

THE LAST ROW

By

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Sometimes the shortest distance between two points isn't a straight line at all. Instead it's a boat ride across a saltwater harbour. Kyle pushed the rowboat off the shore and, just as it began to float, he jumped in, sat down on the middle seat and began to row towards the spit of land across the bay, where, on the horizon, he could see the little town of Edendale. At this distance, it reminded him of his younger sister's doll village. He fought off homesickness, aware that he was here for the summer with his best pals to experience what independence was all about.

The household was in need of groceries, and the car was broken again so Kyle had volunteered to row across the inlet to the grocery store. The distance by boat took only ten minutes while the road trip was almost an hour with the winding road following the shoreline for a good ten miles, then curving besides several farms, and finally crossing over two inlets where bailey bridges allowed passage to only one vehicle at a time. The only disadvantage was Kyle couldn't carry as much in the wooden boat as he might have in the car. He was going to have to balance the need for grocery against the need for liquor and beer. Kyle had made a collection before leaving to ensure he had enough money for two cases of beer and a couple bottles of rum.

He was in no hurry. It was a relief to be away from the dilapidated house on the Island where there were always a lot of disagreements around who should do what chores, who wasn't carrying their fair share of the work or the finances, and who was too noisy or nosey, or too withdrawn (which was Kyle's shortcoming).

As long as they were partying, everyone got along. The five young men could forget that in lieu of rent, they were supposed to be fixing up the house. When they had made the agreement with the landlord, Moe Wishart, a real estate lawyer in Edendale, they had assumed that carpentry was a hobby requiring little skill and only a special pair of pants with a fabric loop to hang a hammer. The embarrassing truth was that they had actually managed to make the place worse instead of making any improvements to it.

Moe had suggested they start with the kitchen which was in the basement so the wood cooking stove could do double duty as a furnace. Full of good intentions they had started by trying to replace the stained kitchen counter. The minute they started ripping out nails, they disturbed a nest of squirrels. The mother squirrel, determined to protect her kits, ran up Luke's leg. This was a surprisingly long trip as Luke, the tallest of them, was over six feet, eighty

percent of that length devoted to his lower limbs. The squirrel then got under the hockey sweater he always wore and sent Luke into a frenzy that might have been an imitation of a ceremonial dance.

“Maybe Mama squirrel doesn’t like the Toronto Maple Leafs,” Jeffrey said. He was a Montreal Canadian fan. This difference of opinion caused much bickering on Saturday night.

Simon then proffered a pipe wrench which Moe had brought over along with a few supplies and a promise of more materials as they progressed with the renovations. What resulted from the use of this tool was a flood that rivaled the flow of the falls over at Ethan’s Dam and turned the dirt floor to mud. It took close to an hour to stop the flow. Finally, Bruce thought to unplug the water pump, mainly because it was beginning to overheat, and Bruce was alerted to this problem by the strange smell of burning beans emanating from the rumbling pump. By then they had emptied the water well. No one was allowed anything more than a sponge bath at the sink for a week. Since they were forced to cook outside on an open fire at the bottom of a rock pit until the dirt floor hardened, they soon smelled of wood smoke mixed with perspiration. As it was mid-summer, they sweated profusely while chopping the wood needed for cooking.

They had tried sticking to upkeep after that. Moe brought them a supply of paint. Immediately, they took to the ladders, brushes in hand. Moe was florid with anger when he saw they had painted the wooden siding with interior paint. He could not fathom that all five of them could be that dumb. He knew they were city boys, he said, but he assumed they could read the side of a can of paint. He asked Kyle how much education he had.

Kyle admitted that he had dropped out of university with only one year under his belt. He wondered why Moe picked on him. Thank goodness, Moe had not got wind of the fact that a month earlier they had cornered a skunk in the pantry. During a good updraft, Kyle could still smell the skunk’s residual perfume in his room way up in the attic.

Kyle enjoyed the feel of his arm muscles as he rowed across the bay. He had learned to row at family picnics where all the cousins raced across the river at his Uncle’s farm in anything that could float. He had been the one to beat during the last few years.

He looked over his shoulder and already he could see that the buildings were now discernible. Edendale was revealing itself like one of those pop-up scenes: the church on main street, the glue factory and the liquor store. He rowed into shore, pulled the boat onto a nearby beach and headed up to carry out his duties. He had to make several trips, hiding the groceries under the upturned boat while he went to the beer store and the liquor store. It was high noon by the time he got done, so he treated himself to a hot dog and fries at the chip wagon near the dock. He sat on the dock to eat so he could keep an eye on his merchandise.

Finally, he set out towards the island. With the goods it was carrying, the boat sat lower in the water. Kyle noticed that it was harder going now. He was tired, the wind had picked up:

each stroke was more of an effort than the last. On his right side, he noticed the water was swirling in an odd way. He tried rowing away from the eddy, but it seemed to follow him. He wondered if he was so tired that he wasn't rowing hard enough to move. He looked over his shoulder and saw that he was getting closer to the island. The old house was not yet in view, but the island was a strong presence in the distance. He tried giving more to his arms. Still the eddy remained on his right side, exactly in the same spot, only it had grown, and the swirling had speeded up. Now he gave his rowing all he had. Still, the boat was not moving away from the churning, swirling water. It threatened to suck him into the clockwise movement, where it would treat him like the hands on a clock that are turning ever faster to eternity. Panicking he began rowing crazily, not paying attention to his strokes, splashing water around like a fountain.

Suddenly he heard a voice. "Having some trouble, are ye?"

He looked up and on the left of the rowboat there was a large emerald green fishing boat with five men aboard. Four of them were his house companions, all four of them in full beard, even though Bruce couldn't grow a mustache to save his life. The fifth man was Moe, the landlord. He was obviously the captain since he was at the helm. Oddly enough, on this bright sunny day, they were all wearing black raingear.

"Hey guys," Kyle said. "Where'd you get the boat?"

"What are you talking about?" Simon said, frowning in puzzlement. "We've been fishing these here waters for the last twelve years."

"Why you so curious about our boat?" Jeff asked. "You trying to make a claim to the fish here?"

"Better not be," Luke chimed in. "Or we'll show you what for."

As if in agreement with Luke, Moe revved up his engine, creating enough wake to shake Kyle's small boat back and forth.

Kyle decided they were joking. "Very funny, guys. Quick rattling my chain and give me a hand up to your boat, okay?" He figured if they weren't going to let him in on how they had got the boat, the least they could do was give him a hand up to the boat since he was getting awfully tired. "We'll tie the rowboat to the back and you can pull it to the island."

"We can't do that," Moe said. "You know it ain't deep there. We can't get in too close to the shore without bottoming out. Are you trying to trick us?"

Kyle thought how the bunch of them looked like mobsters with their black shiny wet gear and their beards. He studied them more closely. There was something odd about them beyond the black clothes and the long beards. They all had blue eyes. Of all five of them, only Kyle himself had blue eyes. And, his eyes were a unique blue, almost violet. Now all his friends and the landlord had his eye colour. Kyle shivered under the hot summer sun.

“You better watch yourself” Jeff said, leaning over the side of the fishing boat, his long red beard dangling. “You’re getting pretty close to that eddy on your port side. You get yourself into one of those, buddy, and you ain’t getting out.”

Kyle glanced to the left and saw that the eddy was at the same distance from his boat as the last time he’d looked, but it had doubled in size and speed. He ignored the fishing boat, and concentrated on his rowing. He could see the house now and he aimed his bow straight for it. Once or twice he heard Moe laughing, but when he finally looked up, the fishing boat was gone.

When he pulled the boat onto the shore, he noticed that there was a shiny black Lincoln Zephyr in the driveway of the old house. Moe was at the wheel. Four guys dressed in black suits, black shiny shirts and ties, and wearing black derby hats, came out of the house and piled into the car. They looked like the same guys from the boat...just like his house companions but with full beards. Kyle watched the black Zephyr disappear from the driveway in a cloud of dust. Several minutes later, out from the front door in the basement kitchen emerged his friends to help haul the goods out of the boat. Kyle studied Bruce’s face. That moustache still looked like a pin line.

“Who was here visiting us in that fancy Lincoln Zephyr?” Kyle asked.

They looked at him with puzzled looks. “What Zephyr?”

“When I got here there was a Zephyr in the driveway and Moe was waiting in it on the driver’s side. Then four guys came out of the house.”

“Moe drives a Mercedes—Benz.” Simon reminded him. “Remember he made the joke about his car not getting a dent in that accident because that’s how the Mercedes Bends.” Simon put hard emphasis on the word ‘bends’. “Come on, you remember that, Kyle. You groaned the loudest.”

“Right,” Kyle admitted. “Moe drives a Benz. What about the four other guys that were here.”

“There was nobody here,” Jeff said. He pretended he was smoking a joint to indicate that maybe Kyle had partaken of some drugs in town. There was no sign of his long red beard.

“They were out there on a fishing boat,” Kyle said. “And then they came out of the house and jumped into a Zephyr.”

“What fishing boat?” Simon asked.

“No one could get from out there in a fishing boat, drive all the way here in a car in the time it took you to row here.” Luke said. “Think about it. “

Of course, Luke was right. Kyle knew he was right. He looked toward the harbour. The fishing boat was gone. He looked towards the driveway, the Zephyr was gone.

But he knew he had seen what he had seen. He went up to the house to his attic room. He packed everything he owned into a duffle bag. That evening he enjoyed a few drinks with his buddies, but early the next morning, he set off hitchhiking. When he saw the Zephyr coming up the road, he jumped into the bush and hid. He caught the next ride and he never looked back. His friends tried to find him, but all they knew about their old friend was that he was living somewhere in Ontario and that he had become a landlubber.