

Francis by Dave Eggers

When I was a kid in the suburbs of Chicago, adventure meant Quetico Provincial Park, up on the border of Minnesota and Canada. The name implies that the place was small, but Quetico is a million acre nature preserve, so big you could go days and days without seeing another soul.

We would go on camping trips up there, weeks of canoeing and portaging, seeing bears and moose and deer, sleeping under star-soaked skies. The park was isolated and so pristine that you could actually drink the water straight from the lakes. But I won't be going back to Quetico anytime soon. Not after what happened to a girl named Francis Brandywine.

Francis was 17 at the time, black haired and with a reckless nature, determined always to leave the well-trod path, to break new ground and be alone. A few years ago, Francis was up in Quetico with her family. They were in a remote part of the park, camped on the shore of one of the deeper lakes, a lonely body of water carved millions of years ago by a passing glacier. The deep part of this particular lake was rumored to be about 300 feet.

One night, after her family went to bed, Francis took the row boat out, planning to find a quiet spot in the middle of the lake, lay on the bench of the boat, look up at the sky, and maybe write in her journal.

So she left the shore, rowed for about 20 minutes, and when she felt satisfied that she was over the lake's deepest spot, she lay down on the bench and looked up at the night sky. The stars were very bright, and the aurora borealis was shimmering like a neon lasso. She was feeling very peaceful.

Then she heard something strange. It was like a knock. Clop, clop. She sat up, guessing that the boat had drifted to shore and run aground. But she looked around the boat, and she was still a half mile from shore. She leaned over the side to see if she'd hit anything, but she saw nothing-- no log, no rocks. She lay back down.

She told herself it could be any number of things, a fish, a turtle, a stick that had drifted under the boat. She relaxed again and soon fell into a contented reverie. She had just closed her eyes when she heard another knock. This time it was louder, a crisp plop, plop, plop, like the sound of someone knocking hard on a wooden door, except this knocking was coming from the bottom of the boat.

Now she was scared. She leaned over the side again. It had to be an animal. But what kind of animal would knock like that, three quick, loud knocks in rapid succession? Her mouth went dry. She held onto each side of the boat, and now she could only wait to see if it happened again. The silence stretched out. A few minutes passed, and just as she began to think she'd imagined it all, the knocks came again, but this time louder. Bam, bam, bam.

She had to leave. She lunged for the oars. She got them in place and began rowing. The water was very calm, so she should've made quick progress. But after rowing feverishly,

she looked around, and she realized that she wasn't moving at all. Something was keeping her exactly where she was.

Again she tried rowing, she rowed and rowed on the verge of tears, but she went nowhere. She stopped. She was exhausted. Her heavy breathing filled the air. She cried. She sobbed. But soon she calmed herself again, and the boat was silent again, for 10 minutes, then 20.

Again, she tricked herself into thinking she'd imagined it all. But just like before, just when she was beginning to get a grip on herself, the knocking came again, this time as loud as a bass drum. Boom, boom, boom. The floorboards of the boat shook with each knock. Now she was so shaken she started making questionable decisions. The first was to lower one of the oars into the black water, trying to feel if there was some land mass, even some creature she could touch. As soon as the oar broke the water's surface, though, she felt a strong, silent tug at the other end, and the oar was pulled under.

She screamed, she jumped back, and now she had no options. All she could do was sit, and hope, and wait-- wait for the morning to come, wait for whatever was going to happen to happen. The knocking went on through the night. She passed the time writing in her notebook, and it's only because of this notebook that we know what happened that night. Frances can't tell us. She was never seen again.

The boat was found on shore the next day, empty but for the journal. On those pages were her frantic jottings, all written in her distinctive handwriting, all but the last page. When the journal was found, that page was still wet, and on it were four words, looking as if they'd been written quickly, with a muddy finger. They said, "I did knock first."

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/448/transcript>