

Lake Stories

By B.G. Bradley

Act I

Ben O'Brian, a middle aged man is seated behind a campfire. He is hold and closely examining the blade of an opened Buck knife in a way that indicates he intends to use it for something drastic. He stands and walks around the fire still holding the knife and looking longingly out towards the lake. The sound of lake water coming to shore is constant. Sounds of loons are frequent. Coyotes, wolves, ducks, geese, and kingfishers sounds occasionally heard throughout the play. Suddenly, Grace O'Brian, a middle-aged woman appears on the camp porch far up stage.

GRACE (Quietly):
Whatchadoin'?

BEN:
(As though he has seen her before she speaks quickly puts away the knife)
Oh, just seeing if the old knife still has its edge.

GRACE:
Does it?

BEN:
It's a little dull.

Ben walks back to the fire, picks up an old Hudson Bay blanket which is wrapped around a battered old loose leave notebook which is tied up with old shoelaces, Reading silently he takes out a sheet, looks at it and feeds it into the fire.

GRACE:
(As he's unraveling and revealing the notebook she giggles to herself)
What's in the notebook, classified government documents?

BEN:
(Without looking up)
You know what's in the notebook.

GRACE:
Yeah. I do. *(Starts to leave)*

BEN:
(Looks up a bit concerned then tries to cover)
Stay. I want you to hear this.
Lake Stories
Stories that float on this wet essence
Between the cool ridge pines
And the insatiable cattails

BEN (con.):

Stories of this cold, clear, lake
Stories that flow over gravel bars
And under wet bear paws
Stories that drift in the colors of dawn over northern waters
Stories that disappear in the ebony of new moon,
Wax to full with August's passing,
Age around beach fires that speak
In maple growls and birch whispers
But never drown the sound
Of the water's relentless rush to shore
Stories we tell to our children
Who huddle close near us in the sand
And conspire with each other in
Way-passed-their-bedtime glances
They listen, as we did, to ancient tales,
And beg. "Just one more, please one more!"
O those stories:
Of wild uncles, wiley aunts,
Grandmothers, grandfathers,
Sisters, brothers, cousins,
Old friends
With names like "Stitch", "Bump", "Rub", "Buck", and "Shine"
Loped eared dogs with goofy grins, central to canine tales all their own
And Mom and Dad in inconceivable younger days
All mixing then and now with
Wolves in the hemlock wood,
Deer so close our laughter quickens their ever startled hearts,
Porkies gnawing the cedar shakes,
Beavers tail slapping warnings to quiet us,
Sandhills drumming, chortling their flight call,
Loons trilling and wailing in the darkness.
All part, all paragraphs, sentences, words, syllables, songs,
In this story we, here, have been writing
(Looks at Grace and continues doing so for the rest of the poem)
Reflected in the blue sky of your eyes too, love,
On this cold night
By the fire, By the water
This one lake story we have made here,
You and I

GRACE:

What a bunch of horseshit.

(Ben removes the poem from the notebook looks over hesitantly, sighs, and feeds it into the fire.)

BEN:

That's done.

(Grace puts her hands on his shoulders. His eyes close and he sighs and she does so)

GRACE:

They're waiting for you.

BEN:

(opening his eyes)

I know.

GRACE:

Pretty soon, the kids aren't going to be able to stand it and they're going to come down here. That is if Mark and Jen don't send them down as emissaries from civilization long before that.

BEN:

That's okay. *(Gets up to get wood)*

GRACE:

It's big of you no to mind if your children come and talk to you.

BEN:

I miss them now that they're away. But when they come back, I don't know what to say to them anymore.

GRACE:

You mean you don't know what to say to *him*. Katie you can handle. You two can just sit and talk about nothing and it's okay. It's always okay. Katie and I could never talk for more than a minute without me transposing my deficits onto her or her asserting her psyche against me.

BEN:

(Chuckles with knowledge of life):

Is that what you psychiatrist call it? I thought she was just being a little shit. I always got the hell out of the room when that started. Those were some of the only times Mike and I spent together.

GRACE:

Michael he likes to be called Michael.

BEN:

Don't you find that a little pretentious?

GRACE:

As I recall you had tendencies that way at one time when you were a young writer who was going to conquer the world with your artistic genius.

BEN:

Writer? You call what he does writing?

GRACE:

Why can't you just talk to your son?

BEN:

Well... he doesn't like baseball.

GRACE:

Jesus Ben, the boy is entitled to his own interests! He's not supposed to be you!

BEN:

Why not? Katie's just like you!

GRACE:

Do you want to ruin your relationship with *her*? Just say that to her.

BEN:

But she is!

GRACE:

She's not. She thinks the science of the mind is a sham...

BEN:

No, she just doesn't think its science... In fact, I...

GRACE:

See? She's not just like me, she's just like you!

BEN:

But she's beautiful just like you. And he's got that same little impish smile.

GRACE:

I hate you.

BEN:

Your secret is safe with me. *(Pauses)* I wish I could be like Jen and Mark are with their boys. No matter what Sean and Patrick do, they seem to be okay with it. They just roll with it. I remember all four of those little goofs rolling around on the beach down here together. Man, they had fun. I remember looking at those little faces. *(Pause)* “Lord we know what we are, but not what we may be.” Shakespeare knew life, didn’t he? He knew it so well. *(Pause)* But if they come down here, don’t worry; I’ll put on a good face or them.

GRACE:

Why do you have to put on any face at all? Your face is good just the way it is. Sad, or silly, angry or worried, it’s a good face.

(He is back putting wood on the fire now. She leans in and kisses him on the cheek. He turns to her and kisses her tenderly.)

BEN:

Do you remember the first time down here?

GRACE:

We’d been out on all of three dates and you brought me home to meet your mom.

BEN:

She stayed at the fire telling stories and keeping watch for a while.

GRACE:

But then she left. And we got close.

BEN:

Then much closer.

GRACE:

And the moon was out just like it is now.

BEN:

I know, that’s what made me think of it.

GRACE:

And the loons were calling.

BEN:

And then the damned bugs!

GRACE:

Oh my god! I've never been bitten so much in so many places!

BEN:

So we dove into the water and we swam away under the moon.

GRACE:

And your mom came down to check on us.

BEN:

And found our clothes on the beach!

(They both laugh)

GRACE:

She called out to you once. And you said *(says in a squeaky male embarrassed voice)* "Everything's okay, Mom!"

BEN:

And she went back up to the camp.

GRACE:

I thought she'd never accept me after that.

BEN:

Don't ask. Don't tell.

GRACE:

And she didn't and we didn't.

(They look at each other for a long moment)

BEN:

It's not the same. Grace. It can't ever be. I don't want the kids to know that.

GRACE:

What, do you think they're idiots? You think they haven't heard from Jen and Mark? You think they're not going to notice that you're down here every night reveling in the water and the flames like some old ghost?

(Ben looks at her and breaks into a laugh which she shares after a moment)

BEN:

I'm just a little blue, and I've got Huck for company.

GRACE:

Stupid dog. You forget who you're talking to sometimes. I happen to know a little about how the mind works.

BEN:

All right. Hang out the shingle. What's the diagnosis doctor?

GRACE:

Stop pretending.

BEN:

"To be, or not to be. That is the question"

GRACE:

That's right, that's you all over, when something's wrong, make a joke, worse yet, a literary joke.

BEN:

Poets do that.

GRACE:

Are poets ever people?

BEN:

Yes, only more so.

GRACE:

What I mean is; let it go, Ben. Feel it real...

BEN:

"Feel it real..." Can I use that? That's a great line!

GRACE:

God, I hate you.

BEN (laughs):

Really, I'm not so down. Before you showed up I was thinking about the kids and all the stories about when they were little...

GRACE:

"The feather story..."

BEN:

Yeah. That's your favorite story isn't it?

(Grace nods fondly)

I was thinking of "The Tribe of the Grandpas."

GRACE:

Oh god, I'd forgotten that... I seem to be forgetting everything...

BEN:

Natural enough.

GRACE *(smiling)*:

Super natural.

BEN:

(Looks at her, shakes his head)

No. It's not time for the feather story. Not yet.

GRACE:

Okay, on to the Tribe of the Grandpas.

BEN:

Do you remember, we'd had a fight that night.

GRACE:

Get to the funny part.

BEN:

You'd all gone to bed. I was sitting under Dad's old lamp in the cabin reading poetry and I had a fire going. I was pretty sure I'd screwed it up with you for all time.

GRACE:

You were always sure of that. I was part of your cycle of preservation.

BEN:

Okay, I'll try not to get maudlin; you try not to get clinical. Deal?

GRACE:

Deal. Anyway, you hadn't screwed it up. You couldn't.

BEN:
Really?

(Grace nods)

Wow, I could have saved a lot of money on Christmas gifts and Valentines flowers. *(Pause)* Anyway, I was reading Robert Frost's *Home Burial*...

GRACE:
Precognitive traumatic fixation...

BEN *(ignoring her)*:
And I came to the line, "A man must partly give up being a man with women folk..."

GRACE:
Oh Jesus! Frost and Hemingway and Fitzgerald and you! You all think you know so much about women... Clueless, absolutely, clueless...

BEN *(surprised)*:
Really?

GRACE:
Clueless.

BEN:
Even Shakespeare?

GRACE:
Okay, special case, but no other man has a clue.

BEN:
Not even Dr. Phil?

GRACE:
Now, you stop that!

BEN:
(grinning wryly)
Well, just because a colleague of yours is a man.

GRACE:
Tell the story!

BEN:

You're as bad as the kids. You know...before...you always used to roll your eyes when I started in on a story.

GRACE:

Shhh!

BEN:

Anyway, I couldn't shake it, and it wasn't just the blues. I was down way down.

GRACE:

Post-traumatic bi-polar disorder. Chemically triggered: chemically treatable. *(Pause)* You'd just turned 40. And now you've just turned 50. See any connection?

(Ben glares at her)

Tell the story.

BEN:

The story. I'm sitting there and I look out the front window of the cabin out over the lake and I can just see the dawn rising and I hear Katie jumping down from the bunk. She walks out into the living room, in pig tails, the little elf, scuffing her sleepers on the floor and dragging her monkey by the leg, and she's just beaming at me, you know, the way she does...

GRACE (smiling):

Like she knows something you don't.

BEN:

She does. Just like you...damn you. Anyway, she's just beaming, those big eyes...

GRACE:

Which she got from you...

BEN:

She says, "Dad, you know what's going to happen to you when you're 63 years old?"

I said, "No"

She says, "You're going to go out into the woods and you're going to join the tribe of the grandpas!"

I'm sitting there with my jaw dragging on the floor and finally I manage to get out.

"What will I do?"

BEN (con.):

She says, “You’ll dress up in animal skins and dance and sing around a fire with all the other grandpas!”

“Well, what will we sing?”

(Ben gets up and does a strange little leg slapping dance around the fire.)

“Stinky bum, stinky bum, stinky bum, stinky bum.”

Then she gives me a little look and walks away out onto the front porch without another word, as though the whole thing makes perfect sense to her.

(Both laughing)

GRACE:

So, what are you doing down here right now but becoming one of the Grandpas?

BEN:

Maybe... *(Distantly)* Maybe not... Anyway, I told that story to everyone I knew. I still tell it. It always cheers people up.

GRACE:

Even you.

BEN:

Even me.

GRACE:

That’s not enough?

BEN:

I don’t know.

(Pause) Finally he opens up the notebook again and reads another poem as Grace looks on.)

(Grace moves behind him as he reads. Ben reading)

Here it is.

What Bears Do
The little bear
Up on the high sand bank
Was doing what little bears do.
He was maybe a year into this world
Still open to new bear things
When I came along

BEN (con.):

In my canoe.

And what do little bears do?

Well, This little bear, high on the bank under the birches,

Was looking at something he'd never seen before.

It was strange to him

I'd guess.

I doubt, in his bear mind,

He separated man from clothes from boat from paddle,

And it all smelled so strange

Anti-septic. Soapy,

Not all of these north woods

He looked at me,

I watched him.

And then he'd had enough,

For a bear still fairly new.

He slowly walked up the bank,

His nose still lifted

His naïve eyes still focusing

On the strange thing

In the water

As he vanished above the bank

Into the woods

He was gone

Off to do what bears do

After they have been some things

Off to walk the woods

With something to remember

Open to a new bear day

Open to all the bears must do.

(Pause) Done

(Ben looks at it for a moment and feeds it into the fire.)

GRACE:

Ben, why are you burning your poems?

(Ben sits silent)

Why are you burning your poems?

BEN:

What difference does it make? They're my poems.

GRACE:

No they're not. They belong to the people who read them.

BEN:

Well, they can still read most of them if they want to. I'm just ditching the originals.

GRACE:

Why?

BEN:

I'm at an "impasse". I'm trying to spark something new; create by destroying; how's that doctor?

GRACE:

Oh, that's where we're going. Okay, remember, I'm better at this than you. I'm the one with the degree in that particular area of science.

BEN:

Science!

GRACE:

Now don't piss me off. I'm trying to make a point with you.

BEN:

There's something new.

(Grace glares at him. Ben puts up his hands)

GRACE:

Maybe you are at an impasse. Or maybe you're thinking you're at an end and why not ditch it all now.

(Grace's comment hit too close to home. Ben playing furiously with the fire.)

BEN:

Hell, what do you care if I burn 'em? You never read my poems anyway.

GRACE:

(Laughing at his lack of perception)

Of course I do, you idiot! I love your poems.

BEN:
You do?

GRACE:
Of course. You should write more.

BEN:
No. That's done. (*Shakes his head*) When did you read them?

GRACE:
When you weren't looking.

BEN:
(*Sudden realization. Laughs*)
All those years I always thought somebody was going through my drafts. You always told me I was being paranoid! Jesus Grace, that's one reason I always hide in the notebook. What a devious... You were messing with my head! And you a psychiatrists!

GRACE:
Hey, you weren't a patient!

BEN:
I'm your husband!

GRACE:
There's nothing about abstaining from psychological warfare in my *marital* vows.

BEN (laughs):
Why didn't you want me to know you read them?

GRACE:
I couldn't stand you looking over my shoulder judging.

BEN:
I wasn't judging.

GRACE:
Oh good lord! Of course you were! That's what you do! You look over shoulders; you judge. Why do you think Michael stays away?

BEN:
Well, Katie hasn't been here much either.

GRACE:

That's an entirely different story. She's engaged you idiot! How much time did you spend with your mother after we were engaged? Besides, it's not Katie you've got problems with; she knows her way around you just like I do. And don't try to avoid the subject. You've got to make things right with Michael. He's finding his way, but you've got to get back in the game! He needs some guidance. Ben, he needs his dad.

BEN:

Mike's always working on a story, or whatever it is he does on that infernal machine of his. Blubbing is it? How in hell do you make money...

GRACE:

Blogging! And you know damned well what it is.

BEN (*small grin on his face*):

Whatever... You may be right.

GRACE:

Of course I am.

BEN:

You're insufferable. By the way, I don't see that thing Katie has with whatshisface lasting. I think the real reason she's not here much is she's taking grad classes galore and planning for her second year teaching.

GRACE:

God, you're so thick! She's in love. Have you forgotten love?

BEN:

Damn near.

GRACE:

You're ridiculous. And quit changing the subject.

BEN:

Which is?

GRACE:

Michael!!

BEN:

Grace, what do you want me to do? We're father and son. That never works!

GRACE:

(Stares at him open mouthed for a second)

You really need help. *(Pause)* Seriously, Michael loves you, but you drive him nuts! You look over his shoulder. You always offer “friendly advice.”

BEN:

Well, if I didn’t advise them they’d...

GRACE:

What, Ben? Figure things out for themselves?

BEN:

That’s easy for you to say you weren’t...

GRACE (Angry):

No Ben. It’s not easy for me to say. Not at all.

BEN:

I’m sorry. Five years is a long time.

GRACE:

Yes, it is.

BEN:

“Time for visions and revisions.”

GRACE:

Shakespeare, right?

BEN:

Jesus, no! T.S. Eliot... *(Realizes)*

GRACE (smiling):

I know.

BEN:

I know you know.

GRACE:

I know you know I know.

BEN:

Now cut that out.

(Pause)

God, I look over shoulders. I offer friendly advice. I've become my mother.

GRACE:

And your father. You're a nice mix.

BEN:

Nice?

GRACE:

Would you prefer sexy?

BEN (smiles):

God, I miss that.

(Long slow look between them. In it is love, frustration, amusement, and mystery)

GRACE:

Here come the kids. Now...

BEN:

Don't advice, just listen.

(Grace nods, moves directly behind Ben and does not move from that spot during the ensuing conversation. The kids enter. Michael is 25, Katie is 22. They have the family god with them. Katie is just back from grad school. She's wearing a Tigers baseball cap. Michael is back from an interview tour of Mackinac Island for a blog he's doing. He looks very much the part of the young counter culture.)

(Hesitant, forced, distracted)

Hey guys.

KATIE:

Dad, didn't you hear us pull up?

GRACE:

(enigmatic smile)

We heard.

BEN:

Yeah.

(Embarrassed into silence)

MICHAEL:
(chuckling)
Yeah what, Dad?

BEN:
Yeah. I heard.

KATIE:
So...what, you just figured we'd find you in the dark.

BEN (smiles):
It wouldn't be the first time.

KATIE:
Oh, we're in a metaphorical mood!

BEN:
Don't knock metaphor. You knock metaphor you knock knowledge. You knock knowledge. You knock life.

KATIE:
Well, there we are, first words of wisdom from old poet for the night. Check the time, Michael.

BEN:
Jesus.

GRACE:
Be right back...

MICHAEL:
10:15 by my watch. *(Smiles)*

KATIE:
Aunt Jen ratted you out, Dad. We've got the whole story.

BEN:
Figured she would.
(Pause. Uncomfortable)

KATIE:
Uncle Mark says you're losing it!

BEN:

(Suddenly a little angry)

How the hell would he know? He married your Aunt Jen! How sane can he be? What's more, social workers who use "creative dramatics" so their felon clients can get in touch with themselves, don't exactly have a tight grip on reality you know.

MICHAEL:

But poets do?

BEN:

College professors! I'm a college professor! My poetry...

MICHAEL AND KATIE:

(using the quote symbol with their fingers)

"... is just an outgrowth of my teaching."

BEN *(grinning):*

Shut up you! You don't know me.

MICHAEL:

You're right. We don't.

BEN:

(Staring at him for a moment)

Whoa! Easy on the heavy sauce there pal!

MICHAEL:

Seriously, what are you doing down here? Aunt Jena says that all you've been doing since they got here is sitting by the fire. You haven't paddled. You haven't fished. You haven't walked. You just take your meals...

KATIE:

"in polite silence" were her exact words.

BEN:

She's a bigger snitch than I thought.

MICHAEL:

You take your meals in polite silence, when you sit with them at all. And then you come down here and start fires and stare out at the lake all night.

KATIE:

Uncle Mark says you're not even listening to the Tiger games...

MICHAEL:

Jesus Dad! What's wrong?

BEN:

They're not having much of a season.

KATIE:

They're in first.

BEN:

Oh.

KATIE:

Aunt Jen says...

BEN:

Jesus, does she ever shut up?

KATIE:

She's got something to talk about, Dad. You were here by yourself for three weeks before they came. Aunt Jen says that when she arrived the place looked like nobody had even been here. Had you been down here the whole time? *(Pause)* She says even Huck doesn't stay down here with you all night. Dad, the *dog* is bored with you!

BEN:

Doesn't like the sand I think. And, he's gotta eat.

MIKE:

Dad, seriously, are you really sleeping down here?

BEN:

Some.

KATIE:

So you're not sleeping? *Dad.*

BEN:

And Grace says *I* look over shoulders.

MICHAEL:

What?

BEN:

Nothing. I'm not really just starting fires and staring at the water. I've been doing a lot of thinking.

KATIE:

About what?

BEN:

Oh, tonight I was considering the fact that I only have 13 more years to prepare to join the Tribe of the Grandpas.

KATIE:

You know, you made most of that story up. I didn't say that.

BEN:

Okay.

KATIE:

You did!

MICHAEL:

You're gonna lose, Katie...

KATIE:

But really...that story is bull...

BEN:

Okay!

(Grace pats his shoulder. He's a little taken aback by her language)

(To Michael) How was Mackinac Island? You save any money?

KATIE:

Michael (Mike), you know this guy? Wasn't this the same man who said, "Find something you love and do it! You can't worry about money!"

BEN:

Alright, alright. What happened out there?

KATIE:

Well, first Michael got off the boat. Then, he bought some all natural fudge with nuts and berries....

BEN:

Smartass. How did the...uh...blotting go out there?

(Grace shakes her head)

MICHAEL:

Blogging, Dad.

(Grace heads off again)

BEN:

Ready to be in college again are ya?

KATIE:

Here we go.

BEN:

How are you gonna make a living?...

MICHAEL:

Dad, I am making a living....my writing...

BEN:

You call that writing. Sending your words off into the ether for some four eyed freak to read at 3 a.m.

KATIE (angry):

Dad, Michael's got quite a following! All my friends read it and he's sponsored by Sunrise Shoes for God's sake... That's a pretty big corporation.

BEN:

Corporation! Run and write and move on. How can that be anything but a hand to mouth existence? Hand to mouth, for Christ's sake get back in college.

KATIE:

Dad!

BEN:

Take a hint from your sister...

(Grace re-enters)

KATIE:
Don't do that!

BEN:
Just what the hell is this computer blabbing about anyway? And running and eating nuts and berries all the time.

KATIE:
Dad!

MICHAEL:
It's okay, Katie...

KATIE:
No it's not!

BEN:
Christ! Your mom...

KATIE:
Dad!

Grace has moved behind Michael now. Who is standing passively as though he's absorbed this many times before. Ben is pacing madly about, throwing wood around with his back to the children.

BEN:
You listen to me! I worked my ass off all the way through college and it still wasn't enough! I should have worked more. That was my mistake. And you guys...

Ben looks up with wood in his arms and absently drops the wood. Sobered he picks it up carefully. Grace goes off quickly.

KATIE AND MICHAEL:
(Trying to lighten the mood they quote him like they have a million times before)
...can learn a lot from the mistakes I made!

KATIE:
God! I'm so sick of this. I'm not Mom. I'm not going to sit everybody down in their separate corners and listen to what they're saying then repeat it back to them like Oprah.

Ben stopped suddenly by realization. A loon calls and the sound of the water and fire is enough to stop the laughter Ben looks slowly at his son at a loss.

BEN:

I'm sorry, Mike. I guess I need to shut up sometimes.

More environmental sound as he gets up to go for more wood. Michael helps him and they have a moment for looking at each other fondly. Finally Ben shakes his head and laughs.

Charlie always used to tell your grandpa that white men don't listen enough. I think maybe he also meant that when we get to a certain, we give too much advice.

MICHAEL:

Tell about Charlie.

BEN:

Good lord. How many times have I told you those stories.

KATIE:

Come on old man. Tell us the stories. Leave out the advice.

BEN:

If I didn't give you advice little girl... *(Stops himself shakes his head)* Point well taken.

(Settles back tells the Charlie Stories)

Well, when Charlie came to the lake from St. Ignace. The word was he'd been run out of town as a bootlegger. He showed up at the lake and started fishing and one day one of the Ohio landowners went out with him. And by the end of the trip, Charlie was the caretaker of all the cabins on the lake. He was the caretaker of all the kids, too. He use to tell such great stories. He'd make big fires out on Birch Island. Oh, and the fish he'd catch! He'd bring in the biggest lakers anybody had ever seen. I can still see him out there at sunset rowing along in that old wooden boat. That big ol' cane pole trailing out the back. His old baseball cap with the big anchor on it in lock and that subtle little smile on his face. It wasn't until after I'd been to college that I realized something. We were at his fiftieth wedding anniversary party out at his...

In the middle of this Michael's cell phone goes off. His father gives him an icy stare, he gets off the phone quickly and Ben resumes the story.

cabin on Birch Island. And there on the mantle was an enormous laker's skull hung with eagle feathers. I'd read just enough Native American literature to recognize a talisman and to realize Charlie was a shaman. A medicine man. All those years and nobody knew, except for maybe my dad...

MICHAEL:

I talked to a guy named Crofoot out on Mackinac. He said the Ojibwa and a couple other tribes believe that the world began out here.

BEN:

(Clearly he thinks this is a bunch of crap)

I see.

MICHAEL:

Yeah, he said that that's where men first crossed with animals and created demigods who made the world... It's in the blog.

Michael and Ben exchange a look. Michael gives up silently with a half smirk.

KATIE:

Wow. That's pretty heavy for my tastes. I prefer the stories about Great Uncle Shine and Clyde and Cleophus.

BEN:

Oh God! *(Laughing)* Now those stories I have told a million times.

KATIE (laughing):

Tell the one about violating the does....

BEN:

Why don' you tell it? You know it better than I do. *(Laughing)*

MICHAEL:

Go ahead, Katie. *(Teasing)* Just like at your grad party... David thought it was great that his summa cum laude fiancé told deer hunting stories...

BEN (Genuinely confused):

David? Who's...

KATIE:

Oh Dad...

BEN:

Oh! *(Realizing he's been an idiot and covering with a joke)* That gawky kid that came here with you last summer! The one that thinks you're going to marry him? I didn't miss the wedding did I? Where's he this weekend?

KATIE:

He had to work. He's... oh just ask Aunt Jen. She's probably told you about it already.

JEN:

(from direction of the cabin)

Three times, Katie, You doofus, Ben!

BEN (to Jen):

Sneak.

(To Katie)

Okay, now, let's hear your version.

KATIE:

Okay, here goes.

Embarrassed, Michael does so and Katie expertly unwraps it and clenches it in her teeth as she tells the story. It's apparent these two have done this schtick before. All laugh then go quiet again

What *are* you doing down here, Dad?

BEN:

Thinking.

MICHAEL:

About?

BEN (Hesitates):

I'm told I'm thinking about turning 50 among other things.

KATIE:

Who told you?

BEN:

...

(Kids exchange glances again)

KATIE:

You know, Dad, you're actually in your fifty-first year.

BEN:

There's a cheerful thought. I'll just keep getting older.

MICHAEL:

Doesn't it beat the alternative?

Ben smiles a bit bleakly. Katie and Michael exchange a look

BEN:

I like making fires.

KATIE:

There's a pretty good fireplace up in the camp.

MICHAEL:

Come on up, Dad. We'll tell some more stories

Grace goes off.

BEN (Smiles):

Obviously, you can do that without me.

KATIE:

No, Dad, we can't. Not really.

MICHAEL:

And we don't want to.

BEN:

(Surprised, touched)

After while, I'll come.

KATIE:

It's about Mom isn't it?

BEN:

Don't.

Katie naïvely taking Ben's hand as though she's talking to someone much younger than she is. She's unaware of how pretentious she's being.

KATIE:

Dad, Mom never was what you thought.

BEN:

I don't like where this is going.

KATIE:

Listen

MICHAEL:
Katie...easy...

KATIE:
She still has the two of you wrapped around her fingers. She gets what she wants.
All the time... still...

Ben shakes his head and changes the subject, a little desperate.

BEN:
I'm right here if you need me. Katie, just let me figure out what to do next.

Michael smiling and relieved that his father has changed the subject, patting Katie's shoulder.

MICHAEL:
We're wasting our time, Katie. There's nobody more stubborn than this guy.

KATIE:
Unless it's you.

BEN:
Or your mother.

Michael and Katie exchange another look.

MICHAEL:
Don't get too cold, Dad.

BEN:
I've got my quilt.

KATIE:
Good night. I'll have Aunt Jen bring down a wool blanket for over the top.

BEN:
Keep that little sneak out of this.

KATIE:
Night.

MICHAEL:
Good night old man.

KATIE:

Let us know how it all comes out.

BEN:

Sure, But I won't need to. Jen will tell you before I do.

JEN:

(From cabin)

Shut up you! You don't know me.

Katie and Michael depart with the dog. Ben opens the notebook again looks for a particular piece. Finds it, smiles a bit sadly and reads.

BEN:

My sister, the moon over the water,
Watches me rise early to hunt and fish and paddle.
She catalogues my foibles,
Arbitrates my inward squabbles
Hears me mumbling and humming in the boat
In the crystalline dark.

She shines out clear over calm, cold waters.
Plays hide and seek when the clouds come,

Coy, flighty girl.
She is married to the dawn
Who speaks in his time
In his wide, red voice across the horizon

She is a good wife to him,
Seeking always his best interests in her darkness.
Taunting and teasing his grandeur
Just before he comes.

She humbles men
Reminds them with her wisps of mystery
Of the reasons for their darker longings.

She is the haunting light.
She makes the shining path
On still nights,
Which all men wish to follow.

She leads the way through the dark,

BEN (con.):

Wickedly wonders aloud in a voice of light
Just what we men would do with the ebony delights
She hides, just beyond the black.
And having silently said just enough,
Leads us back to day and all
That must be done.

Ben, not noticing Jen coming down the stairs, puts the poem in the fire wistfully.

Done.

Ben jumps a bit, startled when she speaks.

JEN:

It's just like we do when we go to India...

BEN (Startled):

Oh Christ! (*Swivels towards her*) First you scare the crap out of me, now I've got to hear your running travelogue on the wonders of India again. Go ahead; remind me again, dear sister, of how provincial I am.

JEN:

Well, big brother, you are fatally Yooper, but you're not provincial. No, listen to me. I was just thinking while I was watching you feed that lovely little poem into the fire...

BEN:

You were listening weren't you? And what do you mean feed?

JEN:

Fire's alive, Ben.

BEN:

(Rolls his eyes)

Oh boy. Here we go with the far eastern mystical mumbo jumbo psycho babble again... I wish to hell you and Mark had never spent that time in the Peace Corps. I'm never gonna hear the end of it.

JEN :

(Somewhat offended)

Hey doofus! Listen to me. I know some things about you. I've been watching you most of my life.

BEN:

Spying on me you mean, you little sneak!

JEN:

Okay, spying... let me tell about the fire in India, or I'll start singing you your favorite song...

BEN:

It's not my favorite song! It got stuck in my head when disco was king...

JEN:

And dinosaurs roamed the earth...

BEN:

You are so funny. So irritating and so funny. Mark probably sent you down here because he was so overwhelmed by your rapier wit and wily feminine charms.

JEN:

(Singing and doing an accompanying disco dance)

“Celebrate good times, c'mon!”

BEN:

God. I hate that song. I wish I could get it out of my head. Thanks so much for bringing it back again. Okay. Okay! Tell me about the goddamned India fires.

JEN:

(Tells India fire story)... so anyway, despite myself I wished that job away, and it was the best thing that ever happened to me. Now, I'm free.

BEN:

Kind of a weird story to tell on a cold, August night in the U.P.

JEN:

Aren't you the one who always talks about the transcendental, Mr. Thoreau?

BEN:

I hate being hoisted by my own petard! All of you are so good at that. Even the kids...

JEN:

They learned from the best how to take somebody down when they've gotten too big.

BEN:

(Lost in his own thoughts)

Even Grace for Christ's sake...

(He looks at her alarmed)

JEN:

Been talking to Grace have we?

BEN:

Sneak.

JEN:

Doofus. *(Pause)* it's not like I don't get the appeal of sitting down here. I do it myself sometimes. Mark and I used to sit down here for hours with Sean and Patrick. Once we sat down here until about four in the morning, looking up at the Pleades Meteor Shower. And right in the middle of it the northern lights came out. God that was something. *(Pause)* I miss them. They're going to try to get here for Labor Day. I hope they can make it. Remember all the fun those two and Katie and Michael used to have down here? It's a great place to sit and think and watch the world, but, Ben, you can't make a life of it.

BEN *(Absently)*:

I've already had a life.

JEN:

What the hell does that mean?

BEN:

Nothing. Don't make a big deal...

JEN:

No, what the hell does it mean? I thought you were just getting all caught up in your nature boy thing. Losing yourself a little in a healthy way. But if what you're burning up, if what you're renouncing down here is your life: if you're thinking crazy, you tell me so right now! Ben, this family has had it with this nonsense. Those kids... Ben, you talk to me now. Right now. What's going through your head? Your life is right in the middle. What came before brought you here. You've got to build on it! The good and the bad! You've still got a good, long second half to live. There are adventures ahead.

BEN:

Jen, honestly, I'm only half here. I'm half a man and I'm sick and goddamned tired of it. The kids are basically gone now and there's nobody else for me to care for.

JEN:

What about me?

BEN (Laughing):

Like you need *anybody* to care for you! You take care of Mark and the kids and me when I let you. You and Katie, and Grace and Mom. None of you ever needed anybody. How in hell does that work? I wish I had swum in that end of the gene pool.

JEN (Smiling):

I think we're going in a strange direction here.

BEN:

You know what I mean.

JEN:

What about your students? What about your readers?

BEN:

My readers are all my age or older and even they're losing interest. You can only read about cute kids and mystical woodland adventures and all the adorable animals so many times before nausea sets in. Besides, they're all into the internet now. I can't compete with that. Hat bloating or whatever it is...

JEN:

BLOGGING! For Christ's sake! Blogging!

BEN:

Whatever! Anyway, I don't even want to compete with that.

JEN:

That's a load of crap, and a huge rationalization and you know it. And what about those kids? Who's going to turn them on to reading? Who's going to tell them that there's something other than car crashes and digital zombies... Who's going to keep them from becoming digital zombies?

BEN:

Turn them on to reading? Hell, they don't even read phone books. They've got so

BEN (con.):

many ipods, and cell phones, and twitter, and laptops full of lap dances and slasher films, I'm afraid poor old Henry Thoreau is pretty well drowned out for good. They sit in my class and roll their eyes while I talk and they play cybersex with all their little doodads under the des, and only perk up when I tell them there's a dirty joke coming up in a line from Shakespeare. Then I have to explain it. I don't know if I'm going back in the fall I'll tell you that. I don't know if I'm leaving this beach... *(Possible continued monologue)* "Oh how weary stale flat and unprofitable seem to me all the use of this world. Fire on it! Fie!" He was right you know god-damn-it! He was right then and now I mean what the hell...

JEN (Grinning):

That vein's standing out on your neck again.

BEN (Stares at her):

You little snot! You did that on purpose!

JEN:

You think? I have hope now. I can still geek you up. Ben, come up to the cabin. You're just spinning your wheels down here.

BEN:

Can you think of a better place for it?

JEN (Pause):

No, there is no better place. *(Pause)*

Ben takes out the notebook and writes something in it. Then he elaborately wraps it back up as the beginning.

BEN:

Now that's personal. Don't read it.

JEN (Hesitating):

Okay.

BEN (Gets up):

See ya.

JEN (Standing):

Where are you going?

BEN:
Some place quieter.

(Jen looks genuinely concerned.)

Not that quiet! *(Picks up a canoe paddle)* Don't worry, princess. I'll be back soon.

JEN:
Doofus.

BEN:
(As he's walking away)
Sneak.

Jen sits watching him go off. Then she comes down stage and squints into the darkness. She squints for a long time, then goes back and stands looking at the notebook. She looks up at the audience with a look that reveals everything. She walks back downstage and squints some more into the darkness. She goes back to the notebook, hesitates some more and finally picks it up and looks for the page where Ben wrote what he told her to leave alone. She reads it aloud and looks up scowling.

JEN:
“My sister Jen is a lousy stinkin' little sneak. Love, Ben O'Brain.” God damn,
you Ben. *(Looks out at the lake and screams)* Doofus!

BEN:
(From a distance)
Sneak!

Jen goes back and sits down at the fire frustrated, amused, ticked off. Mark comes out through the screen door followed by the boys.

MARK:
What's all the hollering about? A guy can't even be corrupted by his nephew and niece in peace with you and Ben around.

JEN:
He's a doofus. Katie, Michael, you're dad's a doofus.

KATIE:
(Coming down to the fire)
Tell me something we don't know.

MICHAEL (Concerned):
Where is he?

JEN:

He's out paddling.

MARK:

That's a good sign.

JEN:

Yes, I think so too.

MICHAEL:

How do you know for sure?

JEN:

How do we know for sure what?

MICHAEL:

Well...what if he... *(Tries to chuckle, but the worry shows through)* doesn't come back...right away.

JEN:

(Goes to him and puts her arm around him)

You're just like him, Michael. You worry so.

MICHAEL:

How do you know Aunt Jen?

JEN:

(Goes to the notebook and opens it to his note)

He just wrote this.

MICHAEL (Laughs):

And he told you not to read it, right?

JEN:

Right. *(Scowling then smirking as they pass it around and laugh)*

KATIE:

Yeah, that's not exactly a suicide note. Don't worry, Mike. He's okay.

MICHAEL:

Maybe, maybe he is. I don't know. I mean who really gets him?

KATIE:

Oh come on, Dad? He wouldn't... *(She thinks about it and seems worried)* Aunt Jen?

JEN:

I get him, Michael. Honest. He wouldn't.

MICHAEL:

I guess.

JEN:

He's okay. The big doofus is okay. *(Suddenly she's not so sure)*

MARK:

He's fine. I deal with lots of guys on the edge at the prison. He'd never... *(Changing the subject)* you know the first time I remember seeing your dad was on a baseball field. It was probably little league... I was in the crowd. I was pretty young, but I remember seeing him patrol that field at third. God, he could flag'em down. Mr. Koski used to call him "the ball hawk". I saw your dad dive backhanded towards the bag and catch a liner Bob Menominee had hit, just a screamer, three inches off the ground. It happened so fast, you could hardly see it. Suddenly your dad was belly down on the ground with the ball in his glove and a big grin on his face.

KATIE:

And dirt in his teeth?

MARK:

Well, he usually has that anyway, but yes. He was a happy kid that day. He was usually happy. As far as I know, he still is. He likes to make other people happy, too. He had a thing about making sure everyone is treated fairly. He's into justice. He's kind of crazy about it really. Always has been. I have seen him step into so many situations and get himself into trouble...

JEN:

He got that from Mom.

KATIE:

What do you mean, justice?

MARK:

Well, like the first time I ever really talked to him. I was over on the playground and I go in a fight with Teddy Beauchamp. Now your dad didn't know me from Adam, really, but he knew how rough I had it growing up, and he knew the

MARK (con.):

Beauchamps were spoiled rotten. I was about ten and the two of us were going at it pretty good. But when I started to win, Teddy's brother Sam kicked me in the side. He was about 14 or so. Well, your dad, who's about 16 at the time comes walking across the playground in hi baseball uniform, he was on his way to a high school game up at the field. He sees what's going on and he says, "Hey, Sam, lay off Hicks. Let 'em fight it out." Sam looks up and says, "What do you care?" your dad says, "Now, Beauchamp!" Sammy's all mad and he looks around and sees my baseball glove and grabs it and gets on his bike and starts riding away. I holler between haymakers, "That's my glove!" That really made your dad mad and he takes a step or two to chase him, sees he can't catch 'em, and takes a baseball out of his pocket and wings it towards Sammy on the bike. *(Laughs)* He must have been sixty yards away by then, but your dad had a pretty good arm. The only reason I know what happened next is because Teddy and I forgot we were mad and stopped fighting to watch it. The ball goes on this beautiful arc and comes right down on target. It hits Sammy's back tire, knocks him ass over tea kettle. He jumps up, drops his glove and runs home bawlin'.

(Laughs. Grace pats his shoulder and goes out)

MICHAEL:

Quite a story.

JEN:

I wonder how much it's grown.

MARK (Grins):

What are you insinuating?

JEN:

Your dad's had a lot of crusades since then. You know about his fight against standardized tests?

KATIE:

He lost.

JEN:

And the mandatory computers for all the students?

MICHAEL:

Lost bigger. And still talks about it all the goddamned time!

MARK:

(A little exasperated with the kids)
Of course he lot! That's the point!

KATIE:

Losing is the point?

JEN:

Not losing, what you lose about, "You can tell who a man is by the battles he loses." You grandma used to say that.

MARK:

It's not even really what you lose about, it's that you care. It's that you care enough to fight for something that matters to you, and maybe even the world. That's what your dad does. *(A little wistfully)* Or at least what he used o do. *(Grinning at Jen)* And your aunt too.

JEN:

Shut up you. You don't know me. He's a crusader all right. The good kind. But he's still a doofus. *(Laughs)*

MICHAEL:

What?

JEN:

I was just thinking about when he first met your mom.

KATIE:

Tell us Aunt Jen.

JEN:

He was so excited! He was gonna take her on a big nature excursion out into the Seney Wildlife Refuge. He got all dressed up so he looked like some kind of big game hunter with one of hi stupid hats on. He picks her up and takes her out there. They're having a lovely time I guess, and somewhere along the way he runs over something sharp, way out there on two rut road in the middle of the refuge. The tire blows, and as your mom told me, he goes out and looks over the tire like he knows what he's doing...

MICHAEL:

Dad? He can't even tell one end of a *hammer* from the other...

JEN:

He knew even less then. So he doesn't know where to put the jack. So he gets it out. And Grace said he was so proud that he had it all together right. But anyway, he jacks up your grandmother's brand new Chevy Ventura, under the *fender*... and everything is fine for a while, but then the fender gives way and bends all up. Grace said he just stood there staring at it like a monkey looking at a space ship. After while this old guy comes along and shows him how to do it, right in front of Grace! She said he was so embarrassed he hardly talked all the way home. So, finally, he gets home, and he tries to tell mom what happened, and mom says, "Your dad was right. Once a girl comes in, the brain goes out!"

Then, the first time he brought her out here... Should I tell 'em, Mark?

MARK:

Why not?

JEN:

They were sitting down on the beach with your grandma. Then she went to be and one thing led to another and...well... romance ensued!

MICHAEL:

Oh my god...

KATIE:

Mom and Dad on the beach? Oh my god I'm scared.

MICHAEL (*Sarcastic*):

Oh yeah! It is um... quite an image though.

MARK:

How in hell do you think the two o you go here? Immaculate Conception?

MICHAEL:

Jesus....

MARK:

No, I told you it was natural!

KATIE (*Smiling*):

Super natural.

JEN:

Anyway, then after, they're lying there together and they hear your Grandma coming and Ben tells Grace to dive in the water and he starts picking up the clothes and your Grandma has a flashlight and she shines it on Ben and he turns around holding up *(she's convulsed with laughter)* your Mom's bra and panties and he doesn't have a stick on otherwise and he says... *(Gasping)* he says... "We're fine, Mom!" And your grandma is so embarrassed she doesn't know what else to do so she just turns and walks away leaving your Dad there in the dark, stark naked, holding your Mom's bra and panties. *(Laughing)*

(Pause all laughing)

MARK *(aside):*

Well, that story's change a bit.

JEN:

Shut up you.

EVERYBODY:

You don't know me.

(Laughs)

MICHAEL:

Wait a minute Aunt Jen, how do you know this? That doesn't seem like a story Mom would tell you. And Dad wouldn't tell you *anything* personal on purpose.

Jen shoots Mike a look. Mike is oblivious. Mark is howling with laughter.

MARK:

How do you think she knows? She was spying *(Laughs)* a usual!

JEN:

Shut up you! You don't know me! *(Pause)* Oh Katie, I wish... You and your Mom used to be so tight. *(She pauses)*

MARK:

Hey, Mike, want to take a walk?

KATIE *(Absently):*

It's Michael.

MICHAEL:

No, I want to know. Aunt Jen, what were you gonna say?

JEN:

Oh, Mikey, before your Mom got sick and went all psycho-analytical on everybody, it was just different. Grace was still, well, Gracie... The girl I knew when I was little. She was like my big sister... Later, she just worried too much,... and trying her clinical psychiatrist tricks to control everybody's pain. Well, it just ain't natural.

MARK:

No, super...

JEN:

Shut up, Mark. All that with your mom, with our Gracie, it's really messed the doofus up. Don't forget what an optimist your dad used to be.

MICHAEL:

Dad?

JEN:

Geez. See, that just makes me crazy. Michael, you spent 14 years of your life walking that beach with your mom *and* your dad. Remember the feather story?

Michael rolls his eyes

Ok, whatever. But see, that's your dad all over. And oh God, Grace and that story... Her eyes would just shine when your dad told it. But... that was just one of the stories. You guys made a thousand stories together when you were little. You just don't remember those as well as what happened after.

KATIE:

Jen, Mom never really like the lake, did she? I mean, Dad would just live here if he could.

JEN:

I don't know. Your Dad loved it, so Gracie loved it. And then she got sick and every chance he had, he brought her here, like it could solve everything. And Grace...well, the worse she got, the more distant she'd be.

MICHAEL:

Dad's not good at hiding stuff.

JEN:

Yeah. And she couldn't stand to see him hurt. So there'd be days when it was... It just makes me sad. So, she got clinical and you got pissed.

KATIE:

I wasn't pissed at her.

JEN:

Yeah you were. I was too. So was your dad, though he'd never admit it, can't I guess... So anyway, she went over the edge and started organizing everybody's psychological reactions to everything. Especially yours, Katie.

KATIE:

"There must be a course of action, Katie. There's always a course of action."

MICHAEL:

Nobody was allowed to be sad.

KATIE:

Oh my god, I just got it. Oh my god.

JEN:

Good. That's good Katie

KATIE:

No. No! Oh. My. God. This very piece of beach! Mom told me a hundred times: "This is a special place for you, Katie." Michael...

MICHAEL:

(Coming to same realization)

Oh no.

JEN (Laughing):

And now they know, the rest of the story...

KATIE:

Michael

MICHAEL:

Right...here...

KATIE:

Yeah. It's true isn't it Jen? We were conceived... right here.

JEN:

Oh yeah.

MARK:

I can vouch for that. Well, for Katie's. I wasn't there for Michael's...

MICHAEL:

What the hell does that mean?

JEN:

That's why the fire pit's right here. Your dad said...

KATIE:

Stop! Oh my god Jen! You know there are some lake stories you should keep to yourself!

MARK:

There's all kinds of lake stories. Some of 'em are sex on the beach. Some of 'em are poetry.

JEN:

And some sex on the beach is poetry

MICHAEL:

Yeah, and you guys need to stop.

JEN:

You're lucky your names aren't beach and fire pit.
So, speaking of poetry, how am I going to get revenge for the note he wrote me?

MARK:

Why don't we write that sex-craze poet a poem?

JEN:

That's perfect! He's been guarding that damned notebook since he was a teenager. And even now, after all these years, and all the times he's been published, he still guards it. It's like his pacifier.

KATIE:

That's evil. I'm in. (*Grabs the notebook*)

MICHAEL:

Not in the notebook! Those are his poems! That's Dad's special book. He writes all his first drafts in there.

JEN:

He's got lots of blank pages.

MARK:

Michael, he'll think it's funny, honest. You know your dad. The one thing he can do is take a joke.

MICHAEL:

(A bit concerned, then smiles a bit)

Yeah, yeah, he will think it's funny. It might even cheer him up a bit. Okay. Let's base it on one of the poems in there.

JEN:

Let's work from the first line of *Lake Stories*. I don't even have to look.

EVERYONE:

"Lake stories, stories that float on this wet essence..."

JEN:

That wasn't the first poem he ever got published, but I think it was the one he liked the best.

MARK *(Inspired):*

I've got it.

Mark takes out a pencil and writes. Shows it to the others. Everybody stars laughing.

KATIE:

I've got the next line! *(Writes. Everyone laughs)*

JEN:

Okay, okay, and then... *(Writes, shows, laughter)*

MARK:

I hear bad singing.

KATIE *(Smiling):*

That would be Dad.

MICHAEL:

(Obvious relief on his face)

He always sings when he's coming in from a paddle.

KATIE:

Or from fishing...

MARK:

With no fish.

MICHAEL:

He catches them sometimes.

MARK:

Not when I'm with him.

MIKE (Laughs):

Katie, remember our lullaby?

KATIE:

Take me out to the ballgame?

JEN:

Only Ben would do that.

MICHAEL:

He'd sing it in kind of a hushed tone. I remember going to a Tigers game when I was about eight and suddenly realizing that my lullaby was a baseball drinking song!

JEN:

You guys head on up. I don't want him to think we've been gossiping about him.

MARK:

Yeah, like he's not going to figure it out.

JEN:

Get out of here. Go! Go! Go!

The song gets louder. Michael, Katie, and Mark head up to the cabin. Jen sits down by the fire trying not to look guilty. She's terrible at it. Ben comes in and puts the canoe paddle away. He's still whistling the tune.

BEN:

Now, does that sound like a depressed man to you?

JEN:

You know how to put on a good face.

BEN:

Shut up you! You don't know me.

JEN:

Ben, come on up to the cabin.

BEN:

You know, when you were laying down the law to me, you know who you reminded me of...

JEN:

Don't say it.

BEN:

Mom! God she knew how to handle her kids.

JEN:

You have kids too, Ben. Those kids still need their crazy ol' nature lovin' Shakespeare quotin' dad. And Ben, *(Pause)* I still need my big brother, if for nothing else, then for his old stories. Do you want the big bad machines to eat us all up? Who's going to be the nut job standing at the abyss keeping us all safe if you don't do it?

BEN:

Remember summer mornings out here?

JEN:

Oh God, I'm wasting...

BEN:

We'd be back on the bunks... *(Here comes Mama with the pancake turner)*

JEN:

Okay, it appears you're just down here hosting the Ben O'Brian nostalgia festival, so I guess you're okay. *(Anger at the edge of her voice)* I don't see any guns or knives or razors or empty bottle of pharmaceuticals and I guess if you decided to go on a one way swim we'd all hear the big splash caused by your raggedy old body, so

JEN (con.):

I'll leave you alone, but not for long. At dawn I'm coming out with the pancake turner...

BEN:

Jen.

JEN:

(Turns, hopeful)

Yes Ben?

BEN:

You know, sound travels really well over water... did you guys mean all that nice stuff you said? *(Grin is wry and growing)* And by the way if you're going to warp my kids by telling them about my sexual escapades with their *mother* you might want to get the goddamned story right! We were out in the lake when mom came down and I wasn't holding Grace's bra and panties! Jesus, you make things up out of whole cloth!

Jen turns like her mother before her and stomps off exasperated and somewhat amused. Environmental sounds. Ben sits alone for a second. His mood quite suddenly turns dark. Then he reaches into his pocket and takes out the knife. He repeats his actions with it from the beginning of the play. This has become a ritual. Quietly Michael walks out onto the porch in running clothes, sees his father and what's he's doing, gets a look of panic, takes a step, hesitates, then the door opens and we hear Jen's voice from off stage. Michael seeks out the shadows at the stage right end of the porch. Ben quickly closes the knife upon hearing Jen's voice.

JEN:

Huck's coming out. He was waiting here at the door. Maybe he can talk some sense into you.

BEN:

Finally, I get to talk to somebody who understands me.

JEN:

Dawn! No longer. Then it's the pancake turner.

BEN:

Sneak!

JEN:

Doofus!

BEN:

Hey Huck. C'mere. *(Whistle if necessary)* They talking your ears off in there buddy? I know the feeling. You've got the right idea. Keep your own good

BEN (con.):

counsel. You know, the thing is you know more than any of us. You could walk down that beach, right now, with nothing but your good nose to guide you and know more about who's been there and what they think of the world than any of us could find in a hundred year. We're all senseless compared to you. Absolutely senseless. "Even the roses is not what they supposes and goodness only knowses the noselessness of man." G.K. Chesterton. At least I think so. I could look it up. *(Sarcastically)* Maybe I could Google it! You think anything I do is funny, don't you? And you absolutely agree with me about everything. Or, if you don't, you have the good sense to keep quiet about it.

JEN (From off stage):

I heard that.

Jen comes out onto the porch. Throughout this exchange Ben is shaking his head and petting Huck.

MARK (From off stage):

Will you leave the poor guy alone for Christ's sake? *(Comes out through screen door)*
He's just trying to get some sleep.

JEN:

No he isn't! He's talking to his dog, in the middle of the night, on the goddamned beach!

MARK:

So?

JEN:

So? Well that's just the pinnacle of male wisdom isn't it? "So?"

MARK:

You're gonna wake the kids up.

MICHAEL:

(Coming out of the shadows)

I'm awake already.

KATIE:

(Coming out of the shadows)

So am I.

BEN:

Go to sleep. All of you.

MARK:

Hear that Jen? That's you: "all."

Mark opens the door for Jen; she passes him giving him a stare. Michael and Katie follow, finally, Mark goes in.

BEN:

(Gets sleeping bag)

I'm gonna settle in down here. *(He lies down the bag)* You staying Huck? *(Dog lies down)* Good boy. Let's just sit here and smell the stars and see if we can figure it all out. *(Long pause)*

GRACE:

Been, a course of action. You need a course of action.

BEN:

Say good night Gracie.

GRACE:

Good night, Gracie.

End of Act I

Lake Stories

By B.G. Bradley

Act II

Same scene. Some hours later. Ben wakes up and goes to the fire. He takes up the notebook again and opens it. Huck is nearby. He starts writing a poem and while he does so Grace comes in, looks over his shoulder. She kisses the top of his head.

BEN:

It's never as simple as it seems or always is
Our dreams are half truths we tell ourselves
And are told from outside our inside. Inside out

To shout the words before we're sure
Is dangerous folly
To wholly know is the goal:
To drink ambrosia
And eat nectar

To know the stars as friends
And take only as much note
Of beginnings and ends
As suits those loving tricksters
Life and death

Breath is not made of air
Nor earth of dust
All trusts must be tested
And thus all tests will disappear

To hear the colors of all the suns
Of men and gods
Is to be finally not at odds
With what is and will be

To need tragedy
To weep at birth
Is the meaning of all
The Earth and cosmos
Besides

(Pause)

Not bad I didn't know I could still do it.

GRACE:

It's a start Ben.

Katie and Michael come in running in running garb from the back of the house. They head up on the stage and startle him. Grace is smiling broadly as she watches them. Then she goes off as they come in.

BEN:

Pretty late for a run.

KATIE:

You're sleeping on the beach, when your cabin is 20 yards away.

BEN:

Shut up you...

KATIE:

Good night, Michael. See you in the morning.

MICHAEL:

(Turning at the foot of the stairs)

Aren't you coming?

KATIE:

Nope. I'm going to see if I can get this old man to go to sleep.

BEN:

Goodnight Mike, take Huck will ya? *(Michael stiffens a little at the name)* He never sleeps well down here.

MICHAEL:

Sure. C'mere Huck. *(They go off)*

KATIE:

Okay now Dad, enough is enough.

BEN:

Gonna talk some sense into me, eh?

KATIE:

Stop treating me like a little girl. You know I hate that.

BEN:

Even when you were a little girl you did.

KATIE:

(Down to business)

I want to talk to you about Mom.

BEN:

Oh Jesus...

KATIE:

Now listen to me. No one's the saint you make Mom out to be.

BEN:

Now Katie...

KATIE:

Nobody! Her psychiatry, her "science", her method it's like experiments with people's heads, sometimes. Control, that's the thing. Control! That's what she tried to do to me. She still does that to you and to Michael, even now!

Pause. Katie and Ben look into each other's eyes. Ben smiles as if to say "get real"

BEN:

Katie, if you love someone, what you love most, is their charming little flaws. You'll learn that soon with what's his name. Now cut your mother some slack.

KATIE:

Okay, Dad. *(Pause)* Now, you need to go to sleep.

BEN:

Okay Grace.

KATIE:

I'll let that one slide. Get back under your quilt. I'm going to tell you a story.

BEN:

(Lying down)

Wow... Okay, I'm all ears.

KATIE:

(Katie tells the contest story of the night)

BEN:

You're getting good at this. Okay, now the song.

KATIE:
What song?

BEN:
The song.

KATIE:
Oh Dad, you're ridiculous!

BEN:
And *that's* the charming little flaw you have to love about *me*.

Katie shakes her head and shrugging she sings "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" as a lullaby

KATIE:
Are you asleep?

BEN:
No, but it helped.

KATIE:
Really?

BEN:
Naturally.

KATIE:
Super naturally.

Katie smiles, shakes her head and goes up the stairs. As soon as she's gone Ben gets up, goes to his journal, opens it reads what he's written earlier silently. Grace enters as he is reading.

BEN:
Not bad. I didn't know if I could still do it.

GRACE:
Of course you can.

BEN:
(Turning another page)
What the hell is this?
"Lake Stories
Stories that float on this wet essences

BEN (con.):

Like your chili farts in the night
That make us take flight
Don't blame it on the dog
And hey, the word is blog

With love,
Your Family"

(Laughing)

This one, I'm saving. You know, you can't control an O'Brian. Mark was trying his best to get them to sleep... Mark does like to sleep. Almost as much as Huck, but while he was down the kids were out running around the lake in the dark. Still, I'm glad Jen's got Mark. Only a guy who works with criminals could put up with that. *(Turns towards the house)* Well, *she's* not awake.

(Pause)

"Gracie and the swallows"
(Throws story into the fire)

GRACE:

They were bats, Ben.

BEN:

"Easter at the Lake"
(Throws story into the fire)

GRACE:

It wasn't Spring.

BEN:

(Pause)
Here it is!

I had a dream once, under this old quilt....
Well, actually I had that dream tonight. But it could have been any night.
Out here.

GRACE:

Stay warm.

BEN:

And in that dream all the good men I'd ever known
Were standing along the rim of that valley
Behind the lake

In a mist, under a full moon
We were all dressed as ourselves.
Some in business suits,
So engrained were they in what they do
But most of us dressed in leather jerkins
Frontier caps
Holding flintlocks
Oh, some had bad swords and kilts

Some were in baseball spikes
Cradling gloves and balls wielding bats
Some looked into the distance
Others straight down at their hands
Wondering, knowing, smiling at the chances
Dreams have many purposes

All we did was know in that dream
All we did was not to each other in confident glances

We lack everywhere else
We knew exactly who we were
And why we were there

The kind was coming
Real as the awn
The kind
No, not Elvis
THE king,
The one we've always been waiting for
He one who pulls back the hood,
And tell Robin of Loxley that he's Richard,
Back from he crusades
All will be well
The one who wears a million hoods,
A million masks

BEN (con.):

He was coming

And we were all there rallied to his cause
And then, of course, just as the battle cries rose,
Sounding from each masculine mouth
Unique and joined in righteous promise
Of justice and safety and freedom forever,
Just as all those hunters and warriors and wizards
And ball players came together in that wondrous
War cry
Just as the kind emerged from the forest
Just as he almost raised his regal head,
I woke, under this old quilt

(Puts poem in the fire)

MARK:

(Opening the door)

Can't this wait until daylight. I'll take him fishing.

JEN:

You go talk some sense into him. Right now.

MARK:

Jesus, I'm half asleep.

JEN:

Well, wake up. *(Pause)* Just a second. *(She leaves and returns almost immediately)* Here is some beer. Go bond.

MARK:

(Walking groggily down the steps) Okay, what in hell is this about? *(Emerges into the light holding a six-pack)* I'm gone for six months and you turn into a whack job. I have half a mind to call your brothers.

BEN:

They already know.

MARK:

Jen told 'em right?

BEN:

Yup.

MARK:

What'd they say.

BEN:

Snap out of it.

MARK:

Sage advice. *(Hands him a beer and racks one himself)*

BEN:

Your turn. Solve my problems.

MARK:

What problems? You've got a great family which includes two mildly impaired children, two wildly psychotic brothers, two clearly brilliant nephews, a sister who keeps your ass and mine in line, not to mention a stunningly handsome, intellectually gifted, social worker Brother-in-law who keeps the criminal element at bay for you, brings you free beer and gives you credit for all the fish you didn't catch and birds you didn't shoot.

BEN:

Hey!

MARK:

Sorry, I know, fishing and hunting is personal...

BEN:

And?

MARK:

What happens at camp...

MARK AND BEN:

...stays at camp.

MARK:

Anyway, what's more, you're gainfully employed, and it's rare for anyone with your advanced age and senility to have a job that doesn't involve greeting people in superstores. What's more you have managed, despite your obvious lack of talent, to eek out a sizeable supplemental income fiddling around with words for

MARK (con.):

your seriously demented cult like followers, who enjoy hearing about little fuzzy wuzzies, and chronicles of your perhaps drug induced conversations with celestial bodies. Last, you live, despite the fact that you have the where with all not to, in the U.P.; the land of your birth and choosing, where winter's not a season, its life. You, are the luckiest man on the face of the earth.

BEN (burps):

Well put. Shut up and drink.

(Pause)

MARK:

So, I'm under orders to ask you, what's the trouble?

BEN (Smiles):

Honestly? I'm not sure there is any. Is sitting by a campfire for a few weeks trouble?

MARK:

I'm told it's been better than a month, and most of that alone except for this manage factory here. So, yes, unless you're Herbie the Hermit, which you've never been before, I'd say you've got trouble. *(Pause)* C'mon, quit screwing around here! Tell me what's going on.

BEN:

Cutting into your sleep, eh?

MARK:

Damn straight. Ben, help me out here.

BEN:

Okay but just don't treat me like one of your low life clients. Grace...already...

(Pause)

MARK:

Your secret's safe with me, but....

BEN:

Not with Jen, right?

MARK:

Naturally.

BEN *(to himself)*:
Super naturally.

MARK:
(A look of concern)

Ben, it's been five years. Haven't you, I mean, you must have had opportunities...

BEN:
No on part A Yes on part B. And before you ask, yes, I do think about it... often.
What's more, there was a lot more to my old life than that.

(Pause)

MARK:
How 'bout them Tigers?

BEN:
What's the score tonight?

MARK:
It's over. Jesus, what time you think it is? They lost, 4-2.

BEN:
I guess I've lost track. Umm...who are they playing?

MARK:
You, don't know? Now I am worried. The Yankees!
(Ben laughs)
What?

BEN:
I was just thinking about the baseball games we used to play out here.

MARK *(Grins)*:
Rolled up tinfoil around an old sock, for a ball. A stick for a bat. And we batted right in front of the picture window! Why did your mom let that happen?

BEN:
I don't think she knew. She was awful busy in the kitchen in the summer. She was happy to have the sons and their friends out of her hair. Jesus, you were always coming over here...

MARK:
It wasn't to hang around with you guys.

BEN:

Yeah, I figured that out after you married her.

MARK:

If you hit the ball in the lake and nobody caught it, it was a home run. *(Laughs)*
Remember, right in the middle of the games somebody would yell, “Pinnings!”

BEN *(Laughs):*

And from that time on if you threw the ball at a guy and hit him, he was out. And the ball was just drenched and heavy of course, and it hurt like hell when you got hit.

MARK:

Which was the reason for the rule to begin with!
Jake always claimed it was your fault.

BEN:

Sure, typical Jake logic, he pins me with the ball, raises a four inch welt on my forehead which starts to bleed...

MARK:

The ball bounces off your head and goes through the window and Jake yells *(Stifling laughter)* he yells...

MARK AND BEN:

Benny’s fault!

Both break into hysterics. Pause

MARK:

Remember the card games we use to play?

BEN:

And what about the poker game?

MARK:

Jesus, which one?

BEN:

The poker game. The one out here after I graduated from college.

MARK:

Easy now, I won Jen in that poker game.

BEN:

Hey, that's my sister you're talking about!

MARK:

Maybe you shouldn't have bet her then!

(They both laugh)

BEN:

Your fifty bucks.

MARK:

Versus your sister!

BEN:

Well, he right to date her anyway. What happened after that, could have still put your life at risk. There were three of us brothers after all.

MARK:

I wasn't worried about what you guys would do. What Jen might do if I did something she didn't like...now that was a concern.

BEN:

That was quite a poker game.

MARK:

God, you were drunk that night.

BEN:

I must have been to let you date my sister! But it's worked out okay I guess.

MARK:

Remember that night we broke into the old lighthouse?

BEN:

Oh my god, I'd blocked that out! You told me to come on up and you'd show me a secret fishing hole north of Marquette...

MARK:

Except we never exactly made it there.

BEN:

We ran into your delinquent friends.

MARK:

And we went on an adventure. *(Tells the Superior Dome Story except now it's an old lighthouse. C'mon, Rob, improvise! Then Laughter)*

BEN:

Remember naked porcupine hunting?

(Ray's story, with this twist, mark holds the dog, Ben runs for the .22 Ben shoots the porcupine just as the wives show up with the kids)

MARK:

God, how did we live through all that?

BEN:

That was living...dangerously. God, that was so long ago.

MARK:

You figure you're living now, Ben.

BEN:

Wow. Lower the boom why don't you.

MARK:

Down here on this beach. Is this a life?

BEN:

Well...thinking, remembering is living. I guess

MARK:

The life of the mind is life without love.

BEN:

That from a play about a guru who leaves the mountain to discover true life among the common folk?

MARK:

Nope, it was beautifully etched on the bathroom wall in a truck stop on our way here.

(Pause)

MARK:

Seriously. Jen's worried. So are the kids.

BEN:

Et tu Brute.

MARK:

Well, your untimely demise would upset my wife, and that always affects me. Yes, me too. You've come a long way through a lot of pure excrement in the last seven years to dwindle away on a beach. *(Pause)* What's the plan once winter comes? I mean, it's gonna get pretty cold down here.

BEN:

Igloo... I'll have it figured out by then.

MARK:

Promise?

BEN:

Yeah, I'll have the igloo figure out by then. *(Pause)* I promise. Hey, take the rest of the beer. I don't want to be accused of being a drunk too.

MARK:

I guess that's my cue. *(Pause)* Ben?

BEN:

Yeah?

MARK:

I cheated in that card game. *(Laugh)* Let's go fishing tomorrow.

BEN:

We'll see.

Mark goes upstairs to the camp. Ben opens the notebook again. Grace enters as he reads.

And so, it comes back
After the wind and the water,
Fire and snow
After everything I know and knew once about hawks and eagles,
Bear and bobcat,
Wandering moose

BEN (con.):
Ridiculous otter
After all that and myriads more
It comes back to you.
You with your hair like the whirling fires of my oldest dreams.

GRACE:
No Ben.

BEN:
Gracie

GRACE:
Tell me the feather story.

Ben offers to tell the story. Michael enters quietly onto the porch. As Ben begins to tell the story Grace starts to walk down stage. Her reaction to the story are at first warm, then they fade to a kind of blankness until, by the end of the story she is partially in shadow downstage and he is standing upstage of her. As Ben tells the story Grace attempts to bring him to tell the truth with interjections. Grace exits as he is telling the story.

BEN:
God, it was so pretty that morning. Michael was 8 and Katie was 5. Michael was wearing that big dopey sun hat you made him wear. And Katie had on her ball cap. Some things never change. We got under that big eagle perch and here he was, right above us. The white head just shining. I pint up at him; they didn't see him a first, but then they did and Katie shouted "Wow!" and he took off and just as he cleared the tree on off his tail feathers came out and started drifting down on that light breeze. And it's just floating back and forth you know and I see Michael watching it and for no reason I can think of I say, "Catch it Mike!" and he stars running back and forth with his hands out and cupped like this following that feather and finally...finally...it comes down so, so light. Right into his outstretched hands just as the sun stars to come up behind him. And he turns around and walks back o me with his eyes as big as saucers. I say, "You see kids? You see why your old Dad takes you out to the natural world?" And Katie looks up at me, those wheels just turning in her head just like always and she says, "Dad, that not natural; that's supernatural." (Pause) Gracie?

Grace is gone completely. He looks into the darkness hopelessly Michael is alarmed, frazzled, tries to call out a few times, can't, Ben reaches into his pocket and takes out the knife with a look of determination on his face. He advances downstage with the knife opened. His face cold with determination. Michael frantic, blurts out eh firs thing that comes into his head.

MICHAEL:
Dad! I... want to show you blog! (He sprints down quickly)

BEN:

What?

Ben closes the knife quickly and putting it back in his pocket.

MICHAEL:

My blog!

BEN:

(Turning, bewildered)

Your...

MICHAEL:

Blog.

BEN:

Blog

MICHAEL:

Blog.

BEN:

Maybe later.

MICHAEL:

Now.

BEN:

Well...I don't really know much about this stuff...

MICHAEL:

The hell you don't! It's writing.

BEN:

(Looking out into the darkness)

I can't.

MICHAEL:

You won't. But you can. *(Pause)* Dad, what's in your pocket?

BEN:

My?

MICHAEL:

Pocket.

BEN:

It's nothing.

MICHAEL:

You used to say "Never carry a knife unless you intend to use I for some good purpose." What's your purpose, Dad?

BEN:

Don't ask that.

MICHAEL:

Okay, okay, but come inside.

BEN:

Son, what's left of my life is out here.

MICHAEL:

What, Mom? Mom's dead Dad. She's been dead for five years! Everybody knows that but you.

BEN:

I miss her so much.

MICHAEL:

Of course you do! You think I don't? You think Katie doesn't?

BEN:

But...but...we talked it out. We were always talking about it. Before she died and after until I was sure you guys were okay.

MICHAEL:

Dad, are you okay? Who were *you* talking to after Mom died that was making sure you were okay? Because the only person you ever talked to about anything serious, without making it into a joke, was Mom! And worst of all you stopped writing! Jesus, Dad, what did you think would happen? You ready to talk yet? You ready to talk to someone who's still alive? You read to talk to your son?

BEN:

Jesus...

MICHAEL:

And another thing. The feather story? That's a great story, Dad. It's beautiful. It's like your poetry. But Dad, it's not really true. At least not literally.

BEN:

What do you...

MICHAEL:

I didn't catch the feather Dad...

BEN:

Sure you...

MICHAEL:

No, no I didn't! Think. What really happened is you said, "Catch it, Mike!" I didn't move. So you just started running, just the way you describe me running and you came back and I did put my hands out, and I did want that feather, but I was...afraid somehow. Paralyzed. I just didn't know what you expected of me. I still don't. I spent years trying to figure out what I was supposed to do with that damned feather. And finally, now, it is happening, but you can't see it. You don't...you won't. Dad, what I just saw scared me to death. *(Pause)* Now, give me that knife you crazy son of a bitch or I swear to God I'll take it from you by force.

Ben bewildered and a touch of pride of his son. *Ben* reaches into his pocket and hands over the knife. *Michael* takes the knife and fake throws it into the lake. *Pause*

BEN:

Son, That's a \$50 Buck knife! *(Pause)* Michael.

The two of them look at each other and for a long moment and then break into hysterical laughter.

MICHAEL:

This I gonna make a hell of a blog!

The family scrambles down to the camp including Huck.

JEN:

Ben?

Ben's wiping away tears with *Michael* standing close beside him.

Ah, Ben.

She puts her arms around him and the family gathers near. *Pause*

Now, you listen to me, you doofus! Your life is not over.

BEN:
I know.

JEN:
She's gone.

BEN:
I know.

JEN:
Grace is gone and the rest of us have known that for a while.

BEN:
I know.

JEN:
Now you've fought the good fight for long enough, but it's time to let down your guard!

BEN:
I know.

JEN:
It's time to let us take over for a while. Take care of you.

BEN:
I know.

JEN:
And then you need to get out there and live again.

BEN:
I know.

JEN:
You know?

BEN:
Yes...

JEN:
You let me say nice things about you, and give you that stupid pep talk, and you knew?

MARK:

Well all humor you most of the time, Jen.

MICHAEL:

Your food is good though.

BEN:

Most of the time.

*Jen goes over to **Katie** and takes her by the shoulders and says earnestly to her...*

JEN:

Pigs, we're surrounded by pigs.

KATIE (Laughs):

Ya think?

BEN:

Jen?

JEN:

Yes, Ben?

BEN:

Can we go up to the cabin now? I'm getting kind of cold.

JEN (Smiles):

Doofus!

BEN:

Sneak!

JEN:

We're not going in yet. You've been hogging this fire all summer. We're all going to sit down here together for a while. Maybe...jut maybe... we'll tell some stories.

*They sit down with **Ben** at the center. **Katie** and **Michael** to his left and right and **Mark** and **Jen** at the far ends.*

MICHAEL:

Remember the time Huck at the blackberry pie?

(Laughter from everyone)

MARK:

The berries just dripping down from his chin...

KATIE:

Or the time the chipmunk supposedly bit off Michael's toenail.

MICHAEL:

That really happened!

MARK:

Yeah, sure it did, and Ben really caught that lake trout that's mounted in the camp wall.

BEN:

Hey now...

JEN:

Gracie knew! She found the wrapper from the fish market in the garbage you doofus.

BEN:

So much for my prize catch.

JEN:

Gracie was your prize catch.

BEN:

(Pause) Yes she was... C'mon Huck, let's go up to the cabin.

KATIE:

I get the comfy chair.

The lights slowly go out downstage as they head up the stairs into the cabin.

MARK:

Finally I get to sleep.

JEN:

That's what you think.

KATIE:

I'm scarred Michael... Scarred.

End of Act II