

The Old Fishing Hut (Part 1)

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Thursday, 11 February 2010
Last Updated Thursday, 11 February 2010

The first house you live in after leaving home is like a sandpit for naughty puppies. Before you know it there are brown footprints in every direction for 200 meters, and the box looks like a bowl of regurgitated dog food. Maybe it's not like that for everyone, but it certainly was for my house mates and me.

We lived in the Old Fishing Hut, a double story shack with baby blue panels and a skew turret, overlooking the south bank of the Mississippi River in St. Cloud, Minnesota. It came furnished with fishing nets and angling trophies on every wall. Our basement was also filled with boxes of fishing gear; everything from rods, to lures, gumboots and plastic suits for wading into the water.

From my bedroom window I watched the trees across the river change color, from emerald green in the summer to sienna toned pencil shavings in winter. When ripples lapped the stony shore outside our house, I couldn't help thinking about all the waves that were breaking back home in South Africa.

Even crappy Pipe seemed appealing. I missed my family and surfing more than anything. Braais came shortly behind that. My board stood in the corner of the room, staring sadly at me, tears in its eyes, cobwebs and dust bunnies across the deck. I promised myself I would save money and take a trip to the coast, but that wasn't happening any time soon.

Above the fireplace in the lounge was a portrait of an old woman named Vera, sitting on a park bench with a poodle on her lap. A hunting knife is wedged between her teeth. The woman's eyes are wide open and angry, like she'd suddenly realized her dog had dropped a turn. Every time something in the house broke, like plates, glasses and one of the glazed trout heads on the wall, we blamed her. "Vera, what did you do this time?" I would shout down the stairs with every disturbing crash. "Ah, the old cow had it in for the whiskey tumblers," one of my house mates would call back up.

Jones was an International Relations student who went to class once a week, and drank at least 9 beers every night. Unbelievably, he excelled in upper level Spanish and maintained a steady grade point average — his marks were good enough to keep his strict parents paying for tuition every semester. He liked to swear at Solly and I in Spanish when he was drunk. Jones came to live with Solly and I, both international students, because he wanted to study abroad in South Africa and thought it best to meet a few natives. Jones was a student from up north, in Duluth. Whilst playing ping pong on our kitchen table in the evenings, he would console me with stories of people surfing in Lake Superior, near his parents' house.

"Yeah, you bet I've seen a cuppla guys surfin' out there'ntha summer time, but not that often or anything," Jones slurred on the night before we went there for spring break.

"Seriously? You're not having me on?" I asked, drawing Jones over the left hand side of the table with a sneaky slice shot, where I knew an overflowing ash tray lay on the floor.

"Ya ya," he answered, kicking a dust cloud of ash and stompies across the carpet. "Ah, time out! I've made a boo boo over here." The extra ash would make no difference to our carpet, which was saturated in beer and spaghetti sauce.

“Three months ago I would have been really bummed,” Solly interjected, putting a cigarette out in the sink’s plug. He was sitting on a bath cabinet we used for a chair, next to a pile of dishes that looked ready to sprout webbed feet and yellow eyes.

Solly was an engineering student from Zimbabwe, on a study abroad program at the time, like myself. He was initially the caretaker of the house – the one who washed up after every meal and cleaned his room on Sundays. But Jones and I were too destructive for Solly to keep fighting. After two months he joined us in turning the Old Fishing Hut into a litter box. Not one of us fished. Jones drank beer and swore in Spanish, Solly smoked too many cigarettes and stopped caring where he put them out, I missed surfing and played ping pong like Forrest Gump.

I was ready for a surfing trip to Lake Superior – I had to believe Jones was telling the truth. By 12 o clock the next day I had my answer.