

# Strawberry Island

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“Daddy, can you tell me a bedtime story please?” My five-year-old asks while jumping on the bed and grabbing her favorite blanket. “I’m not tired yet.”

“Which one do you want to hear tonight, Trouble?” I ask as I settle onto the edge of her bed and push her hair off of her face. She looks at me with her big puppy dog eyes and I prepare to be here for a while.

“Can you tell me how you met Mommy again?” she questions as she snuggles deeper into her comforter. “It’s my favorite.”

“As long as you promise to actually go to bed after.” I say, fully anticipating her to drift off before I finish. She sticks her pinky out waiting for mine to complete our promise. “A very long time ago, the summer before I moved out of Grandma and Grandpa’s...”



My day starts off as any other day at our cabin. The waves are lapping softly on our rocks down on the shore. Our boats are rocking softly on their lifts, and it reminds me of the canoe trip I have planned. I want an early start to be back in time for dinner, so I push back my covers and put on swimming trunks and a shirt before walking outside. It looks like the perfect day for a day on the lake. The sky is clear of any clouds and I can tell the sun was just under the horizon, which gives the sky an orange hue. It’s not too humid, uncharacteristic for Minnesota summers,

and not too hot where the oars will try to slip out of my hands from the sweat.

A sharp whistle gives out the signal to my black lab, Mocha, who is my favorite companion. She comes bounding around the side of the cabin and skids to a stop in front of me. She loves a good adventure in the water with me. We would live in the water if we could. I want to be able to float and swim all day without worrying about what homework is due or what college classes I have to take next semester.

I can see Mocha’s excitement as the back half of her body violently shakes with her tail. We walk down the hill on our rickety old wooden stairs to the shoreline where all of our water items are. She looks up at me expectantly as I am getting all our supplies ready as if to say, ‘can you hurry up please?’ I turn towards my dog and give her a pointed look, “this would go a lot faster if you could help me y’know.” My hands grab bottles of water and mutter to myself, “you can’t get us snacks and water prepared or get the life jackets.” Mocha happily pants at me as she sits on the sand with her tail wagging, “I’ll be ready in a minute,” I say as I put the last of my gear in the canoe, now ready to get in and take off for the day. “Well what are you waiting for, hop in.” I say as I hold the canoe steady for her. She carefully steps into her favorite spot right at the bow looking forward, always wanting to know exactly where we were going. *Weirdo* I think to myself.

I like the tranquil mornings of a canoe ride with my dog. Something about them calms me, centers me. The crisp air and cool water on my skin fills me with peace. Mocha stares off the front of the canoe and pants lightly, looking for anything that moves. I paddle out towards the center of the lake, working with the current. "What do you think?" I ask Mocha. Her head turns to me and I swear she is smiling, "should we go up the river today?" She gives no signal and turns back to her lookout position. "Thanks for the input." I mutter to myself as I paddle towards the river directly in front of me. I usually stay away from the river, the current is too strong and I never feel the urge to fight against it. Today, I feel like a challenge.

There are legends of sorts from the locals, they say that the river leads to a magical land. No one can travel there in one piece, the river protects the entrance and makes it difficult for anyone to successfully make it to 'Strawberry Island' as they call it. I refuse to believe the lore surrounding what they call Strawberry Island. I will get to the end of the river.

Rowing into the river was easier than I anticipated knowing what others have told me. I am wondering if they are all just messing with me. The sun, now higher in the sky, feels amazing on my skin. Mocha pants heavily, signaling she is thirsty. I take out her travel bowl and set it on the bench seat in front of me. I then grab out one of my water bottles to pour some for her but before I have the chance, she jumps into the water. "Damn it!" I mutter thinking about how hard it will be to get her back into the canoe. She starts to swim circles around me letting the cool water surround her. "I swear you should be a fish and not a dog," I playfully tease her. She huffs at me as if she knew I was making fun of her.

"Alright, come here, Mocha. Let's get you back in the canoe." I order. When she gets close enough I pull her back in by the scruff on her neck and she

shakes, getting me soaking wet. "Aw come on! Are you serious? Why'd you do that? Now it looks like I went for a swim, too." As I am complaining to my dog, the sun fades from the sky. I look behind me and see big, dark clouds creeping up on me. *Must be a coincidence*, I think to myself. My back feels cold and the loss of sun sends shivers down my spine. "Well, Mocha, looks like I don't need to put on sunscreen," I remark. She just gives me a look as if to say, 'you wouldn't have put on sunscreen anyways.'

I start rowing again, but this time the current feels stronger against me. My muscles strain and my rows become slower as I try to tread water. It takes me much longer to move than I would like. I now know why people said the river was trying to make sure they never got to the end, but I was determined to see it. I felt the water start churning under me, making my canoe rock violently...

"Daddy be careful, I don't want you to get hurt. Did you get hurt?" my daughter asks sleepily. At this point her eyes are half closed. I am wondering how much more of the story I will get through before she starts snoring.

"I didn't get hurt, munchkin. Let me finish the story, okay?" I tell her as I give her shoulder a squeeze. "Now where was I again?"

"The bad water, Daddy. The bad water," she mumbles through her blankets as she rubs her eyes.

"Ahh that's right," I say while smiling, "well the water continued to get worse and I was starting to get worried..."



I try to get control of the canoe, paddling frantically and sometimes trying to find rocks to shove and propel me forward, but it seems impossible to go farther. Mocha stands up, looking ready to jump out of the unstable boat again. "SIT DOWN!" I yell, terrified that if she got into the water I would never be able to find her, let alone get her back into the boat. Mocha whimpers and

sits down. I feel bad for yelling but also don't want to lose her. I will have to make it up to her later. I try to head back the direction I came from, but everywhere I turn looks the exact same. There are weeds growing off the side of the boat, blocking my vision. I start hurriedly paddling in one direction that looks the safest in hopes of getting out of this river and heading home. The clouds continue to get darker and darker above me, and it looks as if it is going to start downpouring. The water churns below me and I fear that my canoe will capsize. I hope I can get Mocha and I to a safe place for the time being.

Even without the sun, I am drenched with sweat from paddling so hard. Maybe I should have listened to everyone else. Maybe I should have continued to go on my normal route. How am I going to get us out of this? I pray that the water will clear soon so I can keep my promise that I will be home for dinner. Guess I should have listened to everyone's warnings. That'll teach me not to write them off as dumb stories. What happened to the fun canoe trip from half an hour ago? Can it go back to that?

It looks like some water ahead of me is not as dark and dangerous. I steer towards that direction and Mocha starts barking. "What? What do you see?" I continue to paddle towards the calmer water

in hopes we don't capsize. She starts to growl in that direction, but I have no choice but to continue. I will have to deal with whatever is there when I get to stable water. As I get closer to the clear water the clouds start to lighten, reverting back to the beautiful sunny day. *What is happening?*

As I hit the clear water my canoe hits sand. *Where am I?* Did I actually get to the end of the river? Mocha hops out of the canoe and starts barking at the huge tree in front of us. "What are you barking at? It is just a tree, relax. There's nothing there."

"I wouldn't say I am nothing," a voice says from behind the tree. Mochas barks get louder when she hears the voice.

"Who's there? What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question," the voice says as a person steps around the tree. She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my entire life...

A loud snore cuts off the rest of my sentence. I let out a low chuckle knowing that Ava is going to be mad she didn't stay awake for the entire story. I give her a small kiss on her forehead and softly close her door knowing I will have to continue the story tomorrow.