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Just like the wilds of Canada

I had a date to go canoeing with our daughter Martha the other morning, but because my back was still a little out of whack, I begged off and we just went for a walk instead.

It wasn't any old ordinary kind of walk either.

We walked a Canadian beach the other morning and got back home in time for lunch.

The rugged, rockfaced bluffs towered above the lake on all sides but the North, the talus slopes sprawling down to the shoreline like some stone glacier.

To the West, the whole beach stretched empty and abandoned.

To the South, the whole lake

stretched empty and abandoned.

Offshore, a single gull hung low above the whitecaps, searching out the wave troughs.

In the summertime, thousands of people pack themselves into this North beach of Devil's Lake. Today, there were just two of us: Marty and her old man.

We walked without talking at first. Along the water's edge. Tasting the scented southwind. Hearing the gull offshore. Hearing the chickadees inland.

As we walked, I told her how the Old Man had brought us to this very beach a full forty years ago. It had seemed like the wilds of Canada then. Now, on this morning, it seem-

ed like them more than ever.

I told her how Jimmy White and Don and I used to fish the Eastern shore for trout. All night long with gas lanterns hungout over the gun-whales and great trout swirling out of the darkness. In the mornings, we would fish the Western shore with flyrods, take 50 fat bluegills apiece and finally call it a night.

I told her how Russ and Bob and I used to fish the lake in winter, driving onto the ice from the South shore, the expansion cracks booming and racing alongside until your mind played tricks and you felt a little panicky.

I told her how legend had it that

Devil's Like was bottomless and Russ always insisted that a boat sunk up in Devil's once and later turned up in Mendota via an underground river.

She didn't say anything and I could have gone on until sundown because this place is peopled with a lot of ghosts and if I close my eyes I can see them waving, and if I close my ears, I can hear them laughing.

You really should close your mouth now, I told myself. You should really shut up because all this is probably boring as hell.

Marty just took my hand and smiled that most beautiful of all smiles.

"I'm glad we didn't get to go canoeing," she said. "For today, this was much better."

Later, as Marty guided the Honda around the South Shore Drive, I wondered where they all were now: Jimmy White; And Russ; And The Old Man. I think, maybe I know. And then, I think, Maybe I don't know anything at all.

"Only the mountain," Aldo Leopold once wrote, "has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf."

Across the haunted lake, the talus slopes sat in repose, serene as the Buddha.