



Lake Makwa

By Markus
Nystrom



Even now, as I sit and wonder what has become of Lake Makwa, I can lucidly remember the Minnesota wilderness: blue, gray, green, and clear. Years ago I was part of a trip to the northern boundary waters, where the sky is high and the water deep. Makwa is what I remember best; what we did there will stay with me forever, even though the government has opened the area to logging. I remember looking up into the sky after a hard day of paddling: an eagle soared overhead and our canoes glided forward, cutting through the water like aluminum knives.

“This here’s Lake Makwa, boys.” Chill, one of our counselors, wiped the sweat from his brow and flourished the stained and tattered map. Ramin, the other counselor, was in the canoe behind. The sun glistened off his naked body as he yelled brazenly, his voice echoing for miles and finally coming back to us. I wondered why he always had to run around naked and make everybody feel so strange. His “customs,” as he called them, seemed awkward in this pure and quiet place.

As we paddled to the north end of the lake, the orange pole that marked a designated campsite came into view. We paddled hard, but it seemed to take us forever to get there; we had already learned that distances can be deceiving on open water. The campsite stood against the backdrop of a huge granite wall that made it look tiny, even at close range. The scene was perfect, and I wished I had seen it before. I wished I had been the *first* to see it; it was so quiet and beautiful. Our canoes grated sharply against the rocks as we landed on the hard beach. I stepped out, felt my feet in the cold water, and pulled the canoe up and out.

I helped the others haul the bags to shore, and as soon as we were situated I went to explore my surroundings. There was forest, rock, and water, but of particular interest was a large indentation that had been carved into the face of the cliff above the deep black water. It looked like a throne that might have been used by the Indians in centuries past. I swam out to it, climbed out of the chill lake, and sat down on my temporary perch. The rough granite was cold on my back and legs and made the hair on my neck stand on end. The voices of my friends wafted faintly from around the cliff, and I knew there were no other people for miles, maybe not even in this whole part of the state. My legs quaked and prick-

led as I remembered the days behind me.

I remembered falling asleep the night before, my back, arms, and legs all leaden with exertion. Chill had made me portage the heaviest canoe on a 300-rod trail. The other boys had laughed nervously when they saw me stumble under the weight, but Chill made me keep going until, at the end, stars began dancing around my eyes. The boys had looked around with wide eyes, first at themselves and then at me. They would be next—I could see it in Chill’s look. Impulsively I pushed myself out of the rock chair and slid back into the black water. Beneath the surface, I could hear nothing but a silence like sleep.

Around me, the water came in currents warm and cold, and there was a burst of light near the surface. The dark at the bottom seemed to go on forever; I was loath to venture into it. My lungs were burning as I kicked to the surface, the water and the sun and the heat of my breath all a blur as I emerged. I saw the damp, brown tents at the site and slowly swam to shore. Ramin was dressed at last, but his brown skin was still unlike our pink hides. I slung the heavy canvas pack over my shoulder and took it to the tent that a few of the boys and I would sleep in. The counselors spoke quietly among themselves: “. . . safe? Is the water . . . done it before, Chill?” I walked away but Ramin caught my look. I felt a little ashamed at having eavesdropped.

The boys were driving stakes into wedges in the rock to hold the flapping tents fast. I busied myself spreading the wet clothes in the bags on the rocks to dry, and threaded a rope through a pulley so I could hoist the food packs high into the trees, beyond the reach of bears and other animals. The rope was rough and frayed, and cut my fingers, but it held well. The pack looked like a person, strung up to pay for a sin.

Chill came up and slapped his big thick hand on my back. “That’s good work. Why don’t you tell the boys to come on up and make a campfire so we can eat? After supper, there’ll be some fun up on the cliff!”

I shrugged quickly in agreement and wondered what his words meant. Was there a cave up there or something? I had been in a cave before, where the cold, pure water dripped off the stalactites and collected in a pool that in turn fed a spring from which people could drink. Was there such a cave up there, or did Chill have something else in mind?

I looked up at the stark cliff and saw the path that threaded its way through the woods to the highest

point. Little red clusters of raspberries dotted the green continuum. I jumped to see if I could touch the food packs and missed by a good foot. Satisfied that no bears could gormandize on our food, I went over to the boys who were trying to prepare our campsite.

“Chill says we’ve got to make a fire,” I announced. They gave me little shrugs of frustration, but soon set off to find kindling. I went with them, and we happened upon a dead aspen and some hickory logs that smelled like leaves burning on a clear day. We hacked away at the logs until they were splintered and we were sweaty and blistered. Carrying our treasure to the campsite, we looked like nomads, or maybe even the Indians who had once lived here.

The fire flared up as if on cue and I warmed my hands over it. We ate canned chili and other dry goods, then purified our water with a cleansing solution. *Potable Aqua*, read the bright little label. Then it was story time, the kind I always used to see on old TV shows. Chill waved his arms and talked so much and so fast that little blobs of white foam appeared at the corners of his mouth. I found myself preoccupied. I wanted to know what we’d be doing later on, up on the dark, high cliff. I could see sparks and smoke rising from the fire, blurring the faces of my companions almost as if I were in a dream, the forms around me fading in and out of focus. I wondered if I would have any dreams that night.

Chill’s words danced in and out of my mind, registering no meaning, only tone, cadence, and rhythm. I was staring straight ahead at the leaping flames when

**Chill made me portage
the heaviest canoe on a 300-rod
trail. The other boys
laughed nervously when they saw
me stumble under the weight,
but I kept going . . .**

Chill’s eyes came to rest on my own. He kept talking, but I knew he was watching me; I could feel him probing, trying to find a knot he could unravel. Ramin was a foreign presence to my left. I felt uncomfortable not knowing what he was up to, but I couldn’t break the stare.

Chill’s eyes were cold as he announced that we’d be mounting the cliff. “To jump,” he added with a grin.

Somehow, I didn't feel as scared as I should have. I just hoped he wouldn't make me jump first.

"Just put your shoes on and cover your jewels . . ."

Ramin's voice was distant as we climbed over the brambles and boulders that tried to cut at my bare arms and legs. Here was a glistening pile of bear scat, there an anthill that held its own on the side of the cliff. I kept looking over the side, which seemed all

Ramin was halfway to the water and yelling his thrill. He hit with a sound that was surprisingly soft.

too close and all too slippery, and was reminded of how it had been to look through the window of a huge skyscraper my parents had taken me to when I was little. My father had carried me on his shoulders and leaned me against a window on the 100th floor, where I had been seized by a fear that the glass would shatter and I would fall through, or that the building would topple down entirely. The skyline here was much more impressive, though, much more vast, and in a way more inviting. I felt as if the water, some sixty feet below, would reach up and grab me.

I was the first to reach the pinnacle. I beheld the mighty view across and below, and the world stretched out forever; the lakes and trees and birds all seemed to breathe with me. Envisioning the jump that Chill foretold had heightened my sense of aliveness, of the life around me, like the time when I careened down a hill on my tricycle and ended up in a throbbing heap on the ground. My skin tingled in awkward remembrance. The boys caught up, looking and acting like a herd. But I was glad for the company, faced as I was with the jump. Was I expected to go first, or would Chill go ahead and set the pace? I wished he would, because I didn't want to get cold feet in front of the others.

Sure enough, there Chill stood, tall and intimidating. "So, who's going to be the first man out of the blocks?"

No one answered. We waited uncomfortably, the gurgling water below only intensifying our unease. Chill stood with arms akimbo, daring us to be brave. The minutes dragged, and I looked at the fiery ball of sun setting slowly over the horizon. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a figure flitting by. Before I was aware of what had happened, Ramin was halfway to the water and yelling his thrill. He hit with a sound that

was surprisingly soft, as if he had slid into the water, rather than struck it. I looked down and saw his little figure swimming around, unscathed.

Ready to follow my elder, I tossed an exploratory rock down to the water, a down payment of sorts. It hit about three seconds later. That was all the cue I needed. In a flash, I hurled myself off the cliff and into wondrous flight. The wind howled in my ears, and I thought of everything and nothing at once. I heard the yells from above and felt my body plummet to the water. I crashed into a flurry of white and was tossed about like a sack of grain. In an instant it was over, and I was in the silent world below the surface. Darting around, my eyes saw everything there was to see, illuminated in an eerie twilight of roaring silence. The lake seemed more like a womb dream than a glacial scar. I broke the surface, the sound of Ramin's clapping filling my ears.

"You forgot to cover your nuts, man! Are you OK?"

I shrugged. Water dripped off my eyelashes and made everything a blur. I did forget, but it hadn't made any difference. The water had protected me. Water like fire, water like dream, water like song. Ramin looked up; I followed his dark gaze to my friend in mid-freefall. He looked less glorious than I had felt coming down. It was not much to see, but to *feel—to feel again that glory!*

I swam back to the campsite, a flurry of arms and legs and unthinking impetus; the cliff begged me to jump again. I heaved over the boulders and scrambled up the steep cliff, its thorns and brambles again digging into my legs. I would jump again, this time without hesitation. Without another thought, I leapt from the cliff. This time I hit the water like a brick and surfaced with a bloody nose that would plague me for the rest of the trip. Again and again I jumped, trying to recapture the feeling of the first jump, flying through the air and hitting the water with a smack that stopped my heart. Again and again. But it was never the same.

To the Crow Indians of northern Minnesota, Makwa was an enchanted lake. For me, Makwa was a testing ground. As the last hints of sun glinted off the lake below, I let myself fall one last time, embracing the future with terrible speed. ★

