

A Quiet Wave Come Each July

(To my brother, Jay)

By Janet Ladrach

Adult Category: Second Place

I felt smug having the best gift. For your high school graduation, I was giving you a trip to the North Woods of Canada. I had worked at an environmental research camp there the summer before and knew just what to show you.

We would canoe on freshwater lakes so clear you could see 15 feet to the bottom. It would feel like flying, before we jumped in to swim to shore. We would scramble over the pink granite of the Laurentian shield to hike through thick conifer woods. Along the narrow paths, peat moss mounded over tree roots. It was deep enough to swallow your leg up to your knee. You had never been to such a place. You would love it.

North of Kenora, out of the lakes, you would see the islands of pines, some with sandy beaches that Leo Kottke sang about. You could take *your* guitar. We might see a moose and even if we didn't, we would still see tons of blueberries. We'd pick them, make blueberry jam and bottle it in green Moosehead beer bottles to bring home.

Having just turned 18 on the 20th of July, you were one of the youngest in your class. The last of the four of us, (Janet, Jeff, Jean, and Jay), you were a surprise. Mom and Dad had worked hard to keep you on track and it had been tiring. They had wanted you to have another year in first grade in the new school when they moved to town, but the teacher wouldn't agree. So, you struggled with school your whole life. But that was done now, and you had a chance to

see beyond Tiffin, a small town in flatland Ohio, where you would most likely end up. When I asked if I could take you on this trip, mom said, "Go ahead. Take him."

At 11 P.M. on July 22, you and I, with Claire, (your five-year-old niece and my only child) left Tiffin, and headed North. We wanted to drive at night to skip all the boring old scenery we already knew: Toledo, Detroit, and the southern parts of Michigan that look just like Ohio.

Sometime in the night we evidently stopped for gas because a traveler's check was missing from your wallet. They said two off-duty EMTs came upon us right after the car flipped over, about 3:30 in the morning. Claire and I were thrown free. Supposedly I told the state troopers that I was driving, but your crushed chest was evidence to the contrary. Maybe I was trying to keep you from getting into trouble.

In Ohio, other state troopers knocked on Mom and Dad's door.

At the hospital in Petoskey, Michigan, I asked how you and Claire were. The tone of the nurse's voice, when I finally understood, made it clear that I'd been asking that question repeatedly. She said, evenly, "Jay is dead. Claire is OK. She is next door." I asked if Claire could be with me and was surprised and grateful when they brought her to my room. They pushed her bed right next to mine.

Jeani, our sister, told me later that when she first walked into the room all she could smell was blood. I don't remember her being there, but she stepped into the role of: Dispenser of Information to the Family. Something she still does. She told me my ex had sent his girlfriend back home on the bus. Nobody needed her there at the hospital, but Claire needed her daddy and his presence for the next three days helped her heal. The nurses told Jeani that it was touch and go for me. Brain swelling. They only knew I was OK at the very moment someone asked.

Claire was banged up but all right. I can see her black eye and the scabs on our knees. We still have the scars.

I don't remember anything of the accident. At first, I thought it would catch me unexpectedly, when I was driving, or pulling into a gas station. There is only a blurry memory of looking over the backseat while you walked around the front of the car, probably that stop for gas. I remember them setting my left index finger at the hospital. They told me it might hurt. I noticed a slight cracking sound as it was put into place. That was all.

Jeani thought I blocked it out all these years because I felt guilty or that I had unfinished business with you. I don't know what that business could be. You were my baby brother. I held you on the way home from Mercy hospital when you were just four days old and I was 13. I taught you how to play Candy Land and how to enjoy being wet in a summer rain when you were just five. When I went away to college, you grew up with only occasional interactions with me. My grown-up life took my attention. For your graduation, I wanted to give you something special; to spend time with my younger brother. Just me and you and Claire.

On the first anniversary of the accident, Jeff and I talked long distance on the phone, missing our baby brother. We actually said it out loud, him first, through tears and voices that caught in our throats. We shared stories about you. Mom had a plant from your funeral that she had tended all that year. She was convinced that if it bloomed around July 23, you were "all right", meaning in heaven. We all prayed that it would. And it did. Dad visited your gravesite regularly, spending time with his youngest boy – feeling older than he should have. Both of them are sure to keep flowers there still.

Unbelievably, time does fill the empty space. I continued with my teaching career and added to my degree. I got remarried and moved to a farm. I traveled to China, Australia, and

Ireland. Claire finished high school, went to college in California, and got married there. Her stepdad and I hosted the Ohio reception in our backyard at the farm.

Thirty years later, July 23 waves a quiet hand. The date doesn't give me a jolt as it did early on. I don't find myself frantically starting complicated projects in the middle of July only to later realize why I needed to be extra busy. References to you no longer make me look down.

Claire has little recollections of those past events, but she has a new baby girl who brings us all joy. I will teach Isis how to play Candy Land and enjoy getting wet in a summer rain. If you were here, I'm sure you would join us, though being 48 instead of 18, maybe not. Still, you always had a soft spot for little ones. Mom and Dad have a picture of you in a lawn chair holding Emily and Aaron (our twin niece and nephew), with Claire leaning into you at the arm of the chair. They loved their Uncle Jay.

Now, instead of the North Woods, I will take my granddaughter to Chincoteague Island, where I took her mother for many summers. We will look for wild ponies instead of moose and gather tons of seashells and skate egg cases instead of blueberries. There will be a peacefulness at the ocean. Waves and memories. Coming in and going out.