from side to

side I hear my back crack once, twice, three times. Taking my cap off, I slowly brush my hand through my hair, scratching at the hair on the back of my skull once I get there.

Off in the distance I hear the call of a loon, that majestic and mysterious bird that one can find only when it is quiet, when it is calm. I hear the loon let out one of its distinctive calls, a tremolo. It sounds a little like the high-pitched laugh that a child might let out. Just a few quick, nasally hahas and then the hoarse song is done. I hear it again and look around to see if I can find where this magical bird is. To my right, in front of some exposed rocks, I find the source of that cyclical laughing, the black and white loon. Right after I notice him, he lets out another burst of sound and dives deep below the water, surely to hunt for some fish. Known to stay underwater for exceptionally long times and to travel great distances, I'm not sure that I'll get another chance to see him again tonight.

Reminding myself that every time I stop or slow down I lose whatever momentum I had built up, I set back to work, arching the paddle back into the water, pulling it towards me and starting all over again with the other side. I try to count out a rhythm to regulate my paddling, something that will keep it consistent and keep me moving at a decent pace, but I quickly lose track and let my mind wander.

Looking ahead, I see that I'm starting to push farther and farther back into the quiet little cove on the other side of the bay. It's officially known as a no wake zone, meaning that there can't be a double wave trailing you. You can see clear enough why they do this; it's a world set aside for families and neighborhood flotilla parties safe from the ruckus of water skis, wakeboards and whatever other type of inflatable toys have been thought up this year. The amount of excitement that comes with dragging one of those inflatable coffins fifty or sixty miles an hour continues to confuse me. A few years ago they actually made one called the Kite Tube, designed to shoot up ten, twenty feet in the air and then stay up there like a seagull swooping over the water. Unsurprisingly, it was recalled from the market by July.

As I nose my way into the cove further and further, I notice off on the right, beside the shore, there is a low lying marshy area, with scores of cattails pushing through the weeds and reeds like skyscrapers in a cityscape.

It strikes me that there is something inherently magnificent about those cattails, about the trees standing shoulder to shoulder along the shore, about everything I see out here really. All of it is allowed to exist organically, to grow in a seemingly random and authentic matter, rather than the assembly line abodes that define new housing developments. These looming anonymous colonies of commodified houses always stare down at me, with a disapproval of any separation from the mean.

In between me and the Chicago of cattails, I notice a log with a painted turtle perched on top of it. In June and July, you can see bales of turtles lounging out in the summer sun, but now, in May, there is only one

solitary reptile taking a turtle nap on some driftwood.

As I push in deeper, maintaining the imperfect rhythm of my paddling, I begin to notice just how tired I am. It's times like these I wish that I could stick to a workout schedule, with the fleeting hope that maybe someday I can go more than five minutes of physical activity without taking a breather.

My mouth feels dry like evaporated milk as I try to gather enough saliva to spit. A childhood friend once called this cottonmouth, I wonder if that's a real term for it. Whenever I heard the phrase cottonmouth, I always pictured a kid with so many cotton balls in his mouth that his cheeks puffed out like a squirrel during harvest season.

Setting my paddle down on my lap, I decide to take a short break before turning around and heading home. With the sleeve of my maroon and gold University of Minnesota sweatshirt, I wipe the collection of sweat and spray from my face. Reaching forward, I grab the water bottle neatly bungeed to the front of the kayak. Mindful of how much is left, I take a couple of moderate sized gulps, careful to leave some for the way back.

Suddenly, the water becomes restless and I hear the water jump about. Off to my left, a fish, a Northern Pike to be exact judging from its long, slender body and menacing snout, has jumped up from a bed of lily pads. As he makes curious motions through the air, I notice a series of gashes on his side in the shape of a jaw; this pike was almost fish food once. As the gyrating fish slaps down against the placid lake like a watery Hiroshima, a ripple of waves rushes outwards, upsetting the forest green lily pads.

Usually, this is the part of the trip where I stop for a while to do some reading. Nothing heavy, usually just some light, little book they give to teens to make them interested in reading. Heck, I've been known to take out a comic book or two if the mood is right. But today was no day for reading, even of the light kind. The sky was a hazy shade of grey and it was starting to get dark enough that I couldn't make out what was on the shore anymore.

Reaching over the side I dip my fingers into the water to test the temperature. Pulling my hand back I immediately realize the water is colder than I had remembered.

Grabbing my paddle I ready myself for the trip back home. I take one last look around before thrusting my paddle into the water and getting my heading right. As I head back, I notice off in the distance the kind of foreboding grey clouds that announce the coming of a storm. Not the kind of severe system that a hot and sweaty day sometimes signals, but a run of the mill midnight rain shower that most people sleep through without noticing.

Licking my lips I try to establish a rhythm again, to make the most efficient use of my strokes as I can. But like always, I quickly give up and just plow through, hoping to get back before the coming wall of rain.