The two of us say our goodnights to the rest of the family and fake drowsiness with a couple of well-rehearsed yawns as we haul ourselves up the old wooden stairs to our shared room. It’s a mid-July night; the hot, sticky day has finally given way to the warm and breezy night. We crank open shutters and allow the gusts to filter out the stuffy smell of moth balls. There’s no air conditioning in this house, no television, no internet: a welcome, annual, weeklong escape.

Flopping down onto the old, springy bed, we feel no need for the dusty covers. The lamp gets turned off with a pull of the cord and we click into heavy and immediate darkness. We lie on our stomachs facing each other, chins resting on the heels of our hands and legs crossed up in the air, that position girls just seem to lie in when they have a clichéd story to tell. Our eyes soon adjust to the moonlight and we begin to talk and laugh in hushed tones as we recount our many tales.

We are starting to become impatient when finally, our cell phones, like cell phones all around the lake, light up, a modern day invitation that prevents us from escaping the 21st century altogether. Smiling, we hop out of bed and pull on our damp bathing suits that have been thrown in a heap on the floor, leaving a squishy wet spot on the split-pea carpet that never gets the opportunity to dry. The swimsuits are chilly against our skin and smell of the lake. We cinch towels around our waists and tiptoe across the small square room.

Unlatching the bedroom door, we begin the agonizing descent down the ancient staircase. The dark wooden lake house has seen this scheme played out many times before, both by us as well as many members who sit high in the branches of my family tree. These relatives become the house as it disapprovingly creaks beneath our feet, a tired attempt to teach us what can only be taught through time. Halfway down the staircase we pause for a moment to touch the old, worn, mounted elk that looms over the staircase, a quirky good-luck tradition that has been passed down through the family. The ancestors who are watching us now did the same thing when they risked escape into the night many years ago.

After we have made it down the stairs, they make one last attempt, screeching through the floorboards as we walk feather-footed toward the porch. Finally, they give up as we reach the screened door. However, the dog has apparently heard us, because she is sitting expectantly by the door, wagging her tail and squeaking quietly, hoping to go for a walk in the woods. I pat her on the head and hush her with an index finger to my lips, and she drops her head, disappointed, and slinks back to her bed. The relatives allow us to slip out into the night.

Our bare feet pat against the crumbly stone steps, the dewy, vibrant moss that has blanketed them squishes between our toes as we hop down them. As we hurry toward the boathouse sharp rocks and sticks try to harass the hardened soles of our feet, the same feet that went on an ambitious, near-vertical hike – without shoes, of course – this afternoon. Footwear is non-existent in the summertime. Our battered feet don’t even notice the cuts and scrapes anymore.

Reaching the boathouse, we lower the hundred-year-old canoe into the water soundlessly – a much practiced maneuver that has become second-nature. Stepping carefully to our seats, we glide on top of the motionless water and out of the cove without a sound. The ancient residents
of the home watch our wake anxiously as we depart, already desperate for our safe return. We put them through this tiring routine most every night.

The full moon has already reached its peak and has begun its descent, casting pale blue light, bright as day, as we reach the huge float. We tether up our canoe and hop out, unfurling our towels, claiming our spots. We wait a few moments and others begin to arrive, gathering in the space around us. There are only eight of us tonight, an intimate group compared to the usual crowd. Conversation shifts to our battle scars. We all compare, a short of contest: I have a gash on my shin from a slip in a rocky brook and a killer sting from a massive wasp on my ankle; she has a scrape that has a pebble burrowed into it that she can’t seem to pick out; he has a scratch on his jaw from where he pushed through thick brush. All a typical day’s work.

I go to the edge of the float and dip my left leg into the water, swishing it back and forth to wash the grit out of my cut. The water, having been soaking in the sun’s rays all day, is now freakishly warm compared to the night air, resulting in a nearly invisible layer of fog lolling over the surface. I can’t help but slip in. I swim out to our secret, submerged rock formation that allows you to stand on it with only your head and shoulders breaking the water’s surface. A few join me as they realize where I went; two nervous girls stay on the float, wary of the thick, sleek, black water snake we witnessed slithering into the lake earlier in the day.

It’s difficult for us to keep a grip on the slimy, algae-covered rock with our toes; a few will occasionally lose their footing and I’ll help them back up. We are all still as we listen to songs from artists like Tom Petty, the Eagles, Credence Clearwater Revival, Van Morrison and The Doors echoing from the distant float. A motorboat slowly approaches and we all fall silent, now just six motionless heads sitting on the lake. We wait as it passes; it must be going two miles per hour. Its green, blinking light fades into the distance as we swim back to the float.

We climb up the cold, steel ladder and towel off. The sound of a train’s whistle quietly reaches us from where it passes at the distant crossing. Normally, if we were at our homes we would be racing down to the tracks to catch it, standing dangerously close to the tracks, taking in its immensity as it flies by, laughing as the conductor hoots his ear shattering horn at us. However, knowing we would never make it in time from out here, we stay, content, as Jim Morrison concludes Spanish Caravan, leaving us in silence.

The moon has fallen now, and we lie on our backs watching the thousands of stars, as if we’re waiting for something. There are always more stars here. Occasionally a meteor will shoot by; the white streak of our galaxy’s spiral arm is painted across the sky. The breeze, which seemed warm when we first set out, now chills us to the bone as our sopping bathing suits soak the towels we lie on. It delivers the scent of the piney woods as we listen to its random gusts rustle through boughs in the distant wood: the soundtrack to our night. The abundance of black bears eye us indifferently as they pass behind trunks that line the shore; it’s almost as if we have an unspoken agreement. Soon the sky appears so deep that we can almost see the three-dimensional layers of space reaching out infinitely. It is at this point that we realize how small and insignificant we are; the day brings adventure and hurriedness into our lives, which makes us the center of our own universes. However, by night, we escape out here to remember again – to be grounded and humbled – knowing we will forget this realization with the new day.

We stay like this, chatting infrequently, when someone notices the horizon is turning light blue. Birds begin to sing as they wake. This is our cue to head home, and our circle parts, knowing we will all be together at the next lighting up of our phones. The two of us glide back into the boathouse as the sky takes on an intense orange. The realization is already slipping to the backs of our minds; we are ready to rest. Running back up the mossy steps, we pass over the
threshold of the house, whose residents are relieved at our return. As always, they let us slip back up the stairs and into our room without a single sound.