Every summer during his childhood, my Southern Californian husband boarded a plane to upstate New York. After arriving and driving north, he and a medley of siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins arrived at their destination: a cabin or cottage or camp on a lakeshore. There they settled into the traditional American experience that is lake life.

There aren’t many experiences my husband and I haven’t shared—but summers on the lake was one of them. For years he talked about flying together to upstate New York and driving to a lake, where we’d spend a week on the water with his boisterous, extended family. Finally, five years after we got married, we booked a trip.

We stayed at the cabin in the Adirondack Park. It wasn’t the biggest lake house, nor did it have the most toys—jet skis, boats, and wakeboards—but it was the most serene. I had previously backpacked in the Adirondacks and wanted to experience the park beyond its endless series of trails. Our Adirondack cabin, which belonged to my aunt and uncle, was tucked in the woods near Saranac Lake and edged up to a pond. It sounded perfect.

When inviting a loved one into a nostalgic childhood experience, it’s typical to try to temper the guest’s expectations. Not my husband. In his mind, summer days on a lake couldn’t possibly fall short of his memories. He promised a lot of things: early morning paddles across silent water, swimming in the afternoons, drinks on the deck as the sun set, lazy hours to read. By the time we had landed, my vision of lake life was cemented.

On the night of our arrival, my uncle drove us from Albany to the Adirondack Park. The light shifted from dusk to dark as we wound through wooded roads. As we approached the cabin, he grew more animated, pointing out barely-visible landmarks and passing along historical tidbits about the park. It was clear he fit in here, more at home in his Adirondack chair or a canoe than anywhere else. He and my aunt bought this cabin for their retirement, and they plan to grow old watching the water from their porch.

Though the weather in Albany had been humid, a typical East Coast summer day, the temperature dropped as we drove north. Outside the windows, the silhouettes of pines disappeared into the night and my cell service blinked in and out. Rain tapped and then hammered on the
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Cool temperatures couldn’t stem our enjoyment of taking a boat out on the water.
windows, the glass was cold to the touch. I mentally rifled through my suitcase, searching unsuccessfully for a rain jacket amidst my optimistic shorts, tank tops, and bathing suit. By the time we pulled down the dirt road to the cabin, the sky was dumping water and the temperature had slipped to nearly 50 degrees.

“I’m sorry!” my aunt greeted us as we ran from the car to the cabin porch, shaking off droplets. “It was in the seventies last week!” We arrived in a June cold snap. The Adirondacks, it turned out, were indifferent to our long-awaited summer trip and our visions of sunshine and warm afternoons. The weather reports predicted highs in the low fifties and rain every day of our stay.

On our first morning at the cabin, we carried steaming mugs of coffee to the deck—where the thermometer read 47 degrees—and swaddled ourselves in blankets and down jackets. The house edges right up to the water, and the dock was partially submerged after a wet winter. Hummingbirds landed on the feeder and the pond was glass under the gray sky. Sunk deep into an Adirondack chair, each of us peered at the placid surface from beneath beanies and hoods. While it wasn’t the sunny lounging my husband had described, it certainly was relaxing.

As a Californian, my summers consist of saltwater and waves. The placidity of freshwater, not to mention the ability to step out of a cabin and onto the shore, felt foreign. As I admired the surroundings, I couldn’t help but compare it to drought-stricken California. The dim light that filtered through the trees was green, the grass leading up to the pond was green, each leaf was green, and all I could talk about was how green everything was.

When the morning thawed, my uncle suggested we take the canoes out for a paddle. I was amused to learn that our hosts called them boats, not canoes: “Can you help me carry the boat from the garage?” “Careful when you put the boat in the water.” My husband and I shared a “boat” while the others paddled solo. One by one we slipped into the water, leaving the damp woods and hum of mosquitos behind. The boats slid quiet as loons across the surface. As we set out, we received a crash course on certain strokes: the draw, the j-pull, how to turn and stall the canoe. We managed to stay afloat and dry as we crossed one pond and portaged to another.

Despite the chill, our paddling kept us warm. Rain threatened, but never came. Something rustled on the shore and my aunt glimpsed the rear-end of a martin, slipping shyly into the shadows. A few minutes later we saw an osprey make slow circles overhead.
We passed islands that looked like heads of giants rising from the water, some lush and some bald in patches. We were the only ones on the water, soaking in what my uncle called “a nice little wilderness dose.” Beneath our paddles the water was the exact color of ponds at the mini-golf course where my husband and I used to go on dates, an opaque blue-green. I watched the trees on the shore slide by.

Up ahead a pair of loons lit on the water. One called to the other: a long woo-oo that sounded like a minor key note blown on a flute. My aunt told me it was their wail call, used to figure out each other’s locations. “To me, that’s the Adirondacks,” she said. “The loons.”

The weather didn’t change throughout the week, but our days at the cabin followed a similar routine as we honored summertime lake habits. We ignored the cold and marched onto the deck each morning, carrying coffee and blankets, ready for a busy few hours of contemplating the water. Eventually, we made breakfast and went for a hike in the damp woods or sunk into chairs to read. In the afternoons, we drove into town for ice cream.

We ate grilled corn and ribs for dinner, a quintessential summer meal, and grinned at each other around the table from faces smeared with barbeque sauce. Back on the deck at night, we settled into our chairs, our coffee mugs replaced by wine or beer. “Help,” we called to each other, “I’m stuck in an Adirondack chair and can’t get up.” We passed the binoculars down the row of chairs and took turns aiming them at the loons who floated as motionless as wooden carvings on the water.

One night, my cousin lit a bonfire in their cast-iron kettle drum. The flames’ warmth extended across the grass and cast an orange glow onto the rippling pond. I couldn’t feel the cold thanks to a borrowed beanie and the fire in the kettle. I could only feel that familiar sense of potential at a summer’s beginning—what Jane Austen called “the sanguine expectation of happiness which is happiness itself.”

On our last evening, my husband and cousin pushed off from the dock and went fishing in a downpour. They sat in the dusk under sheets of water, fishing poles draped optimistically over the sides of their boats. From our living room perches, the rest of us watched them with sympathy, but they returned elated, having caught a single fish between them.

Once they’d dried and thawed, we headed into town for a final ice cream. Crossing the wet street, I paused. It was going on 9 p.m. but still dusky, summer solstice just around the corner. The pavement gave off a humid scent and all at once it smelled like summer: asphalt, pine, wet soil, new leaves. As I breathed in the season’s potential, I imagined a summer marked by cabins and woods and loons, and I liked how it felt.

Annelise Jolley is a San Diego-based writer and editor who covers travel and food. Her work has appeared in Hidden Compass, Civil Eats, and Edible San Diego, among others. View more of her work at annelisejolley.com.