

Blue cabin

I.

We took the boat to camp every year. Our parents dropped us off and said goodbye and then we cried. We lugged huge rucksacks twice our size onto an ageing ferry with paint peeling off the white hull. The once-red lifejackets lay in salmon-pink piles on the floor as we begged our parents to stop the boat, but they never did. Sometimes I faked an illness, but usually I'd just sulk in the car, radiating displeasure on every frequency. No FM, no AM, just static. No chance of talkback. But every year it was the same story. Our parents waved from shore as we clutched our sleeping bags, clutched each other and prayed that we would make it through the week.

II.

It wasn't the length of the camp that concerned us – just the first day. We lined up on the cracked tennis court and were sorted into cabins. McDermott, Johnson, Fagan in Yellow Cabin; Smith, Williams, Adamson in Red. Blue Cabin was always last. Like the teachers knew.

The stories came from our older brothers. Stories about the kid who died in Blue Cabin. He had an allergic reaction after eating peanuts, supposedly. Or drowned in the river after capsizing his canoe. He was bitten by a snake and died convulsing on the floor. Now, his name is carved into the top bunk next to the window. It says: Adam Carter Died Here. I can't tell you how he wrote that, but we all believed he did.

III.

Life was amplified in Blue Cabin. So was death. At night the wind howled a little louder, the cabin creaking, shaking, swaying. The bunk beds squeaked like a mouse's last breath and at the end of every day, the boys in the other cabins would nod and wish us luck. They had either been through it, or they knew that their time would come.

The teachers told us that there was nothing to worry about. That they were just stories, that there was no truth to them. At night they patrolled the path outside the cabins, and though we never quite felt safe, nothing ever happened. Every year we made it back to our parents, who stood smiling, waiting, on the shore.

IV.

But then the stories changed. They became memories. They stopped coming from the older brothers and came back to them instead. Stories about school camps and teachers and nightly patrols. The teachers said that they were just stories, that there was no truth to them. And it was then that we realised Adam Carter was lucky. A capsized canoe was preferable to the alternative.

But then the stories changed again. They became letters. They stopped coming from the older brothers and came from the school instead. Letters with signatures and explanations and apologies. Our parents read those letters in their kitchens and studies and called New York and London to ask their adult sons the unaskable. And once they'd hung up, they clutched each other and prayed that we had made it through the week.