

This book is a collection of twenty nine stories primarily for young male adults. The stories range from canoeing, bar life, wilderness adventure, personal essay to odd animals. A fair amount of fantasy happens in some stories.

The Classy Lumberjack Bar and Lounge

By James L. Freeman

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THE CLASSY LUMBERJACK BAR AND LOUNGE

Stories of Life and Fantasy in Northern Minnesota

JAMES L. FREEMAN

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A Lovely Canoe Trip

Silhouetted against the dawning sky like Easter Island statues, father and son watched streaks of red race westward on the underbellies of the thick gray clouds. They stood on a beach of the Cloquet River as its root beer-colored water ran swift and silent. Across the river, scraggly spires of jack pines formed a black backdrop for the diorama.

“Do you think they’ll come?” asked Carl.

“Of course they will,” replied Samuel.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

The beach, a boat landing downstream of the village of Brimson, Minnesota, was a popular departure point for canoeists. Their aluminum canoe lay on the sandy gravel, two paddles against its side, with two backpacks inside.

They wore warm wool parkas against the lingering winter air spiced with the fragrances of emerging grasses and bogs as they waited for their canoe partners.

Carl wandered about the beach kicking gravel. “I hope they get here soon. How many saber-toothed tigers do you suppose walked on this beach? I bet mastodons and pterodactyls lived here too before the glaciers came!”

Samuel walked to the rear of the canoe to open the Duluth pack, found his lined leather mittens and put them on. “You need to put yours on too, just remember not to wear them when you paddle.”

“Okay. What do you think we’ll see on the way to Alden Lake?”

“Could be some wildlife, for sure lots of scenery. If you’re lucky, a moose.”

In May the snowpack melts quickly, raising the water level so that a canoe will glide safely over rocks and through rapids. Samuel remembered from his younger days the thrill of swift rides, the challenge

of weaving through rapids, the beauty of old-growth white pines, wetland ponds and marshes, bogs and meadows. Samuel hoped that Carl would see a Bull Moose browsing in a pond, lifting his head to look at the canoe, huge rack spilling pond water, water lilies caught in his lips. He might see mallards, their behinds waving as they dipped their heads to feed, does and fawns grazing on high riverbanks. If Carl and his paddle were quiet in such fleeting moments, he might experience the wonder of not being an intruder.

Carl hoped that his father was strong enough and had the endurance to manage the trip. After all, he was now older, in his forties, just worked as an interior designer, was a little overweight and didn't care much for physical activity. His father's recreational choices were passive ones: usually going with his close friend, Marshall, to concerts, art galleries or cocktail parties and occasionally with his wife out to dinner and a movie. Carl knew that his father had canoed a lot before he got married, so maybe he would remember how to use what muscles he had left. That his sister and her new boyfriend would soon join them added to his uneasiness.

A bright yellow Toyota Celica, bearing an aluminum canoe on its roof, left the gravel road to park in the clearing above the beach. His sister and her boyfriend left the Celica to walk down to the beach. She gave her father an enthusiastic hug and a little wave to Carl. Her boyfriend shook Samuel's hand, placed his arm around Paula's shoulder and didn't greet her little brother.

"Good to see you, Paula," Samuel said, grinning. "Did you have trouble finding us?"

"Not really. Doug followed the map you gave him. It sure is isolated out here!"

"Piece of cake," said Doug.

"Good, glad you helped her. Now, Carl and I will help you bring the canoe down."

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Carl thought that Doug should be plenty strong to take the canoe off Paula's car and carry it to the beach himself—after all, he was a football player—but he went with his father and Doug anyway. Their aluminum canoe was a rental with a number of dings and large dents on the sides and bottom, but his father thought that it would safe enough. When their mother had asked Samuel two weeks ago to take Paula and him on a canoe trip, Carl knew that since Paula had been on several canoe trips into the Boundary Waters she could help him assist their father if necessary.

Doug asked Paula, "You ever been in a canoe?"

"What should be so hard about paddling?"

Samuel, hiding his surprise, said calmly, "You'll be in the front and all you'll have to do is paddle on the left or paddle on the right, or not at all, when Paula says so."

Doug asked Paula, "Why will you be in back telling me what to do?"

"The one in back is the captain and the one in front is the grunt."

Doug's eyebrows shot upward.

"Really, the one in back does the steering and the one in front provides the power, and we both know you have lots of muscle."

Doug frowned. "Okay, we'll see how it goes."

Paula rolled her eyes, turned, and walked up to the Celica to bring a backpack down to her canoe. Life vests on and Duluth packs centered, they pushed their canoes into the river with Paula and Doug in the lead. Carl was glad to be in motion as their canoe knifed smoothly through the water downstream. The sun had risen, promising to warm them so they could soon shed their coats. Later, toward noon, they would find a good spot on shore to eat lunch.

Carl watched Doug paddle with wild, mighty strokes, ignoring Paula's directions as their canoe zigzagged downriver, sometimes almost broadside to the current. Carl wondered how Doug would feel if the

canoe went backward down the river, but he knew that Paula wouldn't let that happen, at least for very long.

Samuel saw this and shouted, "Listen to Paula! Don't work so hard! You're overdoing it!"

Doug listened. Their canoe proceeded straighter, but now and then it didn't when he apparently got the urge to again show off. Carl hoped that Doug's skills would improve enough to assist Paula successfully through the rapids ahead. Carl hoped he had the ability to do the same for his father. He pushed thoughts of capsizing, cold water and drowning from his mind.

He continued to paddle and listen to his father's instructions and felt relaxed as their canoe moved easily downriver. Carl turned his head to see that his father was also at ease. How could he have doubted his father's ability to do an athletic activity? Maybe the guys he liked, the ones he spent hours with talking about novels, poetry and such, would also have the physical ability to canoe. Maybe Marshall, his best buddy, would also.

They successfully steered through two rather tame rapids and while on a calm stretch they saw a moose crash away into the woods as their canoes came near. They caught four otters in the act of sliding down their mud slide into the root beer-colored water. The sun and paddling warmed them. They now wore light jackets, even though the air temperature was still just above freezing. It almost lunch time so they looked for a safe and pleasant place to beach the canoes.

After Samuel saw a wide sunlit grassy area on the north bank, he aimed toward its beach, got out and helped pull both canoes fully out of the river. Carl took the bag lunch his mother had packed and climbed up the riverbank to sit on a flat boulder. Doug sat on the boulder with him. Carl would rather have sat with Paula and his father but they sat on a two-person space on the trunk of a downed jack pine several yards away.

Doug said, “That was more work than I’d thought it’d be; I’ll sure be sore tonight. Next time though, I’ll know enough to be the captain.”

Carl, not wanting to agree, just said, “I think canoeing gets easier the more you do it.” He hoped that Paula would get rid of him before he came with them on another trip. “I’m glad that Dad is a good captain, it sure helps me. Someday I hope to be as good as him and Paula!”

Doug shrugged and said, “There’s something that bothers me and you’re probably used to it, not even notice it, but I don’t like the way your father walks!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, the short little steps that kinda makes him bouncy. That’s not right.”

“That’s normal for him. What of it?” Carl didn’t feel like being forced into defending his father. “Just shut up about it!”

“Okay, but I just think it’s kinda girlie.”

Carl wanted to hit him in the mouth, but instead told Doug to shove it and walked over to Paula and his father.

Paula noticed the lunch bag in his hand. “You didn’t finish your lunch!”

“I’ll eat it later.”

Samuel stared at Doug, still sitting on the boulder eating his lunch. He nodded as if to himself and studied his son.

He asked Carl and Paula, “You want to hear a funny story?”

Paula replied, “Sure, if it’s not one of your really long ones.”

“No, it’s a short short story.” He began, “Long ago and far...”

“Stop, stop!” Paula laughed.

“Okay, I’ll be serious. Well, when I started working for the county in the land department, before I left to become a designer, one of the supervisors persuaded twelve of us to canoe down the Cloquet River. Sound familiar? Maybe it was a please-the-boss kind of thing for most

of them, but I really wanted an adventure, something to get excited about, to do something most guys do.”

“Is that how you learned to canoe?” asked Carl.

“Yes, that’s part of the story, but that’s not the funny part. That started when we arrived at the very same beach that we just left. It was May, and it was just as cold as it is today. Percy and Robert were the first to arrive, after Marshall and me, and had this black rubber two-man life raft tied to the roof of their VW Bug. That raft sat on the roof like a huge, limp, black donut, drooping over the windows. It’s a wonder Percy could see to drive. Our boss, Conrad, got there just after they did. Well, when Conrad saw the raft he threw a hissy fit. He told them, in words I won’t repeat, that they were supposed to bring a canoe. Robert said they thought to ‘canoe’ was just a way to go down a river in any kind of floating device. Conrad shook his head and told them they could either go home or be satisfied going slow and watching the real canoeists leave them far behind. Percy and Robert stayed, apparently to have fun by themselves.”

They all chuckled and Carl asked, “Did they make it through the rapids?”

“They didn’t get that far, but they soon were part of funny incident.”

“Your story is getting kinda long,” said Doug, unaware of Paula’s scowl.

Samuel ignored Doug and continued. “James and Harry came next and they had a twelve-foot rowboat in the bed of their pickup truck. Conrad started in on them but then started to laugh when they stepped out of their truck. James was in the brown suit he wore at the office and wore his black oxfords. He said that he wanted to look good for this special occasion. Harry wore a long black overcoat, black cowboy hat and black rubber galoshes, the kind with metal clasps.”

Paula was intrigued. “What did Harry say?”

“He said the cowboy hat was the only hat he could find.”

“What were the other guys like?” asked Carl.

“They weren’t dressed funny, but when they saw the raft, the rowboat and the funny clothes they laughed for a while. They really poked fun at those poor guys for the rest of the trip. I thought they were just doing what most guys do—have fun, joke around, needle each other and drink beer. Well, I’d better shorten up my story since we’re due at Alden Lake before dark.”

Paula glanced at Doug and said, “We have enough time to hear the rest of the story.”

“Okay, I’ll try to be brief though. Those of us in canoes looked back and watched Percy and Robert in their raft swinging from one side of the river to the other bouncing off large boulders that are easily avoided by a canoe. James and Harry in their rowboat followed a similar course. Soon the raft hit a sharp rock or sunken tree snag, sprung a leak and started to deflate. Percy and Robert managed to get their shrinking raft to shore, where James and Harry picked them up in their rowboat. They told us later that they left the raft on shore for the seagulls to choke on. Well, we all made it safely to Alden Lake and were picked up by our wives and girlfriends to go back to Duluth.”

Paula exclaimed, “That’s a funny story, Dad. It’s amazing that nobody got hurt!”

“Yes, it was rather. I suppose there are old sayings about young fools.”

Carl asked, “Did you know Mom then?”

“Yes, she was a good friend of Marshall and me and then she picked me to be her boyfriend. Speaking of Mom, we should shove off. We don’t want her to worry.

Carl exclaimed, “What a bunch of idiots you had to put up with!”

His father looked at him thoughtfully. “Carl, I hope you learn that all people, even idiots, are people with many facets, positive and negative, in their character.”

Carl wasn't sure what that meant but nodded. "Maybe I will."

On the river again, they made good time, the sun yet warmed them and they took for granted the beauty the river propelled them by—the wide and tall white pines, spruce, tamaracks and the occasional maple and oak. The ponds and bogs revealed no moose, the riverbanks no deer and no ducks dove for feed along the banks. Samuel left his semi-trance when he remembered the rapids ahead. Time obviously had dimmed his memory of the danger there. Now, he felt concern, the concern he should have felt before agreeing to the trip. Samuel was confident that he and Paula could navigate the tricky paths between and around its many boulders in the rapids. Carl and Doug, especially Doug, did not yet have those skills. The terrain surrounding the rapids did not allow portaging or walking the canoes along the riverbank. He decided that they should find a spot to beach the canoes and he would warn and instruct Carl and Doug as best he could.

While Samuel looked for a landing spot minutes from the rapids Doug turned to Paula and said, "We need to pull off. I need to go to the bathroom bad!"

Paula saw a narrow beach at the base of a short, steep bank and steered over to it. Samuel and Carl followed and secured their canoe. Doug climbed the rocky bank and disappeared behind a spruce. He returned to the bank and as he started to climb down he slipped, falling on his side onto the gravel beach. He yelled and clutched his right elbow in pain.

His face white, Doug moaned, "I think I broke it!"

Samuel and Paula rushed to him, helped him sit up and Samuel said, "Sit there a while and we'll see if the pain leaves. Maybe it's just a bruise, and if it is and you can move your arm, we should be all right."

After several minutes Doug said, "It still hurts really bad. I can't move it."

Paula took some Advil from her pack. “Take these,” she said. “It may help the pain.”

Carl knew they were in trouble. If Doug couldn’t paddle, he couldn’t imagine how they all could get home. There wasn’t cell phone service here. It was apparent that Doug’s elbow was broken. Carl and Paula looked at their father, who saw their apprehension.

“There are some tricky rapids just ahead that I had forgotten about, that dump into Alden Lake but I believe there is a way to get to the lake safely, even with Doug being hurt. Someone waiting for us at the lake can drive Doug to a hospital in Duluth.”

Carl and Paula just looked at their father. Doug looked scared.

“Doug can sit in the middle of the canoe that you and Paula will take and I will take the other canoe. Doug can have our wool coats to keep warm and Paula can give him more Advil for the pain.”

Paula exclaimed, “Will you be able to manage the canoe through the rapids?”

“I think so. I’ll follow you and Carl through the rapids so I can see better how to maneuver. I’ll have two packs in the bow to steady it. If Doug sat there he’d be shifted around, which besides being painful would make it harder for me to steer.”

Packs and gear loaded in the canoes, Carl and Paula helped Doug get positioned in the middle of the canoe and draped a coat over his shoulders. They shoved off with Samuel closely behind. Samuel found that it wasn’t too hard steering as long as he paddled with more vigor than usual and anticipated which way the bow tended to go and responded quickly with the appropriate counter paddle. Paula saw that her father was handling his canoe quite well and didn’t get too far ahead of him. When they came to the rapids she wanted to make sure that she and Carl showed their father the best route to follow through the rocks and boulders.

They soon heard the rapids and within minutes they heard a roar that quickly grew louder and louder and louder. When they finally saw the rapids sending spray high into the air several yards ahead, they felt its energy in their heads and bodies.

Carl tried to preview and prepare for the challenge ahead. He must hear Paula's commands above the noise and respond correctly and instantly. He must have the strength to paddle in the swift water and follow the path Paula chose.

A few yards from the rapids' upper edge he saw rooster tails flying off boulders and jagged rocks that squeezed and twisted the river into swift ribbons of escape routes. He knew the swift water and rocks could instantly overwhelm them, smashing their bodies and canoes. He felt the river's power pounding his body as he grew near. An image of a barrel falling over Niagara Falls flashed in his mind. He felt helpless and doomed.

They plunged into the rapids. It was a world of speed and thunder. Icy water drenched his face and body. Icy water threatened to fill his eyes. Cold air was forced into his lungs. He paddled hard on each side when necessary. The noise and paddling and maneuvering and the noise! His state of being, of existence, was one of endurance and noise. Yet he must have heard Paula's commands. He couldn't remember them later.

Their canoe shot out onto smooth water and slowed. He slumped forward to rest his head on the gunnels. He turned to look at his sister. She sat with her head down, gasping. He heard a shout. It was his father coming to join them and he was grinning. Carl had not thought of him at all, had no time to worry about him. He'd made it through.

Carl remembered Doug and so apparently did Paula. Doug was drenched, shaking uncontrollably and looking straight ahead, a grin frozen on his pale face.

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Samuel said, “I think he has hypothermia. He needs to get out of those wet clothes and warmed up, and very soon. You need to get him to the landing and have one of the people waiting for us warm him up.”

It didn’t take long to reach the landing. Their mother’s friend, Claudia, put Doug in her panel van, wrapped him in blankets and turned the heater on high before driving him to St. Luke’s Emergency Room. Samuel, Paula and Carl sat in Mona’s Buick wrapped in blankets with the heater on high. When they were able to speak without their teeth chattering, Samuel recounted the ups and downs of their trip to Mona. She listened patiently, smiling or frowning or laughing. Carl told his mother how proud he was of his father and sister and that he wouldn’t mind taking another canoe trip with them, but it’d be better if it was a little tamer. Paula agreed and promised that she’d have Doug better trained next time.

As she was about to drive them home, Mona joked, “Aren’t you glad I sent you on a lovely canoe trip?”

Flower Lake

Charley's red and white bobber slowly returned to the dock, towed by a desperate leech. He reeled the leech in and up out of the water to examined it. It was still writhing. He cast it further out to the left, toward the dock of Cabin Eight, near the underwater reef, where he'd caught a smallmouth bass last summer. He'd admired its brave efforts to escape. He'd extracted the hook carefully from its mouth and held it briefly, experiencing an eye to eye moment, before lowering it into the water. It disappeared into the deep blackness of Flower Lake.

He returned to his aluminum and plastic-webbed lawn chair to again watch the bobber, his green plastic tackle box at his feet. The sun too soon dropped behind the pine and poplar on the western shore, the signal for mosquitoes to seek blood. Squadrons of the little suckers launched their attack. He reeled the leech in and returned it to the Styrofoam container to join its relatives yet alive in their cramped swimming pool. He escaped the bloodsuckers, entering the safety of the pine and poplar shadowing the uphill path to his cabin carrying his tackle box, chair, rod and reel and container of leeches. Cabin Six at the resort was his favorite and as he walked on the wood chip path the cabin's golden glow windows reminded him of Thomas Kinkade's painting *A Peaceful Retreat*, a scene promising comfort within.

"Any luck?" Cindy asked without looking up.

"No."

Cindy continued writing in her journal at the high-gloss, hand-hewn pine table and Charlie asked, "What did you find to write about this afternoon?" His question was rhetorical. He knew she did not have trouble finding things to write about. She wrote to demean and discount the people she had to deal with. On the rare occasion when he could read a few sentences of her journal undetected, Charlie had to admire how she

used simple, everyday words so cleverly. She began to write in this fashion after her accident two years ago and Charlie spent hours most days wondering what Cindy had written about him. In his daydreams and imaginary conversations with himself and with Cindy, he concocted scenarios to combat what he pictured she had written about him. She may have written how to maim him, make him beg for forgiveness or even how to do him in. He did deserve, after all, whatever fate Cindy desired.

She looked up at the electric wall clock. “What are you making for supper?”

“I didn’t catch any fish.”

“Since it’s so late, how about something easy?”

“That would be soup, scrambled eggs, or toasted cheese sandwiches.”

“Tomato soup, but add fresh veggies, rice and a little sausage.”

He set his gear in the corner of the room, stuck the container of leeches in the refrigerator and retrieved the rice, veggies and sausage he’d brought from his last trip to Little Portage. The leeches should survive another day. He chopped carrots and onions and sliced two of the manufacturer’s fully cooked bratwursts. He put a packet of fragrant rice in a pot of water to boil and opened a can of tomato soup. When the rice was ready he added it to the veggies, soup and bratwurst in a bowl and zapped the concoction for two and a half minutes in the microwave. The timer dinged three times. He brought the bowl, a soup spoon, a glass of water and a paper napkin to Cindy at the table and she set aside her journal. Charlie watched as she studied the soup to see if anything was moving in its depths before sampling it.

“The carrots are hard.”

“Pretend you’re eating carrots right out of the garden.”

“You know my teeth are sensitive.”

“Since when?”

“You should know—after my accident.”

“Apparently I didn’t take note of that.”

“My soup is ruined now.”

Charlie reached for the bowl and said, “I’ll pick the carrots out and feed them to the chipmunks tomorrow.”

“No, you won’t. I’ll feed them. Gloria can wheel me out to the deck after she gets here.”

“What would you do without Gloria?”

Gloria was Cindy’s youngest daughter, who lived four blocks from them in their hometown of Scandinavia. Charlie often wondered why Gloria came by to visit every day, when she’d rarely visited them before the accident. Every week or so she’d cook a meal for them, which he supposed was nice, like infrequent respite care for the elderly, like an obligation. When Gloria and the boys came tomorrow she would take charge of the kitchen and meals. He would take the boys fishing on the resort’s pontoon for as long as they wished. He imagined that Cindy would relish telling Gloria the latest nasty things Charlie had visited upon her while he was safely out on the lake fishing with the boys.

Charlie didn’t daydream as much as he used to about how various fates would deliver him from Cindy. None had come to his rescue. A tall white pine didn’t fall on her as she sat in her wheelchair on the deck feeding chipmunks. A drunk driver never hit their car broadside—on her side, of course. No quick, aggressive cancer or a massive heart attack. A jet’s engine didn’t drop on her head like poop from a seagull. Charlie knew that there were few accidents that would leave him blameless—a grieving widower. Real-life accidents rarely benefitted the right people. He’d always known these thoughts were bad and that he shouldn’t have them. He should care about Cindy. He should experience positive feelings for her. Sometimes he wondered where he’d been when all those good feelings he’d heard about had been divvied out. He was reminded of a science fiction story he’d read as a child about a robot wanting all possible human feelings and the predicaments that presented. Getting rid

of these disastrous-end thoughts must be like an alcoholic, a gambler, and a womanizer giving up their obsessions. He couldn't stop cold turkey, especially when they provided such comfort and peace. Charlie had to admit that the quiet of the woods, changing music of the lake and the focus on the possibility of hooking a big bass took his mind away from the fantasies for a while.

The dreadful thought of being with Cindy full-time in town crept in again as they waited for Gloria after breakfast. Charlie loved to prepare breakfast because he enjoyed scrambled eggs mixed with sausage, whole wheat toast covered with full-strength raspberry preserves and perkolator coffee and because Cindy invariably didn't complain.

"You can't wait for Gloria to get here, can you?" asked Cindy. They were on the deck that had a line of sight on the road in to the cabin. She shifted her weight in the wheelchair to stare at him, as a prosecutor would at the reluctant witness, demanding the truth. Charlie couldn't be truthful though. He would leak fantasy. Cindy would have more to write about, more to stoke the embers of his guilt.

"I'll be glad to see her and the boys."

"I'm sure you'll leave me right away to go fishing with them," she stated as she looked back at the road.

If he retreated into a fantasy now, Cindy would see his retreat, which would force him to be evasive, to say something safe. Before he responded, a dark and dense swarm of honey bees appeared above Cindy's head. The thousands of bees emitted no noise, no fascinating buzz. The swarm descended, totally covering her head, neck and shoulders. Was this the fate he'd longed for? Cindy didn't scream, wave at the bees or otherwise move defensively and Charlie marveled at her composure. A few minutes later Gloria's car came down the road to the cabin and parked. Cindy waved and the swarm of bees vanished.

The boys hurried to the deck, found the jar of sunflower seeds and poured small piles of seeds around the deck in anticipation of petting the chipmunks. Three chipmunks scampered from the nearby bushes onto the deck within five minutes to begin the familiar practice of stuffing the black seeds into their cheeks. Jacob and James sat cross-legged, hands on the deck filled with seeds. Charlie admired how easily the boys found joy.

Gloria waved and smiled at Charlie as she wheeled her mother into the cabin. Charlie was content to sit in the Adirondack chair and watch the boys and the chipmunks. He dozed off for a few minutes but awoke to the sight of a large dark gray wolf climbing the steps to the deck. The wolf took no notice of the boys and the chipmunks, nor did they to it as it walked slowly across the deck. The wolf stared briefly at Charlie, without malice, as it passed by. It apparently had received training on the ways of doors because it pulled on the screen door's handle to open it to enter the cabin. Charlie didn't hear screams or other sounds of distress from within. Had Cindy known the wolf was coming to visit? Was she and Gloria and the wolf nibbling on biscuits and sipping tea?

Cindy yelled through the screen door, "Well, are you going to take the boys fishing or not?"

Charlie heaved himself up out of the Adirondack and peered through the screen to see Cindy and Gloria and their cups of tea. No wolf. Now his fantasies were dreams and just as unproductive. He sighed and went in and retrieved the container of leeches from the refrigerator, gathered up the fishing poles and tackle box from the corner of the living room and went out to the deck to gather up the boys. Cindy watched silently. Gloria wished the boys good luck fishing.

As they walked on the woodchip path by the water on the way to the resort's office, Charlie listened to the boys chatter about who would catch the largest bass while his mind stirred up another fantasy about Cindy. What if he took her out in the pontoon later in the evening and a violent thunderstorm suddenly erupted and a lightning bolt struck the metal canopy frame that she was grasping and it instantly transformed her into gray ash? An instant, free cremation. An afternoon away from Cindy and a new fantasy made Charlie feel better.

The bass were biting. He'd found a good spot to anchor in one of the several coves on Flower Lake. The cove's water was quiet and dark in the shadow of the surrounding hills, and on the shoreline the cedars stood silently, a deep hedge guarding the fragile aspen and birch above. Charlie stared at the dark water and wondered if a thunderstorm could come by later to applaud itself and spew hot bolts where expected.

Jacob screamed as a huge largemouth bass exploded out of the water to fly at James. It snapped its large mouth open and shut and growled just before it swallowed him. The fish dove back into the water and the sight of James's feet sticking out of its mouth as it slid down out of sight was ludicrous. Charlie was annoyed. His fantasies were supposed to be only about Cindy. This was scary.

Soon Jacob and James had caught more than enough bass for the three dinners they would have at the cabin. With the big ones in the live box and the future trophies freed, Charlie pulled anchor and headed back to the resort, skimming atop the calm water of Flower Lake still troubled by his latest fantasy. He didn't understand it. Why James? Was it a fantasy? Was he losing it and headed into the cruel world of dementia, or worse, Alzheimer's? The former promises of Cindy fantasies seemed less promising. Was this a wake-up call, a call to action?

Perhaps he could soon conjure an appropriate and saving fantasy plan.

At dinner Charlie was relaxed. Mashed potatoes smothered with real butter, peas, and crispy fried bass fillets and the boys' rehashing of their fishing adventure pushed away thoughts of fantasy or delusion or visions or dementia. Cindy and Gloria seemed relaxed too. The chipmunks, however, stood on their hind legs at the screen door, chittering loudly for more black sunflower seeds. The boys noticed them and gave them seeds after they finished eating their ice cream.

Cindy asked, "Do you have enough pep left to take all of us on the pontoon this evening?"

Gloria said, "I think the boys have had enough fun for today. We'll stay here. Early to bed for them." Jacob and James had begun to wind down and didn't object.

Cindy crossed her arms across her chest and glared at Charlie. "Well, I want to go. Do you think that you could favor me with a moonlight pontoon ride?"

"It would be an honor and privilege to take my wife out on the lake."

"Thank you. You're so kind."

It was easier to wheel her down the road to the resort landing than along the water on the woodchip path. The moon was full and showed the way plainly. Charlie was preoccupied and Cindy spoke just twice to warn him about an impudent rock ahead in the road. The rocks reminded Charlie of his farming days before he met Cindy. It was on the family farm in southern Minnesota that he drove a John Deere B in the alfalfa field as he and his first wife baled hay. The John Deere, which he likened to a green-and-yellow ox, would snort as it bounced over rocks that had the temerity to get in its way. Bales safely tucked in, he and Emily sat resting on the edge of a hay wagon, legs swinging back and forth, surrounded by the sweet fragrance of alfalfa once again wrested from the ancient soil.

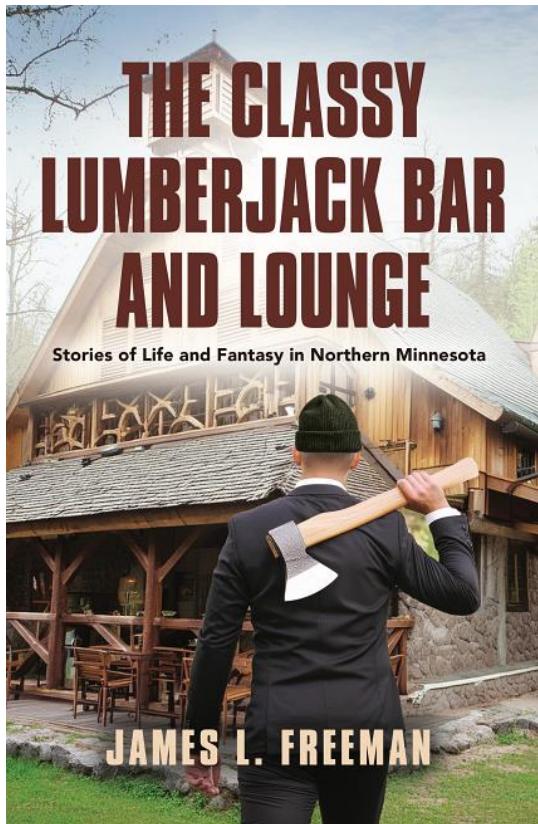
He pushed the wheelchair down the dock and onto the pontoon. The moon seemed to shine a pathway for the pontoon out onto the lake. Charlie chose instead to motor close to shore where the water was not so deep and they could see into the cabins set close to shore. The cabins all seemed to resemble Cabin Six. They had golden-glowing windows just as in *A Peaceful Retreat*. He doubted they all fulfilled that promise. He felt encouraged that he hadn't experienced a fantasy or illusion as they slowly glided along the shore. Cindy was writing in her journal with the aid of a battery lantern hung from the canopy and seemed to take little notice of the sights. Charlie was thankful that she was writing and not talking.

They came to the cove where the boys had caught the fish. He hadn't meant to come there. He decided to stop for a while, so he steered the pontoon to the middle and dropped anchor. He intended to tell her about the boys' fun catching the bass.

"Why are you stopping here? It's dark and I can't see the moon from here. Can't you humor me this once?"

Charlie went to the front of the pontoon to where he'd just dropped the anchor and stepped out onto the float to pull the anchor up hand over hand. He pulled it out of the water and turned to look at Cindy. She looked back at him, her face devoid of expression. Charlie noticed for the first time in a long while how beautiful her face was, how tempting her full lips were, how appealing her tousled brown hair was. He stared at her for several minutes before he took a step backward and as he entered the dark water he clutched the anchor to his chest.

Cindy, for a moment, stared at the spot he left. She opened her journal and resumed writing with the aid of her flashlight hung from the canopy.



This book is a collection of twenty nine stories primarily for young male adults. The stories range from canoeing, bar life, wilderness adventure, personal essay to odd animals. A fair amount of fantasy happens in some stories.

The Classy Lumberjack Bar and Lounge

By James L. Freeman

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