The Boys of summer

Friday, September 16, 2005

My son Ian and I just this minute got out of the lake.

We swim every night when I get home, if he is not playing with friends. We started this ritual last fall. He would get off the school bus from kindergarten and say, “Let’s go swimming!” We would splash around for a while; Ian taking “shark rides” on my back. We were hanging onto the last bits of summer.

Eventually I had to go in first and convince him that it wasn’t cold, until he waded in slowly and then made the plunge. As October neared, each day required me to be more convincing about the water being warm, even as I felt the chill. I would wade in fast and dunk down to my shoulders. I would turn to face Ian, tread water, smile, and tell him it was warm enough to take a quick swim.

Each day, it would take longer and longer for him to get all the way in. He would watch me closely, looking for signs that I might be cold. Each day it was harder and harder for me to fake warmth as the water temperature fell.

Then the day finally came. Ian could not bring himself to get in.

Maybe the pain on my face gave it away. I pulled out all the stops: “Ian, you are going to have to wait until next May to swim again; today is your last chance to swim before “Old Man Winter” puts down his blanket of ice and snow.

He was torn. It was painful to watch. Summer ended right before my eyes. Father and son had milked summer for all it was worth, and we had finally come down to the final 30 minutes. I remember restraining myself from shivering one more time as I walked out of the water and put a towel around his dry body.

I watched him as he stood silently staring at the lake for long time. Here was my son, a young boy of summer, watching the final moments, wishing it would all come back for just one more day.

Now it is a year later. Ian is a bit older, we snorkel chasing bluegills, rather than just thrashing about, and I hope a both of us are a little bit tougher, so we can keep summer around longer this year.

It is mid-September and he says, “Daddy, let’s go swimming; grab your mask,” and he beats me into the water.

We chase bluegills and touch the lone perch that shows up each night. We swim until dark, shouting and throwing the ball back and forth for diving catches. Mom has to call us in for dinner. It’s too dark to see underwater, so we might as well get out.

I know the day is coming. It may be a little later than last year, and maybe this will be the year when Ian wades in while I stand on the shore. But I hope not.

It’s been raining, ad highs are only in the 70’s, but I am willing to bet Ian and I will take summer almost to October, longer than we did last year.

Whatever the day, whatever the time, it will be a precious moment when we say good-bye. This year or maybe next Ian will understand what is going on. We will talk about what is happening, that the boy of summer and his father have grown another year older.

**Epilogue**

The years have flown by.

We had lots of great summers on the lake when you were young, but now you are 18 and living at prep school in Maine, while I continue to swim alone (with the dogs) each Fall. Continuing to jump off the dock until the last week of September, I think of you every day as I try to stretch summer to the middle of October.

It is a strange time for me with you gone. You weren’t around the house much your last 2 years, but I still feel like a part of me is missing.

The first week was the hardest as I fought back tears while driving the truck. Just knowing that it will never be quite the same around here is the hard part, but each day gets a little better and I am not glancing into your bedroom as much. I take solace in knowing you are in the best place possible at this point in your life.

You are almost 20 years old now and a freshman at University of Delaware, you’ve been gone since late August and I’m not sure if you even swam in the lake last summer.

I’m 74 now and still jumping off the dock on October 11th, thinking of you. With all the rain we’ve had the water is still not chilling me to the bone, but there is going to be some chilly weather moving in tomorrow and I have to start thinking about taking the dock out, before I am shivering too much.