

## JOANNA

*“I can’t find my joy anywhere.”*

*--Lucinda Williams*

### I

IT WAS A fine specimen of a spring afternoon when we shoved the sleek red Old Town canoes out onto the marshy waters of Mattagodus Stream. Six new girls, among them a shy red head named Joanna who dodged my attempts at eye contact, sat in their boats clutching broad beaver tail paddles. The girls wore olive green cargo pants tucked into their socks, sturdy hiking boots and long sleeve flannel chamois shirts. Their heads were covered in bug netting since this was black fly season and the blood sucking insects were particularly hellacious that day. The girls were not especially happy about the clouds of insects swarming around them.

Teamed up with Joanna was a girl named Darcy who was big shouldered and stocky and had honey brown hair. She was loud and cock sure of herself, guffawing and cracking jokes as she sat in the bow seat at the front of their canoe. Kim and Karen drifted alongside Joanna and Darcy in another red canoe. Kim was small and wiry like Joanna, but unlike her, Kim possessed an air of confidence. She hailed from Seattle and had been born in Korea and adopted as an infant. Karen, from Minneapolis, was tall with wavy blond hair tied in a pony tail. She appeared relaxed as she sat in the canoe’s stern, poised like the athlete she was for the paddling to begin. Leslie and Debbie, both from

southern Maine and both in the program for drug use, had partnered up, being the “locals.”

“Sure is buggy today, ain’t it?” Leslie announced, and Debbie answered, “Ayah” in a thick, put-on Downeast accent.

While I soloed in my canoe, Joel and Eve, my fellow instructors, were partnered up in their own boat. All three of us had agreed that Mattagodus Stream would be a good spot to hold an intensive seminar in Paddling 101. The stream wandered through a low, sparsely settled landscape of spruce and fir east of the Penobscot River where the few inhabitants earned their living from logging and guiding hunters and fishermen. Its lazy tea-colored waters were clogged every few miles by the stick and earthen dams of resident beaver colonies. Their packed mud lodges could be seen in nearby wetlands where red wing black birds sporting crimson epaulets were perched on alder branches singing their “conk-la-rees.” Overhead some invisible scythe had swept its curved blade across the sky leaving mare’s tail clouds in its wake. In this outdoor classroom the six newbies seated in their vessels were about to learn a valuable lesson in applied physics.

Predictably, the black flies were driving our new clients crazy. I thought of the Penobscot creation myth that I had heard as a kid. Apparently, the gods, seeing that after a long winter the People grew complacent when warm weather arrived, created a pesky insect so the tribe would not forget the suffering of the leaner months. Every May this insect’s arrival in angry clouds counterbalanced the glories of spring. That afternoon on Mattagodus Stream, as the bugs tormented the girls, I’m ashamed to confess that their suffering was filling me with cruel glee.

Like so many winged demons these small black bugs crawled over pant cuffs and buttoned-up shirt collars, probing loose folds of cloth. On one girl's trouser legs alone, they grazed in a multitude of biblical proportions. And though each girl's head was veiled in a bug net, more than a few black flies crawled under the netting into recesses behind the ears and down the neck to sip from aquifers of blood. The sight of so many insects, all of them bent on feeding off a human host, conjured up a scene from *Animal Planet* where some hapless grasshopper, many times the size of its army ant tormenters, is literally eaten alive.

"Oh shit, my neck's bloody! I hate these damn things!" one girl cried out, her arms swinging wildly like a fighter trying to land hook shots on an invisible opponent.

"Don't harm those black flies, ladies. They're an endangered species protected by Maine law," I shouted.

"Are you nuts!?" the girl shouted back.

I explained, as our boats drifted along, that the black fly anesthetizes the skin so we don't feel a thing when it slices off a tiny chunk of flesh with its razor mouth gear. (My teeth clicked audibly as I bit the air for emphasis.) Then it sips from the red pool that wells up from beneath the skin. (I made a quick sipping sound.)

"That is 'sooo' gross!" Darcy, Joanna's canoe partner shouted. Through her veil of netting I saw Joanna's jaw drop. She had said hardly a word on the drive to the stream in the program van. But her look now bespoke astonishment, mixed with horror and repulsion. How would she possibly come to terms with these little blood suckers?

JOANNA HAD BEEN sent to us after being diagnosed with depression. Filene, our head therapist, gave me the details during a meeting in her office. Joanna had lost interest in competitive figure skating and her passion for Irish step dancing had fallen by the wayside. Filene commented that the parents in their zeal to see their daughter do well weren't helping matters. They dragged her off to competitions, pressured her to try out for area musicals, insisted that she take full advantage of ice time to practice, practice, practice.

“They did this long past the point when it ceased being fun,” Filene said. “They filled every spare moment of her day with the pursuit of perfection.”

“Many kids would run with that kind of attention,” I commented, “be all they could be so to speak.”

“Not all,” Filene cautioned.

The parents, in a call to Filene, said they were bewildered when their attempts to help their daughter excel had an opposite effect. Joanna became infatuated with kids who had a lot of time on their hands, who got into mischief – smoking weed, shoplifting, exploring one another's bodies.

Girls like Joanna, I reminded myself as I listened to Filene, had been placed with us by parents who were emotionally torn and full of ambivalence. When new girls turned up, I kept repeating a simple mantra: *Each one of these girls is somebody's daughter.* Obvious as this was it helped awaken that core of compassion that I knew I possessed, and would have to summon again and again in the weeks to come. Estranged as each girl was from her family, Mom and Dad would give the world to have their girl more whole

and less broken when she returned at summer's end. It was this chance for a profound shift in a girl's outlook that parents were hoping for, counting on, believing in.

During Joanna's induction interview, Filene saw a girl with a rather unassuming nature, quiet and withdrawn. But she was not surprised to learn from the parents of the outbursts of profanity, the obscene gestures, and the blatant disrespect that occurred at home. Joanna must have given her folks an earful around the house.

"Can you say more about her interview?" I asked Filene.

"I couldn't get anything out of her about the blowups on the home front," Filene said. "Claimed she felt no animosity toward her folks."

I knew better than to probe further into what transpired during the arrival interview, which was confidential. But I could almost hear the pregnant silences and the shrugs that passed for responses when Filene asked the girl about her sudden loss of interest in the things that had once given her pleasure.

I tried to imagine this shy and reclusive little girl stomping up the stairs, slamming her bedroom door, holing up there with the shades drawn and the music of Annie De Franco, angry and soulful, streaming into her earphones for hours, refusing cajoling pleas to come down for supper. Where did the rage come from? And where did the fact that she was adopted fit into the picture? Could we get her to open up about her journey as an adoptee? Clearly, these were waters we hoped to paddle with her in the weeks to come.

ONLY THE STRUGGLE to steer their canoes took the girls' attention away from the black flies. My team mates Eve and Joel coached the girls at their paddle strokes.

“All right now, ladies, dip your paddles in the stream and pull a piece of water toward you,” Eve shouted. With her light grained beaver tail paddle she demonstrated the draw stroke, the cross draw, and finally the J-stroke -- that graceful sweeping of the paddle in a J-motion, with tiny whirlpools trailing behind the blade like miniature galaxies. Eve and Joel worked in unison with well-timed motions of their paddle blades. Their canoe tracked smoothly on the stream’s placid surface.

Two to a canoe, the girls imitated Eve and Joel with mixed results. Joanna, seated in the stern of her craft, executed a fair J-stroke but she was having a tough time staying in synch with her partner, Darcy, who overpowered her attempts to steer. Instead of tracking straight their canoe veered right. Darcy had no clue how to keep the boat on course.

“Look out! We’re headed for the shore!” Darcy shouted.

“Do a draw stroke,” Joel called out. “That’ll keep you straight.”

Darcy looked bewildered. Joel reached out with his paddle and executed a well-timed draw. The bow of his canoe swung right in response. Darcy’s awkward stroke pulled the bow away from shore at the last minute. But out of nowhere Kim and Karen’s canoe rammed Joanna and Darcy with a resounding thud.

“My bad,” said Kim in the bow of the other canoe, a pained grin on her face.

“Shit happens,” Darcy replied, shrugging.

Eve blew her whistle and everyone stopped paddling, while the girls watched Eve and Joel once again demonstrate the strokes of paddling 101. This is going to take time, I thought, as I looked on from my solo canoe.

The events of the next hour bore out my apprehensions. If a great blue heron flying over that boggy stream had looked down on our little armada, the broad winged bird would have seen a half dozen red canoes bouncing off each other with loud echoing thumps. For a new paddler, finessing a canoe in even a mild current is no easy thing. Thinking of my wife, I recalled how the first few times we canoed together tested our marital bliss. I can still picture, I'm embarrassed to say, Jan's steaming glances as I coached her (lectured would be a better word) on her paddle strokes.

But that afternoon on Mattagodus Stream things turned out not to be as hopeless as I thought. Through trial and error, the girls started to come around and get the hang of steering their sleek and sporty Old Towns. Their timing improved. Paddles began to draw and cross draw in the slow current. Whining about bugs had ceased; as had playing the blame game on paddle mates for miscues that caused one red vessel to collide with another. I noticed that their boats now moved in harmony, not as gracefully as formations of migrating geese perhaps, but with a dawning awareness of the space that separated one canoe from another, yet loosely tethered the fleet together.

Up ahead we could hear the rush of water over a breached beaver dam.

"This is that 30 foot waterfall I warned you about, ladies," Joel shouted.

"What waterfall!" Darcy yelled. "You never told us about a waterfall!"

"It's just a joke, Darcy," Joanna spoke in a stage whisper.

The boats approached the drop one at a time. With loud whoops of joy the girls sank their teeth into this exhilarating frothy descent, their canoes sliding down a five foot chute to the quiet pool below. I could tell these girls would enjoy the sweet adrenaline rush of river running. Sooner than they knew, the high voltage thrill of navigating a

gnarly piece of whitewater would be theirs. They would have to hone the various strokes to perfection if they were to use the push of the river with boldness and confidence. The all-too-human tendency for self-preservation would caution them to behave timidly in situations that called for decisiveness. But more than once during the next eight weeks, these girls would find themselves in a position to learn something about their own visceral fears.

I REMEMBERED MY own greenhorn days training to be a whitewater raft guide when I learned an elemental lesson about fear. My throat had clamped shut after I fell out of a raft into a big cold rapid full of haystack size waves. The plunge had triggered my body's primordial diving reflex, a life-threatening reaction when one is floating down a major rapid. Each time my head bobbed above the giant waves, I could only gape like a trout out of water, unable to force even a tiny breath into my lungs. As the river thrashed me around, panic rose up inside me; but I somehow was able to talk myself down, summoning a soothing inner voice that told me to focus and stay calm. I rode out the rapid and swam to an eddy where my clenched throat relaxed allowing my lungs to fill with sweet air. Later, I got back up on the horse that threw me and continued to run rivers. The experience had taken me to the edge of fear and I had learned a sense of mastery in a panicky moment.

While I didn't wish anything quite so dramatic on the girls, the adventure of the wilderness was waiting for them around most any river bend. I recalled a solo canoe trip I took one autumn on the St. Croix River which forms the border of Maine and New Brunswick. Drifting along with fallen birch and maple leaves, yellow and crimson on the



river's surface, I'd caught sight of a river otter and a pair of beaver. I was relaxed, my senses enlivened by the autumn brightness as I reacted to the current's whims with quick or leisurely paddle strokes, stopping for lunch when I felt my stomach growl, pulling over when the brief day ended with just enough light left to set up camp.

Sitting before my fire on those frosty evenings far from the nearest road, I had glimpsed one or two insights about my relation to the world and the people in my life. Treading more softly on the earth, showing humility in the presence of its wonderfully adapted life forms, and being compassionate toward my fellow beings, both human and nonhuman, were ideas to which I had paid lip service for a long time. But those solitary fall nights on the Croix, way back in where the coyotes yipped and the owls boomed, had crystallized the reality of those ideas for me. I hoped that each girl would gain her own insights during her time with us. Perhaps one or two would recognize that the inhuman beauty of the woods was worthy of admiration and praise simply because it was not about us but about the eternities of wind, water, rock and evolving life.

## II

FAST FORWARD TO an afternoon a month later after this team of girls had earned their stripes with a paddle and had become skilled woods women. That day the weather was against us from the time we set foot in our canoes. Sheets of slanting rain pelted our faces as we made grinding progress up a fir-lined thoroughfare known as Pocumcus Narrows. The girls dug their paddles into the rolling white-caps, shoulders tensed and straining with each stroke. Their jaws were set and their eyes fixed upwind.

Each young lady fought for every inch of headway, knowing her boat would be pushed back, would lose much of what it had gained, if she let up for a moment.

“Pick a spot up ahead – rock or tree – and paddle that far,” I heard the small and plucky Kim shout to her rangy blonde paddle partner Karen. Good advice, I thought.

We had been hugging the shore line, trying to hide from the wind behind jutting points and inshore islands. It was like playing an exhausting game of hide-and-seek. And now, a mile upwind, was an ancient wooden dam around which we would portage canoes and gear, then make camp on Big Island out on Sysladobsis Lake. But to get there we had to fight the Northerlies a little longer as they bore down relentlessly on our heavily loaded canoes.

Among these now experienced voyageurs was Joanna. All day, she had clutched her ash paddle in her callused hands, while she and her paddle partner, Darcy, bulled what amounted to two hundred and fifty pounds of loaded canoe into a 20 mile an hour wind. Drenched, tired, hungry, she had soldiered on up the wind-battered straight. Now the moment had come when all five boats made the turn, one after another, out of the wind into the sheltered approach to the time ravaged dam. In the distance one of its two gates was partially open. Water from Sysladobsis Lake boiled up from underneath the raised gate and raced down a bouldery channel. Downstream where the current died down the portage path began. Joanna and Darcy swung their canoe toward shore where it slid with a grinding screech onto the gravel landing.

“Jeez, that was hard,” Darcy said, as she sat stoop shouldered in the bow of the canoe, paddle across her lap. Joanna simply shrugged and put her head down a moment

then looked up and took a deep breath. “Let’s get this boat unloaded,” she said. By now, I’d come to expect this stoic response from her when the going got tough.

“Get out and stretch a bit, ladies,” I said.

This portage was mercifully brief and the girls knew it. A faded logging road opened onto a broad lawn, unlikely here in the deep woods, edged with huge white pines. A dam tender’s camp had stood here decades before. And while a bramble-choked fieldstone foundation was all that remained of the cabin, someone still saw fit to mow the lawn so that canoe trekkers could pitch their tents on its neat trimmed surface. Here we had camped with other girls. I recalled one serene evening, the sky edged with pinkish clouds, when we circled up in the dying twilight for group therapy on the lawn while a shower of green, gossamer winged insects fell into our laps, having lived out their life cycle on the still air. One girl thought she could save those tiny creatures from the inevitable extinction that awaited them by the thousands on the wide evening lawn. “*Oh, the poor things,*” she cried out, scooping them up with her cupped hands as they rained down on us.

We would not camp on the lawn this night. Joanna, Darcy and the others knew this and worked methodically, silently to unload the canoes. Out came the bright yellow dry bags – those backwoods rubber duffels, cinched and velcroed shut against rain and the slopping of lake water over the bow of the canoe. Joanna hefted her bag out from among the others. In it she stored her sleeping bag, tent, clothing, toiletries, books and journal. Then came the nemesis of clients and instructors alike, the unwieldy, canvas Duluth pack: for storing pots, cooking utensils, a basic spice kit (big on garlic and curry powder, red, black and cayenne pepper, Soy and Tabasco sauce, cinnamon and nutmeg),

and the essential Dutch oven, which made up for its eight pounds of cast iron heft with its versatility for baking corn breads and chocolate cakes, and various lasagnas and meaty casseroles.

The Dutch oven was indeed essential. Embers from a campfire were shoveled thickly atop its great lid so that the ingredients simmered within, cooking from the top down. Canoe country cuisine would have been bland and unappetizing without this piece of equipment, and so it rested at the center of the pack. To shoulder and lug the Dutch oven from canoe to campsite at day's end was a chore necessary and onerous, loved by no one, even veteran girls who grabbed onto its shoulder straps and slung it onto their backs with disdainful groans.

Heavier still was the York box. It took two girls to lug the York over the carry path. It held a week's worth of cafeteria size canned goods, zip-locked pastas, dry cereals, condiments, herbal teas, coffee, creamer and sugar for the instructors, dried eggs and boxes of pancake mix. Joanna and Darcy staggered with the York from landing to lawn and around the dam to the put-in where the canoes would be launched at Sysladobsis Lake. The weight put more strain on Joanna's compact frame, but she held her own with Darcy, a big girl, sturdy and strong. When the canoes had been lugged around the dam and the gear loaded into them we pushed off into the new lake.

SOMETIME DURING THE crossing to Big Island, a dark green presence in the gray rain soaked afternoon, I noticed a shift in wind. The breeze came at us now from the northwest, a fair weather quarter. Then clouds dispersed and patches of blue sky appeared. The air felt dryer as the trailing mass of clouds was swept away revealing the

declining sun a couple hands above the horizon. The clearing sky lifted everyone's spirits. By the time boats were beached and unloaded, Big Island's dripping evergreens were bathed in sunlight. Hidden in the forest shadows a white throated sparrow sang its *Old Sam Peabody* tune solemnly in the brightening air. Diminishing waves gently lapped the rocky shoreline.

"This could be the right time for that team building thing we talked about back at base camp," Eve said, as she, Joel and I stood watching the girls set up their tents on level ground underneath towering pines.

"You know we're all wet and tuckered out," I replied. "We could stew up some Dinty Moore on the Coleman two-burner stove, have a quick check-in to gauge everybody's mood, and crawl into our sleeping bags."

"I'm not saying they'll like the idea," Eve answered, "but I think they'll run with it just the same. Besides, Joanna's lead girl this week. She'll have to really step up to get the others to follow her on this one." Joanna had been designated leader by therapists and field staff at the weekly turnover meeting. She'd been doing well, but needed more practice taking charge.

"What do you think, Joel," I said.

"Can't hurt to throw it at them," he replied.

"OK, let's see what these girls have left in their tanks," I said.

We called Joanna over and outlined the exercise. When she heard our pitch the petite, freckled redhead threw up her arms. Under her breath she let out a low teenage growl.

“Listen, chief,” Joel said, looking Joanna in the eyes, “You are the boss girl! You can make this happen!”

“I am the boss, I am the boss,” Joanna muttered, rolling her eyes. Little girl that she was, we were gambling that Joanna could take charge and throw her weight around like a bantam rooster. The girls needed a leader, someone to beat the drum, if they were to do what we had in mind.

I remembered Joanna a few short weeks before. Back then she would sit slump-shouldered off by herself, her legs tightly crossed, listening wide-eyed as the other girls spoke their minds in evening group or went about camp chores, erecting a tarp to protect the picnic table from rain or slicing and dicing veggies for a stew. When asked her opinion around the fire, she seemed afraid of her own voice. Her unfinished sentences trailed off and she cast her eyes down at the ground. But Joanna had paddled a lot of miles since then. She had worked hard on asserting herself, and while the journey hadn't been easy, what happened next proved she was no longer that skittish girl from the early days.

The girls circled up, while we stood some distance away.

“Look, dudes, we can make this work!” Joanna was heard to say. Kim and Karen were leaning against their paddles. Leslie, Debbie and Darcy had slumped down on the damp mossy ground. All seemed captivated by Joanna's hands which wove a cat's cradle with invisible string as she explained the thing that needed to get done. The fire in her voice ignited everybody's interest. The plan was to tie each girl's wrists with bandannas. Yoked together in a human chain they would prepare supper. “*No way, man!*” everyone would have shouted a few weeks ago. But paddling white-capped lakes and camping on

the shores of loon-haunted waters had worked a spell on these girls. Yet how much had they changed in that time? Could they get a thing done without the usual teenage resistance? I could tell from their voices that one positive thing was happening. Joanna had convinced everyone to pitch in, even if it meant doing some asinine initiative dreamt up by their instructors at the bone-weary end of a long day.

Eve tied the girls together wrist to wrist with their yellow bandannas. Standing beneath the hemlocks, the girls were bewildered by this multi-limbed, many-headed creature they had become – something out of a mythological nightmare. How could they shuffle in unison like the centipede when so many minds had to have a say in every move they made? First they had to light a fire, so I handed Joanna some birch bark and some cedar kindling from a cache of dry wood stored back in the woods. As the line slithered like some drunken anaconda toward the fire grate, rebellious mutterings filled the air. Separately, the girls could have thrown the meal together in no time as they had done at so many camp sites. Lashed together, tempers flared, shrill voices rose.

“Damn, how can I cut up the veggies while you’re trying to light the fire?” the many headed creature cried out.

“Wait guys! Forget the veggies. We need cooking oil from the Duluth!” another head yelled.

“This is crazy! I’m being yanked all over the place,” said a third head.

“Ouch! You’re squeezing me against a tree!” still another voice yelped.

Thinking collectively wasn’t easy. Irritated voices endlessly debated procedure. It reminded me of a New England Town Meeting. We stood back in the evening shadows, resisting the temptation to rush to the rescue as skillets and spatulas clattered together,

got dropped on the ground, and had to be picked up and the dirt brushed away. We covered our mouths to hide amused smiles as the many-headed beast groaned loudly when the fire sputtered out, the flames dying into a thin wisp of smoke.

We could hear Joanna directing, cajoling, shouting instructions with remarkable persistence. On the second try the cook fire crackled to life. A cast iron skillet was pulled from the Duluth and oil dribbled in it so onions and peppers could be sautéed. Boneless chicken breasts were sliced lengthwise and added to the mix while refried beans simmered in another pan at the corner of the grate. All those reaching and grasping appendages had learned to work together. *“Oh man, that smells so good!”* A voice exclaimed. *“I’m sooo hungry, I don’t know if I can stand it!”* Another voice moaned. *Look, you guys, I think the filling is done!”* A third voice piped in.

As we stood watching, Eve nudged me and whispered in my ear, “The grub’s cooked. Should we untie their wrists?”

After Joel unknotted the yellow bandannas, the entire team crowded in front of the food laid out on the picnic table, forming a rowdy assembly line. The aroma of the spicy filling made everyone salivate. As each girl spooned ingredients into her tortilla shell, the trials of the day evaporated. Though we knew tomorrow paddling on the lake the girls would joke about the cruelty of making them cook supper tethered together, tonight everyone could only think about filling their bellies.

Through the entire exercise we got to see the many faces of Joanna. When tempers flared she was the diplomat, when energy flagged she became a cheerleader, when the line floundered she was a general marshalling its lost sense of direction. The



way she took hold of things it seemed this girl was born to run the world. Circumstances had put her in touch with her inner Churchill!

While wolfing down our thick tortillas, Eve threw out a simple declarative sentence, something real obvious, followed by a question.

“Most of you were pretty darn ticked off trying to cook supper all tied together. Anyone find themselves in some role they play at home?” The girls considered Eve’s words between bites.

“I always boss my little brother around when we help out at meals,” Darcy began. “I guess I was nagging Kim and Joanna when we were tied up, like they were my younger siblings.”

“All the squabbling we did tonight reminded me of the fights my older sister has with my mother at the dinner table,” Karen from Minneapolis said. “It made me feel like running and hiding to get away from the shouting.”

“As leader I had to play the grownup,” Joanna said. “It felt sort of weird being in charge, trying to get others to go along.”

We liked to kick around the all-purpose family metaphor, getting girls to think about troubled times with their folks, their siblings. Out here they did a lot of falling into the roles they played at home. Seeing the connections was vital. So after an initiative we simply backed up the reel and looked at it again in slow motion. This didn’t come natural to girls who had landed in the program due to a lack of reflection. Pondering their actions had been on the menu for these girls morning, noon and night. Making them aware of the root causes of their frustrations and the positive steps they could have taken, was what we tried to get at.

WE SET THE STAGE deliberately for such inner work – a fire near enough to a lake to hear water lapping the rocks, the moon rising in the east, with stars wheeling in their celestial course. It was the atmosphere of the woods in evening repose that invited the girls to peer inward. Often we'd begin with the anger – anger girls harbored toward us for making them paddle into the wind all day, anger toward their parents for sending them to the program. Sometimes, after a hard day, it all came boiling over. Girls sobbed, buried their heads in their hands, yelled. We could work with outbursts. "*Sounds like you had a pretty tough day,*" an instructor would say to a girl's sudden tears glistening on her fire-lit face. I used to think such obvious statements made us sound like idiots, but girls needed their sorrow acknowledged. Sure, there was a risk they'd wallow in their sadness, unable to get past it; but most girls were ready to consider what glimmers of hope lay on the other side of pain once you let them know you were aware they were hurting.

Today there had been more triumph than pain, more laughter than tears. Perhaps it was the drama of the weather – its cantankerous, butt-kicking side with all the wind and rain giving way at day's end to sudden peace and serenity, the trees dripping rain as the sun poked through before setting and the big yellow moon taking its place. I for one was proud of this crew of young ladies, and of the role Joanna had played making it all happen.

LATER IN MY tent, while a Barred Owl boomed out his "*Who cooks for you 'all'*" from deep in the evergreen heart of Big Island, I pictured Joanna's story in my head, imagining her sneaking out at night to hook up with her weed-toking, shoplifting, slacker

friends. Her house was probably in a hilly, forested suburb an hour or so outside Boston. The homes in her neighborhood were Tudor style or neo-Colonial on huge lots that eschewed lawns for rock gardens and indigenous shrubs. Swedish ivy and moss substituted for the manicured grass of more middle class communities. Huge Sugar maples and Copper beeches gave the neighborhood a woodsy feel and pheasants roosted in the blue spruce in her yard while deer sometimes bedded down out back.

After she crawled out her bedroom window and climbed down the maple that grew close to her window, Joanna headed for a run-down strip mall less than a mile away. There, in an adjacent plaza with cracked and potholed pavement, she would meet her baggy-jean misfit friends. Mostly they skate boarded and swigged tall, caffeinated cans of Red Bull and Monster. They hid the flashy beverages in paper bags like winos, hoping the squad car sweeping the plaza would check them for underage drinking. But the police weren't fooled.

Joanna was drawn to the heedless attitudes of these kids. She envied their freedom to fritter away their evenings in parking lots practicing skateboard tricks, calling each other "DUDE," their flat-billed baseball caps aslant like suburban "wiggas." They, in turn, played her, insisting she rip off penny-ante merchandise from Wal Mart to be one of their crew. Besides dime store thievery, she smoked homegrown, not-so-potent weed and necked in the moonlit oak shadows of a local cemetery with a skinny boy with long brown hair named Jarred. When her folks found out, they went through the roof. After they had pieced it all together with some phone calls to other parents and the police, and some sit-down sessions with Joanna, they paid a visit to a therapist.

JOANNA CAME TO us with a secret. The staff knew from her files what the secret was, but not her peers in the program. Most girls would have just put it out there. They would have said, *“Look, this thing is a part of who I am. Take it or leave it.”* Not Joanna. She was timid as a deer mouse – so worried about what her new friends would think if she revealed that secret. She kept things light-hearted for the first few weeks, giggling with her friend, big loud Darcy. Darcy had a sweet bumbling way about her, but she hid behind a comic mask; both girls treated the program like it was summer camp. They had this Beavis and Butthead routine. In mocking tones they pretended to buy into the therapy. *“Yeah, Butthead, I’m really starting to like myself! Me too, Beavis! Trust falls are way cool! You close your eyes, fall back, and someone’s there to catch you! Yeah, when I spill my guts in evening group, I cry tears of joy. We’re all so connected here!”*

It struck me that Joanna and Darcy were missing out on what the program had to offer them. With staff and therapists as guides, they might have picked up a few strategies to help them live in harmony with their families and the world around them. But neither of them seemed ready on day one to sit attentively around the fire and begin an honest and candid dialogue with their peers. As exasperating as this could be, it was just part of the job to puzzle out such recalcitrant behavior. I now see that for Joanna, at least, this refusal to seriously participate in the therapeutic component of the program may have been a way of protecting her secret.

THERE WAS SOMETHING innocently beguiling about a newly-arrived Joanna. A freckled, Irish redhead, she had learned to step dance back home in Boston. Whenever

the program girls were seized by a fit of exuberance and were laughing and fooling around, they would plead with Joanna to get up and dance. “*C’mon Joanna! Let’s see the dance!*” At first she would beg off, but it didn’t take much coaxing to get her onto her feet. Then with straightened torso, arms tucked behind the back, her feet nearly a blur, she would charm us with an on-the-spot performance. She was no mean practitioner. As with the best Irish dancers, the motion of her feet cast a spell, an incantation, in which she seemed to float above the earth. You could almost hear the fiddle, drums and penny whistle playing a lively Celtic reel to accompany her.

After such fleeting displays, Joanna once again became passive, emotionless.

Interestingly, Joanna took to the hands-on stuff, learning to kindle a fire, tie a bowline knot, and throw together campfire suppers. She also appreciated the natural setting in which these skills were practiced. As we canoed along the lake shores, she’d point out sloping granite ledges where cedars and white pines grew in wind-twisted beauty. At night she’d strain her ears to hear the unearthly cries of loons. She took pleasure in the deep booming of bullfrogs and the ratchety calls of kingfishers as they dove for minnows in the shallows.

And she had the perfectionist’s drive to master the canoe on the rivers. Whenever the pace of the current picked up, Joanna’s neutral gaze snapped into focus, her eyes flashing with concentration. She could reach across the bow with a quick cross draw stroke to pull the canoe away from a boulder. Or, with the help of her paddle partner, neatly thread their craft like a needle between two rocks. Every time the low growl of white water rumbled up ahead, she’d cease her boat-to-boat chatter with Darcy and the

other girls. Soon everyone would be yipping like coyotes as the current grabbed the boats and pulled them bow and stern into the river's frothy snarling teeth.

But I remember most clearly a different kind of day when Joanna and I were paired up as canoe partners on the St. Croix River. For once we were not confronted by the pulse-quickenning feeling that the world ended up ahead where the river plunged over a steep drop. The river was spread out flat and calm before us, with just enough current so we could drift leisurely along. Joanna peered into the water as our canoe drifted over a host of sunken logs lying helter-skelter on the river bottom.

"Why are there so many logs down there in the mud?" she asked. She had been silent for about ten minutes, her paddle lying idly across her lap. Her voice woke me from my own daydreams.

"Oh, those are left over from the days of the river drives," I answered. "They got water-logged and sunk before they made it down river to the mills, I guess. Being under water preserves them a long time."

"Why are they different sizes?"

"The long ones," I said, pointing with my paddle at the 12-foot timbers reposing like battlefield dead below in the wavering, tea-colored depths, "were used as saw logs. Some of them have been in the river since the 19<sup>th</sup> century – well over a hundred years. The short ones are pulp wood. They had to be cut four feet long so they could fit sideways in a grinder trough at the paper mill."

"What's a grinder trough?"

“I should know. I fed many a pulp log to the grinders for a summer job at Great Northern Paper. It’s hard to picture without knowing a little about the process. If you’re interested, I can describe it to you.”

“Sure, why not? I don’t have anywhere I need to be,” Joanna said with wisecracking honesty.

“Well, I’ll try to make it short. At the mill pulp logs were unloaded from logging trucks and dumped into a big pond. They floated from the pond by means of a channel called a sluiceway into the mill and were herded into a huge water-filled holding tank. Workers then speared the pulp wood with long, steel-tipped poles as it drifted past and guided the wood sideways into long narrow troughs. At stations along each trough other workers jabbed the pulp logs with a short steel pick and slid them down a short sluice into a grinder pocket. Then they’d pull a lever. The wood dropped through a trap door and a set of pneumatic presses pushed it against a huge grinding wheel. The wheel chipped up the wood so that it could be cooked into pulp stock to make paper. Have I put you to sleep yet?”

“Not yet. It sounds like a pretty tough job,” Joanna commented.

“Yes indeed. A hot, loud, monotonous job! But it paid for my college.”

Joanna considered this. She didn’t seem at all bored. “You mean they drove logs down the rapids we run in our canoes?”

“Yes indeed,” I said, warming to my subject. “River drivers in spike soled boots – most couldn’t swim a stroke. Not that it mattered much when they were breaking log jams. A misstep could send a man to the depths where he was banged around in the avalanche of water and logs.”

“Did they ever find the bodies?” Joanna asked, with dread and fascination in her voice.

“Mostly the bodies floated to the surface down stream. Once in a while you’ll see a simple wooden cross marking the spot where some drowned river driver was lowered into a shallow, hastily dug, grave. Aside from a few words of scripture spoken over the battered corpse, the crew couldn’t hang around. The logs had to get to market while the river was running high and fast from the spring runoff.”

“Oh,” Joanna said, pondering the brutality of it. Perhaps I had been a little too vivid, I thought. But the river driving lore interested me a great deal. My brother had worked on the last log drive before the State closed the rivers because of the detrimental effect river driving had on aquatic fish and plant life. For example, it had been established that when bark fell off the logs, it sunk to the bottom, clogging up the spawning beds for salmon and trout. Nevertheless, my brother’s work experience had left him with a strong impression of the colorful history of the log driving era.

WHENEVER THE MOMENT seemed right, I’d use my brother’s job on the river to point out parallels between the rollicking existence of river drivers and the express lane life styles of girls who landed in our program. The outdoors, in both cases, became an antidote for unrestrained living, a sanctuary where one could reflect on how life had gotten out of control.

“You know, you girls who are users aren’t much different from those old time river drivers,” I said to Joanna’s crew one day when we stopped for lunch along the St. Croix after running a set of rapids. This got their attention, especially Leslie and Debbie,



both in the program for substance abuse. Then I launched into a story my brother had told of a river driver he'd worked with, perhaps the last of his breed, who showed up on the first day in a befuddled haze, his brain stupefied from months of binge drinking. He'd spent the winter in a Bangor flop house, having drunk his pay, and needed to get dried out as badly as he needed the work. *"He had the shakes so bad, spilled half his morning coffee before it reached his lips,"* my brother said. *"But after a week he came around, and was spearing pulp logs passing on the current with his pike pole and herding the wood down river with the best of them."*

"How's that like us druggies, Paul?" Leslie asked, looking up from chewing her veggie pocket sandwich.

"Well, some of you, and you know who you are," and I'd wink, "were plucked only a month ago from the fast-paced world of all night raves, trendy clubs and, more often than not, drug and alcohol binges. The first couple weeks after you landed here, you were so pissed, trying to cope with withdrawal from meth, coke and vodka."

By now, their eyes had lit up with interest.

"Why, I'll bet the first couple weeks a few of you were even wondering what would become of your status in the glamorous circles you travel in since you were no longer around to make an entrance. But, as you've found out, lots of fresh air and exercise clears out the cobwebs, as it surely did for no few of the returning river drivers. Besides, you've all earned your stripes in a canoe, endured heat and heavy rain, and gotten used to the bugs that drove you all batty way back in the beginning." I'd look from girl to girl. A few beamed with pride to be compared to those mythic heavy drinking, cursing and fighting characters that drove logs down Maine Rivers.

### III

THERE WAS A TIME, in the weeks before the bandanna initiative, when Joanna wasn't ready to step up and give an honest account of herself. She loved the laughter of the crowd, its social energy, but was afraid to let her individual voice be heard. One morning at the Field House, during our weekly turnover session when the off-going and oncoming instructor teams got together with therapists and support staff, we addressed this issue. We were all arranged around the picnic tables in the pine grove next to the field house, our notebooks open as we jotted down details of each girl's treatment plan for the upcoming week. The summer breeze blew softly through the grove, ruffling the red pine boughs.

"What can we do to help this girl find her voice?" Filene our head clinician had asked, referring to Joanna. Our head clinician was a tall, long limbed woman with short silver hair. She wore navy green cargo pants that unzipped above the knees into shorts. On her feet were Teva sandals. She tapped a pen on the picnic table as she waited for our responses.

Instructors shrugged or wrinkled their brows, but remained silent.

"Joanna's been here going on four weeks, hasn't she?" Filene finally asked. Everyone nodded. "She's doing well with the outdoor skills, but emotionally she's going nowhere. It's high time she stepped up."

I had to agree. She couldn't continue to sit back with her lips zipped shut like the shy student in the last row trying to ride out the semester.

“You know,” Eve commented, “in the beginning Joanna probably felt a little overwhelmed. I mean, some of these girls have been in analysis for years. They’re pretty darn good at speaking about their emotional turmoil.”

Eve had a point. But time had passed, and during Group Joanna still sat rigidly, arms wrapped around her legs, making herself as small a target as possible. She had yet to read her feedback letter from her parents aloud around the fire, a requirement that served as a debut into the program. She continued to hide in the shadows where the fire’s flickering light didn’t reach.

“How about a little reflection time, say a solo paddle away from everybody?” I offered.

Filene nodded, a neutral expression on her face, as if waiting for other ideas. Funny how we hadn’t thought of this earlier. The first thing usually tried when a girl was stuck was some time away from the others.

“We’re beginning a lake trip tomorrow,” Joel put in. “Weather’s supposed to be good. Might be the right time to start her on her solo.”

I tried to picture Joanna out there by herself. Without Darcy to entertain her and help share the burden of fighting the wind, how would she react? Even with instructors nearby for safety, the challenge of keeping a boat on track in erratic winds would try her patience. Would she turn inward where the turmoil lay – the depression that caused her to abandon the pursuits that had given her pleasure, the hostility toward her parents that had caused her to lie, sneak out of the house, and shoplift to gain approval from dubious friends?

Classic outdoor therapy, I thought -- the idea that wilderness was more than a place of beauty and recreation, but a setting where physical challenges turned one inward where the mind grappled with its own haunting realities while the muscles strained against the natural elements of wind and water. But what haunting realities might surface as this girl dug deep with her paddle into the sunlit fathoms of lake water? Perhaps she might ask herself what it meant to be adopted, and how she could thrive in the world without a clear memory of a childhood spent in the house of her biological parents. A lot was riding on this experiment.

“So it’s settled then,” Filene said. “We’ll put her out on reflection time,” let her try her hand soloing a canoe for the upcoming week. Perhaps a dose of solitude -- a few days paddling off by her lonesome, away from the rest of the clients, will do this girl some good.”

FILENE’S PARTING WORDS emphasized that our team present the solo paddle in the proper spirit, so it didn’t seem like punishment, a public shunning. Our clinician needn’t have worried. Joanna didn’t have any qualms about soloing when we took her aside that morning at Cranberry Cove. A fairly compliant kid, she was willing to go it alone for a few days.

We shoved the Old Town Trippers off the gravelly beach after breakfast and paddled out onto the lake. A following breeze arose and pushed us along steadily. But as often happens without a headwind to fight, the girls began lollygagging. Laughter and constant chatter echoed across the blue ruffled water. Joanna knew she had to stay a hundred yards out in front of the group. While she was having little problem maintaining

that distance, she kept looking behind at the others. Not one of them thought to call out to her to see how she was doing. The more giggling and laughing she heard behind her, the more distracted Joanna became. By tiny increments she fell off her pace and began fading back into the pack.

I buzzed Eve and Joel on my hand radio and told them to have the girls moor up just off shore on a cluster of rocks. It was a warm day and everybody could cool off with a ten minute swim while Joanna continued alone, with me paddling thirty yards behind her. Off she and I went. The head turning continued until we got a quarter mile in front of the group.

It was tough cutting the umbilical cord that linked her socially to the other girls, but Joanna wasn't the type to complain loudly. Her unhappiness was voiced through deep sighs and her trademark muffled growl. "Urrr," she'd sigh with a deep exhalation of breath. In jerky mechanical motions she'd bore in deep with her paddle, head down and shoulders stiff and unyielding, frustration writ large on her face. Her canoe rocked gently on the water, making for an island some three miles off. Now and then I checked in by radio. The others were now underway nearly a half-mile behind us.

This kicked off a long week of solo paddling for Joanna. The weather was generally fair, so it was safe to separate her. She spent hours each day a half-mile ahead escorted by Eve, Joel or me. At night Eve would have her pitch her tent off in a corner away from the other girls' shelters. During the evening debriefs Joanna joined the group for a short spell and a portion of time was given to her solo experience. The other girls had encouraging words. They wished her well in her "vision quest." "*You're out there on the cutting edge, girl! Keep your eyes and ears open, and listen to your heart!*"

With gentle probing, the girls got her to express her qualms about being on the water alone:

“But it sucks knowing you guys are splashing, giggling, having fun...”

“C’mon dude, that’s just an excuse. You don’t want to think about all that hard, back-home stuff,” Kim said.

“Yeah. Long as you’re splashing around with us, you get to avoid that stuff. You’re hiding, J,” Joanna’s friend Darcy added.

Joanna had no rebuttal for this. She lowered her eyes, wrapped her arms around her knees and stared into the fire.

“Stick it out, Joanna!” Eve spoke. “Paddling that canoe all day – it’ll make you think harder than you ever would hanging out with the rest of these guys. You’ll like yourself better for it. That’s why we do the solo thing.”

Joanna began to understand what it was like to be absent and still be cared for by the other girls. \_

LYING IN MY tent on Big Island after the “bandanna initiative,” I thought of how natural Joanna had been as group leader that night, but how hesitant she was to read her feedback letters from her parents during the earlier days. She had sat around the fire listening to other girls read theirs until her turn was long overdue. Still she kept begging off. Then, one day when we’d landed our canoes for lunch on a spruce clad island she approached Eve, Joel and me. In her hand were the typed and folded pages from her parents, tattered and smudged from being in her yellow dry bag so long.

‘I’ll read these tonight,’ she mumbled, waving the pages in the air, then turned on her heels and rejoined the cluster of girls hanging out by the beached canoes. Joel exchanged a raised eyebrow with Eve but said nothing.

When we circled up around the fire that night after supper, Joanna looked uneasy as she gripped the creased pages she’d been carrying around for weeks. Her gaze flitted from girl to girl, from one sun bleached face to another. She was waiting for the group to settle down, but people were in a restless mood as if they sensed electricity in the air.

“Time to take the bull by the horns, Joanna,” Eve said. Clearly the moment had arrived. There would be no hiding for the small redhead behind the pages of those letters from home.

“Hey everybody, Joanna’s worked up the courage for this moment, so let’s give her our full attention,” I added in my English teacher voice.

Joanna breathed deeply and raised her head to face the others. “Well, you guys, it’s like this,” She finally said. The other girls had quieted down and were gazing across the fire at her. “I’ve always said what people expect me to say, instead of what’s really in my heart. I just don’t like to let people down, I guess. Back home I ended up stealing things and smoking weed and sneaking out of the house at night because I wanted to seem cool to the people I hung with. And because I didn’t want to let my parents down, I put way too much pressure on myself to do well at skating and dancing. So much pressure, that I just don’t enjoy either of those things anymore. So I no longer skate or dance. Now I come here and I’m doing the same thing with you guys, not sharing stuff about myself because I’m afraid of what you’ll think.”

“What sort of stuff?” Darcy, the girl friendliest with Joanna, spoke up. “It’s not about adoption, is it?”

“What’s the big deal, Joanna? Karen from Minneapolis added. “I mean Kim’s adopted.”

“I’m not talking about adoption,” Joanna said. She paused and lowered her eyes. Joel threw a few pieces of black spruce on the fire and a sputtering shower of sparks drifted into the calm cloudy night. A loon cried mournfully out on the dark still lake.

Joanna held up the pages she’d been clutching and breathed deeply. “I have two letters here, one from each of my moms.”

The girls looked puzzled. Darcy spoke: “Yeah, I got letters from my mom and step mom the other day too.”

Joanna sighed impatiently at her friend. A faint smile creased Eve’s lips. Though Darcy wasn’t really obtuse, sometimes her tongue shifted too quickly into gear.

“You mean your moms live together?” Debbie from Southern Maine spoke up.

“They’re in a relationship, yes,” Joanna said.

“Oh!” Darcy said, conking her head with the palm of her hand. “Now I see. How come you didn’t tell us?”

“I was afraid of what all of you might say, that you might think I was gay too,” Joanna said.

“That’s dumb,” Darcy said in her usual frank manner. “You know we wouldn’t think that about you. But so what if you were? That wouldn’t change anything.” I adored Darcy for her sweet bumbling way. Compassion flowed easily from her heart.



The girls gazed encouragingly at Joanna. She sat cross-legged on the ground not sure where to go next.

“Joanna,” Eve spoke up, “before you read the letters, why not tell us about your home life, how your moms met, their life together.”

“One of my moms had children from a prior marriage,” she began. “Her son, my step brother Mike, is all grown up and has his own family. Judy, my step sister, lives on the West coast. She never comes to visit. My other mom was single when they met and didn’t have any kids. My two moms had been a couple for three, no four years, when they adopted me. My birth mom gave me up right after she had me. When I got to be about ten they told me about her, said I should write her.”

“So, it was an open adoption,” Joel said.

“There was nothing secret about it. It came up all the time,” Joanna stated flatly. Clearly, her two moms figured keeping adoption on the table as a topic for discussion could help their daughter sort out any sorrow or confusion she might have about being taken from the arms of her biological mother.

“Did you ever write your birth mom?” I asked.

“Yeah, I wrote to her once,” Joanna said.

“Did she not write back?”

“Oh, she wrote back,” Joanna answered. She was intently watching the flames dance as the fire consumed the split pieces of black spruce.

“Not the reply you were expecting, huh?” Eve said sympathetically.

“It wasn’t that,” Joanna said sheepishly. “She encouraged me to write, wanted to plan a meeting.”

“What happened?” Joel asked.

“I just didn’t write back.... Guess I didn’t get around to it.” Joanna continued to stare at the flickering fire. A lull descended over the conversation. While we waited for Joanna to find her missing voice, I thought about the importance of this adoption piece. From what I’d read, a young person with access to her biological mother was usually curious about her birth narrative. Piecing together the story would surely take Joanna out of her comfort zone, but the reward could be a new understanding of her origins, her identity. Why did this 14 year old lack the energy to gather it up and lay it all out? Why hadn’t she struck up a relationship with her birth mom?

As she shifted to a more comfortable position before the fire while clinging to the letters, Joanna’s mind seemed far away. Her eyes bore through the smudged and crinkled pages in her hands as if she were looking at some distant place beyond the typed lines. She seemed haunted by the ghosts of her past – by the spirit of her birth mother, and perhaps her biological father, lingering inside her, and by the child she might have been if she hadn’t been given up. And though her two adoptive moms had paved a clear path for her with their desire to meet the needs of an adoptee, Joanna was stuck in that haunted world, unable to muster the energy to awake from the confusions of her past.

“Joanna, I think it’s time for everyone to hear what your moms have to say, don’t you?” Eve said gently, breaking the silence.

Joanna, startled from her reverie, looked over at Eve, cleared her throat and began to read the letter from Joan, her mom with grown kids. Joan’s letter detailed the history leading up to and including her daughter’s difficult behavior. While Joanna was very close to her two moms as a child, long about age 12 things went south. It was an all too

familiar pattern – clamming up about school, mopey shuffling through the rooms of the house, acting pissy and irritated toward her folks. Hearing the details expressed in writing about this difficult stretch for both she and her mom was healthy for Joanna, so we listened patiently as she read the letter. Midway through, a telling passage appeared:

*“We could only guess at the impact being adopted might have had on your life, especially as you were entering adolescence. We felt certain there was so much unexpressed grief and sadness inside you. We were therefore confused for a long time when you wrote only the one letter to your birth mom and didn’t follow up when she wrote back. We were hoping the two of you could eventually meet. The letters, had you written them, would have laid the groundwork for a meeting.*

*It was only when you were diagnosed with depression, that we suspected that your lack of interest in your own adoption history was a symptom of your fragile state of mind. So we decided to help you build up your self-image through skating and dancing in hopes that your achievements would give you new confidence and maybe help you get well. You are so talented in so many ways, Joanna. We felt that developing your talents would be the best therapy possible. Perhaps we pushed too hard?”*

So Joanna’s moms harbored doubts about their ambitions for their daughter. Yet they continued to taxi her to skating and dancing, continued to make these activities the centerpiece for her get-well program. Her moms were certainly on the right track with their openness on adoption, but they obviously smothered her with their attentiveness. Her personal time had been far too regimented with the pursuit of perfection in the ice skating arena. She had gotten caught up in the drive to please her moms. She wanted to be perfect for them, for herself. Out on the ice if only one judge’s score card would register a 5-10, just once, then she would be worthy of her parents’ love. But when, and if, that hallowed event ever arrived it would be fleeting, supplanted by new doubt, by a

new drive to excel and gain approval. She would only end up chasing a mirage, a mirage of approval.

One positive note came out in the letters -- Joanna's continued interest in poetry. Joan, in particular, recognized what a boon writing was for her daughter. She saw in this exacting art form that her daughter practiced, demanding precise words to capture a mood, a kind of tonic for her daughter's languid spirit. Poetry allowed Joanna's mind to wander through the broad, borderless landscape of imagination. There was room to daydream there, to indulge in reverie. Her writing gave day dreaming a place in her life. And maybe it could assist her in understanding what it meant to be adopted.

I felt that her moms' good intentions, however they had backfired, would bear fruit in the end. Both moms had fervent hopes for their daughter. You could hear it in the lines Joanna read to us that night. And it struck me that she was the kind of kid who would, in time, respond to those good intentions. At heart, she possessed an untapped reservoir of understanding and a profound, but as yet untested, ability to accept the all-too-human foibles of those who loved her. During the weeks I had gotten to know her, I sensed these qualities in her.

That night we were moved by the sincere tones of concern, involvement and love Joanna's folks displayed in their letters. This was nearly always an ingredient in the tumultuous stories the letters told of a daughter's estrangement from the family. Those typed pages could be blunt when parents enumerated the things their child had done to bring the situation to such an impasse; they could also express vulnerability when a parent admitted to mistakes and failures of character that had contributed to the difficulties; but the letters were almost always leavened by the ideals and hopes of

parenthood, and by a willingness to see things through and be there to support their daughter. Though this was not always enough, it was often the only thing in the end parents could offer their child.

That night, by the shores of a loon-haunted lake, it seemed to me Joanna was taking a big step in the direction of facing her fears of being gay, her desire to fit in, and her trepidation at not receiving peer approval. As the flickering yellow flames consumed the split spruce logs, I imagined I saw a new strength in Joanna's face, a calmness and courage as she looked us all directly in the eyes.



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From the upcoming book *The Summer Grievances*