

John Tavares

THE SISTERHOOD OF THE PROVINCIAL PARK

Tina, the storyteller, drove her hipster van to the provincial park. Meanwhile, the group of young women bicycled down Highway 72. Tomas peddled steadily past the group on the steep hill while they walked their bicycles single file uphill on the gravel shoulder of the paved highway. Tomas shouted ebulliently they should be riding their bicycles uphill, not walking them, to maximize the cardiovascular benefits of cycling.

Lou had been telling war stories from her internship with the Thunder Bay police, riding with the officers in their patrol cars, during her police foundations courses at Confederation College, where she was determined to work in law enforcement. Taking strict offense, she hissed, spat, and waved her hand dismissively at the faintly familiar intervenor in annoyance, as he bicycled past them on the highway shoulder. Lou complained he was killing their positive vibes, and she told him to mind his own business.

On the other side of the steep hill, they continued to bicycle to the beach in the provincial park to celebrate the end of the academic year and their new employment. Half had recently graduated from university and community college and were engaged in the process of orienting themselves to life after postsecondary education. A few of them had started work full-time as tree planters and forest fire fighters with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry at their fire base and camp in town, in Sioux Lookout.

They were in a celebratory mood. They had even brought psychedelic mushrooms, hashish and marijuana in clear plastic resealable sandwich bags, LSD on blotters, and crushed and broken tablets of meth

and ecstasy, and bottles of wine, beer, rum, and whiskey. What else were they celebrating, aside from college graduation and the beginning of their adventurous summer jobs? The start of summer? Canada Day?

Shouting happily, the young women were not very particular on this beautiful summer day. They only knew they wanted to celebrate their freedom, their lives as young adults, and the fact it was summer in the great white north. They wanted to get stoned, drunk, and high; they were young, full of promise, and, they were reminded, after the death of a close friend from suicide and another in an automobile accident, life was short.

After they set up a campsite on Little Vermillion Lake in the provincial park, they built a large campfire that grew into a bonfire after they piled on stacks of driftwood, firewood, and scrap lumber from the patio of a nearby fish hut. They started smoking pot, imbibing psychedelic mushrooms, and drinking beer and hard seltzers. They played music, sang, and danced around the campfire. Meanwhile, they noticed the young man in his swimsuit seated down the shoreline reading a book. After the sun set, he took a swim in the chilly water. A few friends marveled that he swam so far out of the lake in the cold water. Lou thought he was a curious figure. They started to converse about him as they drank beer, gulped shots of vodka, and smoked pot in the dim light of the abandoned shoreline in this remote provincial park outside of their hometown.

“Like what does that guy do for a living?” Lou demanded.

“I heard he was a photographer, or something like that,” Cindy said.

“No,” Tina said. “He doesn’t work. He’s on disability. My mom is a nurse in the emergency room. She says he’s schizophrenic or schizoaffective, or schizoid something. Sometimes he shows up at the hospital, wired, pacing in the ER, in a panic, and they need to adjust his meds.”

“A freeloader then,” Lou said. “But he cycles all the way to the provincial park to swim?”

“It looks that way.”

“I think he used to swim at Second Sandy beach, but there were too many complaints about him or his picture-taking.”

“Taking pictures isn’t illegal,” Cindy said.

“It is if you’re at the beach,” Lou insisted.

“That isn’t against the law; the beach is a public place, not private property,” Cindy replied.

“I’m not going to debate and discuss the matter,” Lou said impatiently.

“But Kay says she sometimes sees him in the bar, and he leers at her and her friends,” Tina said.

“Leers?” Cindy asked.

“As in, he stares at them. Glues his eyes to her breasts.”

“No fucking social skills whatsoever,” Lou commented.

Cindy sighed and said that happened after Kay flashed her bare breasts at him in the Legion, showed off her piercings, and even pinched her nipples. “It is the Legion, after all, where guys take off their hats out of respect for veterans and dead soldiers.”

“Isn’t that why you go to the bar?” Tina said. “To get picked up? I don’t care if a guy stares at my tits in the bar. I want the attention.”

“You want some creep staring at you, but some women don’t,” Lou said. “Probably most women don’t want to be creeped out.”

“I don’t understand how he can sit in the sun and read at the beach and swim in that cold water,” Courtney said.

“I think it’s called crazy,” Lou said.

“You mean mental illness,” Cindy said, and quickly added, “Maybe he’s just different.”

“Kay says she was walking home one night down Front Street from Gloria’s house and she ran into him,” Tina said. “He gave her the creeps so much she started running.”

“He gave her the creeps?” Cindy asked.

“Just the looks of him, you know, made her afraid, and she ran,” Tina said. “She says she ran fast and hard, and a few times she thought he was right behind her, but it was just the zipper bouncing on her hoodie.”

“That’s messed up,” Lou said. “He’s messed up.”

“Kay says he’s fucked up,” Tina said. “She said she felt so afraid she felt she didn’t have a choice.”

Cindy’s friends continued to smoke pot and a few ingested psychedelic mushrooms, as they mused and chatted. They were also drinking whiskey, beer, and vodka coolers.

“He fucked Gloria,” Tina said.

“What the fuck!?”

“Well, he was swimming nude at the beach—”

“Swimming naked at the beach—the guy who seems like such a nerd and a geek?” Lou demanded. “I just can’t see him swimming nude at this beach. I mean, isn’t it illegal, lewd, like sex offender stuff?”

“Anyway, one evening Gloria peddles her bicycle furiously down to the provincial park as part of her triathlon training. He was swimming nude at the park beach.”

“She peddled her bike all the way to the park?” Lou said. “She must have had some secret crush on the guy.”

“Anyway, she sees him swimming nude at the beach,” Tina said. “She walks her bicycle to the shoreline. She strolls along the beach and sees him. She strips down and decides to do her swim in the buff as well. Then Gloria, the fool, started talking to him. He starts asking her about her swimming routine, but she says she doesn’t understand how he could swim so long in the cold water and so far out into the lake. She noticed he swam underwater for a very long time. She said she had never seen anyone swim underwater for so long.”

“The bitch,” Lou said. “She was flirting with him.”

“I think she just admired his swimming ability. And everyone knows Gloria will fuck anyone. Anyway, she started asking him about his girlfriend. He tells her he didn’t have a girlfriend and he never dated anyone. And so, she figured he was clean, disease free, and maybe even a virgin, and I guess she liked his body. She believed he had never dated anyone; she was his neighbor, and she never saw him with any woman, and he had no sisters. So, she swam out and said, ‘Come and get me.’ And, he’s like, What? And she says, ‘Come and get me. Make love to me.’ And he stared at her and so she said it again. Then she reached for his hand and that was when he started shaking. He picked her up, something she never expected, and carried her to the shore. He was trembling and breathing so hard that she started having second thoughts. She figured she made a mistake, but he fucked her anyway.”

“The freak raped her,” Lou said.

“An effing rapist,” Courtney said.

Cindy argued what he had done wasn’t sexual assault, but the other women said she was raped because she had changed her mind. Then Cindy, who was studying to become a lawyer, said Gloria failed to communicate that fact to him. Lou protested she could withdraw consent anytime, and, essentially, she had. But he was not a mind reader, Cindy complained.

“You’re fucked,” Lou said.

Lou wanted to attend police college, following her college studies, and join a big city law enforcement agency, but she had yet to receive a return call from the recruiter and rejected job offers to work as a security guard. By this time in the evening her friends were intoxicated, stoned, and full of feist, energy, and outrage. Like demons possessed by the spirit of fire, her friends danced around the huge bonfire, the flames from which leapt into the humid night air and illuminated them with an eerie orange glow. They ignited the campfire from discarded newspaper, leftover copies of the weekly community bulletin, which they retrieved from a camp wastebasket, which ignited the sticks, and built up the fire with broken logs, driftwood, and snapped branches. They shouted and sang vintage classic Queen songs, which they recently discovered from movies, online, on the Internet. They belted out “We Will Rock You” and “We Are the Champions,” acting as if they were true champions and recently won the Stanley Cup. Indeed, they were kissing and hugging each other in victory and celebration. The friends had smoked too much pot and had drunk too much whiskey, vodka, and beer. They were also tripping on the magic mushrooms, which Lou bought from a roving nude flower girl and hippie on the clothing optional beach of Hanlan’s Point, after college friends, Toronto natives, took her there for a visit.

Cindy’s friends decided they would take their accusations directly to the man. Young women, barely adults, meanspirited, acting like vengeful high school seniors, her friends headed down the shoreline to where the man dubbed the swimming nerd and geek was reading his hardcover book, *The Caine Mutiny*.

Lou pushed him and demanded, “You fucked our friend Gloria, eh?”

“Who are you talking about?”

Cindy got the impression that initially he liked physical contact, at least until Lou got pushy, ugly, and she belligerently shoved and hit him.

“Gloria. You know Gloria. She is your neighbor. You raped her.”

“I know Gloria. She is a neighbor and a friend.”

“What?” Lou demanded. “Did you molest her after school, diddle her in the playground?”

Cindy groaned and shouted in protest, but Lou turned around, glared at her, and ordered her to shut up. Lou turned around and glared at Tomas, who stared back at her and matched her stony expression.

“You fucked her when she was a minor, eh?”

“I didn’t. Gloria is too nice a person.”

“But you fucked her here at this beach, didn’t you?”

“My personal life is none of your business.”

“You raped her.”

He ignored her and continued to read the hardcover book.

Cindy’s friends continued to directly confront the young man, crouching down in front of him, as if ready to leap upon him, leveling their face-to-face accusations against him. The man realized the encounter had escalated into a physical confrontation with a woman, Lou, and her friends, which had the potential to explode and had already escalated out of control. He figured he needed to leave the beach, the lake, and the park immediately to avoid a physical conflict and altercation, which, he feared, could lead to his arrest, and cause him no shortage of remorse and regrets. He needed to escape, to get on his bicycle and speed away from the provincial park in the late evening, warm and illuminated by the moon.

By then Lou and Courtney grabbed him. They held him while the rest of Cindy’s friends also held his hairy, narrow arms after he fought back. The conflict had become deeply personal. Tomas became angry and retaliated, trying to kick and strike Lou so she would release him. Lou became angry at his attitude and resistance. The friends felt outraged and retaliated, angry at how ferociously he fought back. He also bruised Lou when he attempted to escape. Cindy watched in exasperation and near hysteria, and screamed at them to stop being bullies and brutes, as they dragged him out into the shallow water of Little Vermillion Lake near the sandy shore.

Lou asked him to show him just how good a swimmer he was now that he was outnumbered by the sheer number of women and the power of sisterhood. Dunking his head, pulling his thick hair, Lou said she was waterboarding him.

“Stop, you’re going to drown him,” Cindy insisted.

Lou held him beneath the water for long while her other friends gripped him. Lou said they were teaching him a lesson, and he should stop struggling. Lou’s friends reinforced her strength and emphasis. Then Tomas put up an incredible forceful struggle, tugging and pulling with his arms and hands, as if they were gripped by shackles, or handcuffs, whose chains he managed to break. He struck Lou, the most aggressive, who

was nearest to his reach, pounding her with his fists, gaining a momentary advantage as he stunned her. He also struck Courtney and managed to break free from their grips. The women chased him back to the shore, though. They dragged him, breathless, panting, back into the water. Courtney pulled him by the back of his swim shorts as well, until she had stripped them off and he was naked. He slapped her in the face and ran back towards the beach, but together the pair, with Tina and another friend, chased after him and dragged him back into the deeper water. The women together held him down beneath the rippling surface of the lake as he splashed and struggled and then seemingly finally surrendered, succumbing to exhaustion and their overpowering strength. Then he suddenly bolted from the water, gasping for air, but the women, who had not expected such resistance, held him back down, to calm him down, they said, and mutually nodded in agreement. Eventually, Tomas stopped struggling.

“You can stop now,” Lou said. She shook him, trying to elicit a response from the floating figure. “You’re faking now, Mr. Mentally Disabled.”

The swimmer had ceased moving and Courtney, who poked him, as he floated with a stick, said he appeared stunned. As Tomas drifted with the water, face down, his bare back and tanned flesh exposed to the moonlight, Cindy said he appeared drowned. Resting her head on her folded legs, which she clutched, Cindy buried her face in her hands and started to sob.

The gang realized then there was nothing they could do about this occurrence, this accident, and the fate of Tomas, who, Lou complained, was the author of his own destruction, and their own destiny. They stood around the campfire as they eyed his body in the darkness drifting in the shallow water. They agreed they needed to take drastic action.

Lou and Courtney strode purposefully along the shoreline to the marina and cabins. They found a canoe stashed in the dusty rafters of the park boathouse further down the shoreline. They paddled to the spot on the beach where the body drifted in the lake and retrieved the body, hauling it over the gunwales into the canoe. They paddled along the lake to the small, narrow turbulent river where they dumped his body into rapids. Pushing the body with paddles, they allowed his form to float and drift downstream with the fast-flowing current. They returned the canoe to the boathouse and walked back along the shoreline to their beach encampment.

Lou pushed Tomas' bicycle off the end of the nearby dock, at the boat launch, where small boats with outboard motors bobbed against worn out rubber tires tied to the wooden planks. Originally, Lou intended to keep his camera, but, when she discovered it was a film camera, and not digital, she threw the single lens reflex camera into the lake. The women stoked the bonfire with fresh firewood and Lou and Courtney burned his book, his beach towel, board shorts, sneakers, and his remaining belongings, including a notebook and pencil.

The gang agreed they needed to remain silent about this ordeal and misadventure, while Cindy quietly nurtured her reservations. Lou even mentioned the need to take inspiration from the mistake and uplift themselves and attempt to attain their loftier goals. They made a vow of silence and a pact of enduring and everlasting friendship. This incident would only make them stronger and closer as lifelong friends. They were a sorority, a strong sisterhood, bonded by this unfortunate incident that overtook and overwhelmed them that evening. They returned to town, loading their bicycles in Tina's Volkswagen van.

Later, Cindy, the daughter of a United Church minister, who came out as a lesbian, felt so guilty about the fate of the young man she felt tempted to report the incident to the police. But she did not want to be responsible for ruining the bright futures of her friends. She also feared people would point the finger at her and label her a murderer; she felt she was commonly made the scapegoat in these situations.

Afterwards, the local media reported the missing man had drowned in the provincial park lake. The community newspaper printed a quote from a police officer, who said Tomas liked to swim alone and was known to take risks swimming, swimming solo, swimming in cold water, and swimming at night. The marine unit of the police service even received calls multiple times over several summers after he swam too far a distance from the shore into the middle of Pelican Lake, close to floatplanes and a boating channel. The police officer, who had heard enough about Tomas and his missing persons case, demanded irately, "Is it any wonder he went missing on a solo trip to the provincial park?" He flicked his fingers in annoyance, as if counting impatiently, "The guy swam alone in Little Vermillion Lake, which was far away from emergency services, or anyone. He was in the middle of nowhere. When he went to the park there were no lifeguards on duty. There wasn't any campground or park supervision, no rangers, no foresters, not even junior rangers, forest fire fighters, even maintenance workers. He disappeared when there wasn't even campers or vacationers. What do you expect?" Not surprisingly, Tomas' body was never recovered.

For several years afterwards, during the summer, “the girl gang,” as Lou called them, or “the sisterhood of the provincial park,” as Courtney referred to the circle of friends, returned to the beach on the anniversary of the young man’s disappearance. They continued to make their annual camping trip to the provincial park, building a large bonfire, swimming, fishing for smallmouth bass and lake trout from a canoe or the shoreline or dock, barbecuing, sunbathing, but never discussing the incident. By then the members of their gang had become: a nurse, a forester, a paramedic, a schoolteacher, a welder, and a post office clerk. After she received a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, Cindy abandoned her position as a paralegal at a Bay Street law firm. Following another episode of turmoil and personal upheaval, she returned to her hometown to work as a post office clerk.

One night during their annual camping trip, at the beach, Lou insisted Cindy sample a dose of psychedelic mushrooms. Cindy, already drunk, became emotional and dramatic as she started to experience the psychedelic effects of the psilocybin. She experienced intense anxiety and flashbacks. She hallucinated, felt overwhelmed by synesthesia, and saw the most beautiful scintillating lights. The eerie haunting cries of a loon flying across the lake triggered a vision of Tomas, in a pointillist painting, standing nude in the lake, beckoning to her. Under the influence of these magic mushrooms, Cindy started weeping and sobbing. She said what they had done was abhorrent from a humanitarian standpoint, morally and ethically wrong. She wept, sobbed, and said that she was tempted to confess to the police; she had already confessed to her priest, after she had converted to Roman Catholicism for a girlfriend who later dumped her.

Lou’s ears perked up. “You need to get a hold of yourself and straighten the fuck out.”

The group of women were in their favorite part of the provincial park, on the shoreline, a short distance from the tall grass and bush, which grew deep and thick around the shoreline of the lake and ran for countless miles in the deep forest of the Canadian Shield. Cindy saw the heavy hatchet Lou, who had been collecting firewood, held in her determined, steely grip and the cold, stern, intimidating expression on her stony face. Still under the influence of the mushrooms, Cindy became afraid Lou would come after her. She ran into the darkness of the forest down the trail, chased by Lou.

The women searched for hours along the trail for Lou and Cindy, but they could not find either of the pair. The darkness of the night made searching nearly impossible, but they continued to shout and survey the bushes with flashlights and dark-adapted eyes.

In the morning, Lou reappeared at the campsite. She looked tired, weary, with her T-shirt damp with sweat, her denim shorts stained with dirt and a bit of splattered blood, with cuts and scratches on her arms and legs. They demanded to know Cindy's whereabouts. One friend insisted on searching and another insisted on knowing what Lou had done to her.

Lou, exhausted, dirty, her face covered with splattered mud, soil, and numerous scratches, mumbled, and said something barely audible. Lou murmured she searched and could not find Cindy.

Cindy, the hopeless fool, the romantic do-gooder, was lost. One of the women continued to demand to know what Lou had done to Cindy. Lou insisted she had merely tried to find her, but never contacted her, despite shouting after her. Even that was not true, Lou admitted, since she heard Cindy crashing through the bushes. Lou even made visual contact with her another time, but she claimed Cindy was too frantic and panicked to stop, calm down, and regain her senses. Lou claimed Cindy was on a bad trip from the psychedelic mushrooms and was afraid of her and tried to hide deeper into the bush.

Lou complained she had gotten scratches from trying to search for Cindy in the bushes in the dark. She had even become lost herself but managed to find the winding trail back to the lake shoreline. "Where were you all? I had to look for that crazy, tripping bitch myself."

Tina had been about to chop a block of birch for firewood when she noticed the axe was missing and remembered Cindy had seized the tool. "What about my father's axe? What happened to my dad's axe? Dad is going to freak out. The police are going to want to know what happened."

"I dropped that hatchet in the bush, for Christ's sake," Lou protested. Lou grabbed her friend Tina by the wrist and shoulder and pushed and tugged her, muttering angrily she needed to knock some sense into this girl. "And the police aren't going to have any questions about a hatchet because nobody is going to snitch. Nobody is going to squeal and tell them. Do you understand?"

Tina nodded and gently asked Lou to release her wrist.

Still, the other women insisted that they had no choice—they needed to report the incident to the authorities.

"Well, duh," Lou said, "She hasn't been found yet."

The women told the police at the local detachment that Cindy disappeared during a hike along the trails through the bush around Little Vermillion Lake before sunset.

Cindy was never found, her remains were never recovered: no sight or sound of her ever appeared. The gathering at the campsite of the provincial park that took place among friends the day after she disappeared was also the last get together that the women in the gang ever had. This sisterhood of the provincial park was broken, as gossip, back biting, suspicion, and fear took its toll on their friendship. The bonds and attachments were also weakened by the vicissitudes of human biology and aging, as nature and wildlife around the provincial park grew and flourished through the changing climes and the passage of time.