

FEELINGS WITHOUT NAMES

NON-FICTION

Stu Wilson

It's the same in every town. It's a feeling kids get, usually starting in the spring, that carries through in emotional ebbs right up until members of the graduating class head their separate ways come fall. It's something like nostalgia, but for a time that hasn't yet passed. Even that, though, isn't exactly it.

The vague contours of it come back to me now, driving north near summer's end through the sparsely scattered towns dotting rural Maine. It's usually the banners that bring it back. Affixed to quaint light poles lining Main Streets, those vertical symbols of pride celebrate each kid that made it to caps and gowns. The feeling is strongest in those single-digit towns, in places like Rangeley, where a tiny district hangs the tiny faces of the tiny class they're releasing into the world. In the waning days of August, when the posters are hanging doggedly, faded from the sun, I imagine the feeling reaching its peak. Some of those kids are headed to college in Orono. Others are done with schooling altogether, ready to join electrician dads in the townfolks' walls, or beneath sinks with plumber moms—just two of many union jobs that'll make them a fine living. But regardless of where the kids are going, I bet they all feel it. There's no telling a kid in the grips of it that they'll almost certainly see their classmates again, that each late-night fire won't be the last with someone whom they've known since they were in diapers, and so they end up lingering on every little thing. Most haven't had their hearts fortified by enough hard times not to feel it. It's equal parts optimism and nervousness and excitement and melancholy. It's something that I, for one, am okay with us never giving a proper name to because, whatever it is, it's nice leaving it only felt and never said.

We felt it, same as most kids in all respects, except that it started early for us. I had decided to take two summer classes, earning enough credits to forgo senior year of high school in Rochester, New York so that I could play hockey in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I remember telling my friends in the tight quarters of a hard, plastic booth at a Burger King, studying the looks on their faces as I spoke. Kevin's open-mouthed chewing slowed, then stilled. Alex set his cup of half parts Coke and Dr. Pepper down after a long pull from the straw, pausing before swallowing. His gulp was audible, even amongst the employees' shouts from the kitchen, the gurgling fryers, the constancy of the kitchen's din. Most memorable of all was the way that TJ's face changed, from the easy smile he wore every day to disappointment, then to a confused version of I'm-happy-for-you. And, as the four of us talked it through, all their expressions followed his, becoming hollow, and saying in ways words couldn't that the year ahead would be different from what any of us had previously imagined—neither better, necessarily, nor worse, but different. That last look, I know now, is a close cousin of acceptance; it doesn't have a name either. But I know what it is because, even being the one to tell them, I felt it too.

Sometime in the not-so-distant wake of my news, we made a pact. Kevin, Alex, TJ, and I would go camping every summer to keep the friendship alive. It seemed an obvious thing to do. In a way that was beyond our powers of expression, reconnecting—or even saying that we planned to—would fill the hole my decision had excavated from deep within us all. As my friends headed back to school in August 2009, I drove on I-90 West through Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and finally, after twelve plus hours, to Iowa.

People forget this, but at that time, Facebook was *the* thing. It was pictures before Instagram, online chatting after AIM; it was statuses before Twitter, socializing after genuine human contact. So that winter, lying in a bed in Cedar Rapids with a hot laptop on my chest, I spent too many late-night hours looking at the senior year I had denied myself as if through the wrong end of a telescope.

Between those moments of heartsick longing, I took solace in a page that Kevin had created called "The Gang Goes Camping." The page was a place where we could organize the inaugural trip. Early in its existence, TJ excitedly explained via a Facebook comment that one of his older sisters, the granola-y one, had recommended three campsites highly. "They're all a little

different,” he explained on her behalf, “so it’s just a matter of what we’re looking for.”

The first was in Seneca Falls, New York. Closest to our hometown, the site was part of the Cayuga Lake State Park, which is to say that there were plenty of amenities: hiking trails, bait and tackle shops, liquor stores—the last of which was, perhaps, most important to us. Kevin had written earlier that “Andrew,” his brother, “said he’d give me his old ID.” Kevin was slimmer than him, but a little weight fluctuation in one’s early 20s was plausible enough, or at least not damning when it came to fakes.

Pirate’s Rock, Pennsylvania was next. TJ wrote that it was practically off the charts. There wasn’t a website; we couldn’t even find pictures. “The benefit here,” he noted, “is that my sister said it’s super secluded and cozy. She set up camp on dried out pine needles, at a flat spot without any roots, near a creek.” I imagined her out there alone, with a headlamp on in the darkening night, tired after having driven across states and after having driven in her tent’s stakes, reading either Krakauer’s *Into the Wild* or *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath—I couldn’t decide which seemed more fitting.

And then there was Forked Lake, a campsite deep in the Adirondacks that required a canoe to get to. Lying there in bed, I pictured Winslow Homer paintings. Something about those paintings, of people paddling away from shore, lingered in my mind. I didn’t imagine myself sitting in the boat with a paddle in-hand, though, but from solid ground, watching my friends’ backs as they forced the boat against the choppy water and into the distance, smaller and further away, smaller, smaller, and then gone. It didn’t matter that there were no such scenes in the links TJ shared – just calm, idyllic water. The image remained all the same and the feeling, too. The latter was at once undeniable but, ultimately, incommunicable.

With our options posted before us, the deliberations began. Alex commented first, writing, “It has to be Forked Lake,” with no reasoning and no room for compromise. Back then, his assertions had an authority that wouldn’t hold up today. It stemmed, I think, from the fact that he was the first to hit puberty. He had a beard by freshman year and was already on his second girlfriend. Alex having “had” girlfriends gave him a confidence he wielded over us, like that particular life experience made him superior in every other endeavor. It was as if, in his eyes, our more innocuous fumbblings with female classmates inside the fogged-up windows of parents’ cars somehow discredited our camping opinions.

The others and I weren’t sold on Forked Lake, partly for practical reasons but mainly from an emotion that does have a name: envy. So, being

the children that we were, our Facebook comments dogpiled onto the fact that both of Alex's girlfriends had been named Megan. Surely that was coincidence, but we joked at his expense that he must have been unknowingly harboring some sort of Megan-based fixation that only a therapist could help him unpack. In this way, the comment chain expanded into personal jabs, rebuttals, and the increasingly rare legitimate camping contribution.

Eventually, I offered one by writing, "My vote is Seneca Falls. I'm not going if we spend nine hours driving to and from the Adirondacks." Hidden beneath the pragmatism of my post lurked a knee-jerk reaction to vote against Alex, spurred by jealousy. Because there I was in Iowa, while he (and, probably, the others) gained the kind of experience we all coveted and with girls that I'd had crushes on since grade school. I wasn't in the kind of reasonable mood required to admit that it was my own fault, having deferred that opportunity until summer. And, of course, my obstinance was no better than Alex's. But I also knew that, in a way, the whole camping idea came about because of my absence. They wanted to see me, and that afforded me a sort of final say that none of them could touch.

When we neared the campsite, we saw murals of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Frederick Douglass on the sides of buildings, but we weren't there to seek out museums. We just wanted to set up as quickly as possible, buy some nightcrawlers, and head out to the fishing and swimming holes that TJ's sister had told him about. There were supposedly quiet spots on the outskirts of town, and I think each of us naively imagined that we'd be spending our days in the seclusion of our own place, dropping lines in a little oasis until the sun got so hot that we'd reel in and fly off a rope swing into the fresh, clear water. But that wasn't how it went at all.

Every picture on the website must have been taken from a convenient angle. The reality, we quickly learned when we arrived at our lot, was that each campsite was practically on top of another. To hide our disappointment, both from each other and ourselves, we tried to minimize the significance of our cramped quarters.

"We'll be out and about during the day, anyway," Alex said. "It'll just be a place to crash." We all nodded, but my friends' expressions told a different story. It was as if gravity suddenly grew stronger, and their vacant faces hung heavy in the aftermath. We got back into the car. Our nodding went on too long.

Driving around, we saw that every fishing spot was equally overcrowded. So much so that at each one we passed, we saw people either in the process of casting out over each other's lines or trying to disentangle the chaos of yarn-balled filament.

And it was no better when we showed up to the places that they'd advertised for swimming. If people were sponges, there wouldn't have been any water left at all.

That prompted Kevin to ask TJ, "When did your sister come here again?"

And he replied, "It was, like, mid-September last year," as we rounded yet another winding path, only to find the massive hordes of finance-type New Yorkers, tender-footing their way into upstate siestas.

That explained it all. Every positive thing she'd said—that it was extremely quiet, that every glen was like bathwater, that it wasn't touristy—suddenly became irrelevant. With that realization, I began to cross out plans from my mental itinerary: That day trip to Taughannock Falls, no way; the hikes undertaken before the real heat of the day, scratch that; and, certainly, the fantasy of our own little oasis, to fish, to sun ourselves, to fly off a rope swing... kaput. We all felt foolish in that moment, which was made even worse by the fact that when we returned to our campsite, we learned that in our rush to leave earlier, someone must've knocked over the cooler. The meat we'd packed had been sitting in the sun, warmed with the since-melted ice at the center of a dark spot in the brown, padded-down earth.

Against our will, we'd traded in the fantasies of a Finger Lakes escape for the stark reality of all four of us, dressed in t-shirts, bathing suits, and flip flops, dragging our feet through the aisles of a Walmart, looking for the freezer section. None of us even had the heart to see if Kevin would try his brother's ID. There was nothing that could be said. For though we were enmeshed in a culture that equated manly hardship with the self-medication of booze, we were all, each of us, realizing individually the truth of the matter: that we were, in fact, little boys, liable to botch an underage purchase in our nervousness and, in a best-case scenario, we'd leave empty-handed—beer back on its shelf and ID confiscated—with our tails between our legs. All of which is to say, we approached check-out only with Kraft singles and beef patties.

The pimple-faced cashier, looking a lot like us, asked, "That all?" which seemed to rub it in.

"Yeah," Kevin sighed.

Probably because of the swimsuits, the cashier said, “Well, enjoy your vacation!” while folding our receipt and handing it to Kevin. Alex, TJ, and I were turning to walk away when Kevin’s words changed our trip.

“Can I ask you something?” The rest of us turned. “We’re actually wondering if there’s any place around here to get away from everyone. Like a swimming hole people don’t know about, or a quiet place to fish—something like that. Know anywhere?”

The cashier studied us for a moment, a few up-downs before a smirk overtook his face. “You know what, yeah. I’ve got just the place.” Leaning in, he quickly and quietly confided the meandering path through the woods that led to an abandoned quarry, pausing his directions only to glance over his shoulder for his supervisor.

We followed his instructions. Emerging from the thick, jungle-like foliage to the canyon carved out of the earth below, our wonder was only interrupted by the occasional questions: “There’s no way they jump from this high, right?” and “Is it always this shallow?”

We estimated that it was a seventy-foot drop. We predicted where we would land. We walked down the so-called footholds of the so-called path, partly stepping but mostly sliding our way down to the bottom of the quarry in our swimsuits. I even went in when we got down there, trying to dive as deeply as I could to see if I could touch the bottom. We were seeking some semblance of safety, as if I had the technical know-how to say, *It took me X seconds to return to the surface, which means it’s Y feet deep, and if we’re jumping from Z feet high, we’ll be fine!* But when I resurfaced into the heat of the day, and all three of them looked to me for certainty, I looked to them for a second opinion. The second opinion turned into a third opinion, which turned into a fourth, and with all of us wading there in the inexactitude of, “It feels a little deeper than the deep end of a pool,” we arrived at the same conclusion: We either had to just do it or not.

By the time we’d climbed back to the top, we realized that, if we were to do it—with the remnants of limestone rock protruding like jagged spears from the base of the sheer drop before us—we’d need a running start.

“But if you start that far back,” Alex said suddenly, before his voice began trailing off, “you won’t be able to... spot your landing... before you jump...”

“Well, duh!” Kevin exclaimed, probably trying to hide his own trepidation with some cocksure machismo. “You’ll just have to spot it beforehand.” Taking exaggerated backward steps from the precipice, he added, “Then, you take one, two, three, four...” He had retreated almost wholly into some bushes. “Let’s call it four-and-a-half steps back.” Waddling towards the edge as if in slow-motion, he counted, “One, two, three, four, and... JUMP!”

I didn’t like the look of it. But if they were doing it, I was doing it. I had never thought I would see the day when our activities actualized my dad’s refrain: “If they told you to jump off a cliff, would you do it?” It seemed I finally had my answer. So...

A few minutes later, standing four-and-a-half steps before a freefall, picturing the view of the placid water below, knowing that TJ and Alex were waiting there in anticipation of either a few slaps on the back or a harrowing rescue, and seeing Kevin out of the corner of my eye holding the disposable Kodak to capture the moment, I began my run to the edge with rubbery legs.

When my feet left the earth, I flew—only for a moment—imperceptibly upwards. That final push, trying to get as far away from the edge of solid ground as I could, began a trajectory with the slightest of ascents. I was then suspended momentarily, as if on pause, levitating high above Alex and TJ below. But gravity grabbed hold of me, and I was quickly pulled toward the earth. I tried to contort my body, flapping my arms and kicking my legs to control the tilting axis of my free fall, but it was no use. The water was coming fast, the limestone wasn’t fully behind me yet, and all I could do was brace for one of two impacts.

The SPLASH! was immediately interrupted by more muted bubbling around my head. Quickly, I retrieved my legs into a squat, wondering if my feet would be slamming soon into the floor of this gigantic pool. Instead of slamming, my feet touched the pebbled shoals gently, and I pushed off toward the surface. There, I was met by Alex and TJ swimming frantically toward the epicenter of the circles rippling across the water. The anxiety I saw on their faces instantly evaporated, overtaken by smiles of joy—pure, grinning joy—when they realized that I’d emerged unscathed.

My feet hurt, yes. My heart hadn’t yet stopped pounding. But I made it. I was safe.

When I closed my eyes to sleep that night, thinking of how crazy it had been—to do such marginal preparation, to hardly look before leaping, to have such little control suspended between decision and result—I told

myself that maybe it's that way with everything. You plan what you can, you point yourself in the right direction, and when you're in it, the tumult of the world, the ending is almost entirely outside of your control.

I fell asleep then, wondering if everybody—my friends sleeping beside me in the tent and other kids in other towns—felt the same way, their heads brimming with equal parts self-assuredness and youthful insecurity, and their hearts carrying along with them the vague feelings of a past forever lost.