

THE
Wintree Waltz
By Lauren
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Chapter 7

After leaving Robert, Clara took a shower and finished packing. She stuffed her food supplies in a blue nylon sack, a pair of socks and sneakers in a red nylon sack, the rest of her clothes in a turquoise nylon sack, and toiletries in a yellow nylon sack. She packed her journal, two pens and two novels – *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Illumination* – in a small grey nylon sack, her camp stove and cooking supplies in a green nylon sack, and her tent and sleeping bag in a large purple nylon sack. Then, she loaded everything up in her large Duluth canoe pack, just to make sure it fit. This packing system was devised over years of trial and error – carrying too many things, carrying the wrong things, carrying everything in her arms and nothing on her back, and struggling every step of the way. Now, when she reached shore she could carry everything on her back in the canoe pack, and carry her kayak to camp.

The next morning, she grabbed a handful of matchbooks at checkout and stuffed them deep into her green sack, just in case her butane lighter failed, and ate a large breakfast in town. She then drove to the Headlands at Trails End Bay, parked her car in the 24-hour lot, and unloaded her kayak, a red Whistler she'd bought used five summers before, and carried it to the beach. On the beach, she emptied the contents of her Duluth pack into the front and rear bulkheads, making sure her gear was evenly distributed. She stuffed the Duluth bag in her final empty nylon sack, and placed it in the rear bulkhead.

Once her kayak was packed, Clara looked out across the water. The winds were low and the water calm, but she was nervous nonetheless. She imagined overturning her kayak and spilling into the water, and the rollover techniques she would use to right herself. She took a photo of her car, and dropped a pin for her mother, just in case. Finally, she pulled her kayak to the water's edge, climbed inside and pushed off into the bay.

It was 10 a.m., and the sun was high. The water sparkled, and shot off glints of light in every direction, the finest cut sapphire. She paddled north through the straits, and exhaled deeply. She was finally there. Finally free.

The first hours were ecstasy. Clara thought about nothing but the rhythm of the kayak, the spray of the water against her arms and face. She had planned her trip roughly, so that she knew how many miles she would paddle in a day and where she would put in at night. Today would be one of her longest. She'd stop for lunch in St. Ignace and then paddle around the southern edge of the Upper Peninsula into Horseshoe Bay. She'd been doing this trip now for ten years, first meeting up with her college friends for a week a year to paddle the Les Cheneaux Water Trail, a 75-mile stretch of paradise that ran east of the Mackinac Straits through the Les Cheneaux archipelago. Some summers, the trips were longer, more arduous. She'd loop up through the Great Lakes Passage and between the Upper Peninsula and Drummond Island, and paddle up the Saint Mary's River and into Lake Superior. One year, she made it as far as Munising. It was thrilling to approach the Pictured Rocks after a month on the water, and she lay back in her kayak and floated below them, staring up in amazement.

This trip would be shorter, a week and a half out through the Les Cheneaux archipelago and a week and a half back. She would take her time, giving her arms a rest when needed, hiking her favorite trails, and visiting her favorite towns along the water. She couldn't go too far – as it was, her mother wasn't happy that she was leaving a month before her sister's wedding. "What if something *happens*?" Elaine had said. "If something happens," Clara countered, "we'll have bigger problems than whether or not I was able to make it to my sister's wedding."

As she passed under the Mackinac Bridge, Clara thought about Robert, and wondered if he'd already crossed on his way to Munising. She was surprised how much she'd enjoyed spending time with him, and as she lay in bed the night before, she couldn't help but wonder about him, and how he appeared before her earlier that day. Was it kismet or careful planning? Contrivance or cosmic force? Now, out on the water, she imagined him there with her – asking her questions, telling her stories, or simply paddling alongside in silence, soaking in the sunlight.

Clara pulled through the straits and stopped at the state park near St. Ignace to use the public restroom and eat lunch. After lunch, she lay in the shade and sipped tea from a thermos, looking out at the Mackinac Bridge and the sparkling water

below. It always surprised her, the first day or two of her trip, how slow the going was, when compared with car travel. If she wanted to, she could have crossed the bridge from Mackinaw City yesterday and stayed the night in St. Ignace. It would have been a 20 minute drive by car. Twenty minutes, or an entire morning, depending on how she went. But she liked it slow. The slower you went, the more you saw. Besides, if she had crossed over into St. Ignace, she never would have seen Robert. Kismet. Or...contrivance? Whatever it was, it had worked its magic on her. She was looking up at the bridge, wondering about the color of his car, and if he was crossing, and where he was going.

There was much to explore between there and Munising. They'd looked at a map together yesterday, before parting ways. She suggested he'd take a picnic lunch through the Sault Sainte Marie Forest, and then drive west through the forests and farmland of Route 28. She'd also given him her itinerary, and they exchanged numbers – for safety's sake. "I'll be the closest person to you up here," he said, "so if you need anything..."

They were standing in the parking lot of her hotel, having walked there after taking the ferry back from Mackinac Island.

"Did my father put you up to this?" she asked, thinking that it finally made sense – Robert just happening to be in Mackinaw the same day she was.

"No!" he said.

"Really?"

"Really," he said, and took her hand.

He stood across from her in the Super 8 parking lot. It was 9 p.m. and the sun was setting.

"I'd be embarrassed if he had."

"He didn't."

"OK," she said.

Instead of letting go of her hand, he pulled her toward him, and she allowed herself to be kissed.

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That afternoon, Clara pushed back into the water and paddled north, into Horseshoe Bay. The water was calm, north of the straits, and it was quieter, away from the highway. As the sun stretched to the west, the water grew more intensely

blue, and the wading birds, the blue heron and double breasted cormorant, dove for fish. Clara sat and watched in awe as a heron caught and swallowed a large fish. She wondered what it was like to be the heron. What it was like to be the fish.

She stopped again when the sun was just above the tree line, and scanned the shoreline for a safe place to put in. There was a narrow stretch of beach, behind which a line of spruce and hemlock seemed to go on forever.

Clara paddled to shore, letting the waves push her in. She lifted herself out of the kayak and pulled it onto the beach. It was an empty stretch of land. The only sounds were the waves lapping to shore and the cacophony of songbirds and owls, calling to one another in the distance. She found a nice, dry spot just shy of the tree line and settled in to make camp.

The first night out always made her anxious, and as she unpacked she was happy to find that all of her bags had stayed safe and dry. She went for her tent first, and once she re-confirmed that she had packed all of its components, she quickly unpacked her stove to make a fire and boil water.

In an hour, she was settled. Her tent was up, and her dinner – a half serving from a pouch of parboiled rice and beans – was made. She'd tapped the pouch of red wine she'd brought with her, and sat in her folding camp chair, her feet up on her kayak, the moon rising over Lake Huron, the sky darkening.

She texted her father, and when she didn't hear from him, her mother.

Safe and sound. Warm and happy, she said, sharing a photo of herself.

Wow! Her mother wrote back. *Relax a little for me, will ya?*

Sure, Clara texted. *Everything OK?*

... Her phone made a series of ellipses as her mother typed.

...Yes, her mother texted finally.

Although Elaine's hesitation piqued Clara's interest, she didn't respond back. The past several months had been full of pseudo-emergencies related to the wedding, and Clara was happy for a reprieve. Besides, they all knew how it was going to end. Her sister would be a beautiful bride in an overpriced dress, they would all eat overpriced food in a beautiful reception hall, and get, probably, a little too drunk. Erin would let go of the crush on John that everyone knew she had. Jean would have a baby or two. And the family would find its new normal.

Above her, the sky darkened and the stars emerged, strong and bright. More stars than she'd seen in a year. When she first saw them, the stars of the true

wilderness, Clara was both stunned and saddened. How was it, she wondered, that she lived in a place where she couldn't see the true night sky? She was cheating herself, she thought. She needed to move somewhere, and soon. But that was a decade ago, and still, she remained in Ann Arbor. What was she waiting for, she sometimes wondered.

In her lap, her phone chirped. It was Robert.

High and dry?

Dry, not high, she texted.

Good, he texted. *Good day?*

Uncommonly good.

She waited for him to respond, but he didn't. And as she sat looking up at the stars, she imagined him there with her, the conversation they would have. He'd show her the constellations above them, and tell her about the Milky Way, pointing up to the galaxy as it stretched out above them, a nebulous reminder of space or size or time. She looked at her phone, a little frustrated now that he hadn't responded. She wanted to know where *he* was and what *he* was doing and whether *he* was high and dry. But she didn't ask him. Instead, she boiled water for her hot water bottle, extinguished her fire, tidied up her camp, and zipped herself into her tent. Within moments, she was asleep.

The next morning, Clara woke just after sunrise. Her arms and shoulders were sore. She made herself oatmeal fortified with flax, hemp, cacao and nuts, and drank a strong cup of coffee as she watched the mist rise over the lake. After breakfast, she steeped tea for her thermos, and stood behind her tent to bathe with water warmed by the fire. When she was dressed, sunscreensed, and energized, she packed up camp, packed her kayak and pushed back into the water.

So went the days. She paddled close to the shoreline, and camped along the shores of Saint Martin Bay, Search Bay and Marquette Island. She rented a cabin on Loons Point so she could take a proper shower and do some laundry. She then paddled out to Government Island, a deserted public island in the archipelago where she camped for three nights, happy to have the time to read and rest. On her tenth day she paddled long and hard out to De Tour State Park, where she pulled ashore and carried her kayak into a proper campground.

It had been a nice, but lonely trip, and Clara was ready to go back. The next day, she would change directions, reverse course, and head back, slowly toward Ann

Arbor. She'd arrive just in time for the final dress fitting, the bachelorette party, the rehearsal dinner, the wedding itself. And then, a few weeks later, the school year. The fall. The Earth slowly tilting away from the sun. Her 33rd birthday. Everything else.

And so she made camp. Built a fire and made dinner. She texted her parents. Texted Robert. He'd be in Munising for days now, awaiting the Aurora's rare summer showing. As the days went on, she felt a stronger pull to him, a kind of magnetic attraction she had nothing to do with, and was powerless over. As she waited for him to text back, she imagined what he was doing. Maybe coming back from a hike, making his own camp, settling in for the night under the same stars.

Clara finished dinner, cleaned up, boiled water and extinguished her fire. She thought about staying a few days in the park and doing some hiking, her arms were sore from one of her longer days of paddling. But she had to get back. She only ever had three weeks for this, and her first two weeks were nearly gone.

Late that evening, she was lying in her tent listening to the owls and reading *The Illumination* when Robert texted her a picture of the Aurora over Lake Superior. *Wish you were here.* He texted. *Really.*

She texted him back without hesitation. *Me too.*

Headed home tomorrow. You?

Yes, she texted.

Want a ride?

Clara stared at her phone, wondering how to respond. Did she want a ride? It was not too far out of his way to get her, she knew. But she wanted to take her time.

I have another week, she wrote. I want to use it.

I understand.

Do you have to be back by a certain day? She texted.

No.

And so Clara dropped a pin to share her location.

Really? He texted.

Instead of texting him back, Clara called him.

"Do you have a tent?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Do you have a roof rack?"

"I can get one," he said.

"I want to go hiking," she said.

“What’s it like over there?”

“Watery,” she said. “But you’d like it. They have stars here.”

“When I saw the Aurora, I thought, I wish Clara was here. Is that weird?”

“No.”

“Does it make you...”

“No.”

“No, what?”

“I thought you were going to say ‘does it make you uncomfortable.’”

“That is what I was going to say.”

Clara switched off her headlamp and lay there in the dark.

“What’s the craziest thing you’ve ever done?” she asked.

“I think I’m about to do it,” he said.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said.

“Goodnight, Clara.”

“Goodnight.”



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