

Northern Lights of Canada, 1968

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Canada ... September 5, 1968: I sat on the porch of the cabin in Magnetawan, Ontario, staring at the still, black water and listening to the loons calling from far across the lake. I came here at the urging of Herb Walker, my college room mate for two and a half years and best friend.

The first night I arrived we spent the evening catching up on each others lives. We took a walk down the gravel road leading to his place, to a small clearing ringed with young pines and a rough stone fence. The Northern Lights blazed across the black sky, an alluring vision that seemed to beckon me to stay.

Tall, pudgy, with wiry black hair, Herb was quick to see the outrageous, the bazaar, the cynics truth. He could be a deep thinker or put everything off as trivial, but he always found the humor, especially the irony, in any situation. He was brilliant. He could handle the toughest math and science courses along with the most demanding literary and writing classes. But he couldn't find one field and stay focused on it very long. Things grabbed his attention and became obsessions until he had learned enough to satiate his thirst. Then he would look up and see what else was out there, by the time he graduated he had earned enough credits for a masters along with the double major (physics and English) bachelors degree.

He had remained in our apartment close to Ohio States campus during the year I had been stationed at Ft. Eustis and Ft. Lewis and would be returning to school just about the time my plane would leave Travis Air Force Base, near San Francisco, headed for Biên Hòa. Now, convinced he could talk me into staying and avoiding Vietnam, he had asked me to visit him before I left. I had no more than arrived than Herb had offered me the use of the place for as long as I needed it.

"I'll help you get a job up here. The cabin is yours to use." He called it a cabin. In truth it was a grand hunting lodge built by his grand dad, a wealthy businessman from Bay Village, Ohio. There had to be at least eight bedrooms lining the outer walls of the second floor. A huge, musty center room with what we jokingly referred to as a "walk in fireplace" dominated the first floor. An elegant set of French doors had been placed in the amber toned log wall on the south side of the house leading you to the screened-in porch where we were sitting. There the property sloped steeply down to the boat house and pier jutting

into the cold, clean waters. The boat house garaged three or four canoes, a 19 foot fiberglass runabout and a classic mahogany hulled speed boat. There were two more spacious bedrooms atop it. Behind the cabin an old detached kitchen had been turned into winterized quarters complete with pantry, stove and refrigerator.

The place had been turned over to Herb by his parents. Splitting this cabin, another newer cabin, and 200 acres of old pine trees and older stones between Herb and his sister and her Harvard professor husband.

We sat and thought as the late afternoon sun began to turn to twilight. Gordon Lightfoot played on the portable stereo in the corner of the porch, singing to us about mountains and streams, women loved and missed, jet planes, trucks and trains; Jack Kerouac set to music in our young minds.

Herb knew I didn't want to go. He knew my anger and frustration with the American political situation. In the two years before I left to enter the army, we would sit in our apartment and have improvisational shows. It would start with something on TV. A clip of George Wallace or the start of a Johnson speech and we would be off and running.