

## Survival

By John Tavares

Ross had another birthday gift for his twin brother's birthday, their father's retirement watch. He found the handsome timepiece while he searched for the property deed and insurance documents for the house they shared. A Portuguese immigrant from the Acores, their father blended in easily with the large aboriginal population in the town of Sioux Lookout in northwestern Ontario. Like his brothers, Francisco found work on the railroad as a laborer for Canadian National Railways. The twins' mother was indigenous, an Ojibwa born and raised on the nearby reserve of Lac Seul. She worked as a cook in the hospital in Sioux Lookout.

When Raven gave birth to Ross and his fraternal twin, she thought she understood why her belly was so huge. Their mother also felt overwhelmed: nature gave her two babies to care for instead of a single offspring. When she was well enough to leave her hospital bed and maternity ward room, she took a painful stroll with Francisco at her side down the corridor. Francisco insisted on her resting and led her to the patient and visitor lounge. Wincing in pain, Raven sat down in the reclining chair. The twins' father, who couldn't read English and was barely literate in Portuguese, handed her a copy of the Guinness Books of World Records. Laughing, flipping through the pages of the Guinness Books of World Records, Raven said there was no entry for the world's oldest virgin. After he died, Raven told the twins their father was a virgin when she first met him in the basement bar of the Sioux Hotel: he was fifty-one; she was twenty-four. Until she met Francisco in the bar of the Sioux Hotel, his mother later revealed, she considered herself strictly a lesbian and, occasionally, a friend with benefits. She joked and kidded with Francisco, who could barely speak a word of English, about the enormous size of her friend's breasts and her bra size. He replied he thought she was "bonito, o lindo," in Portuguese.

"What does that mean?"

Uncle Manuel translated his brother's Portuguese to English, explaining it meant

Francisco thought she was beautiful. From that moment, Raven was hooked. Raven had just received her first paycheck as a cook at the Indian Affairs Zone Hospital in Sioux Lookout. She kept buying Francisco, who usually only drank cheap table wine with Sunday meals, rye-and-ginger ale. Francisco didn't want to be rude, particularly towards a woman, since he never met a woman who bought him drinks, so he kept sipping the rye-and-ginger-ales, nursing the drinks she handed him, until he was drunk. They ended up having a one night stand—his first. Four weeks later, she discovered she was pregnant.

The new mother browsed through the index of the Guinness Book of World Records and found remarkable entries about twins, triplets, and quadruplets. Then she looked at the introduction to the record book and perused the short biographies of the authors and editors: Ross and Norris McWirther were identical twins. She told Ross later she knew she didn't want to give her fraternal twins Portuguese names or Ojibwa names, but solid Anglo-Saxon names. So she named her twins Ross and Norris and even gave them the middle name of McWirther. Their autistic brother, born a few years later, was named for their Portuguese uncle Manuel, who introduced the couple. Shortly afterwards, he drowned during the spring thaw in Lake of the Woods, when he went swimming during coffee break from his work as a track maintainer for Canadian National Railways. Manuel was shocked by how cold the lake felt to his exposed flesh. He panicked and flailed helplessly in the cold water. To this day Ross hears his Portuguese uncles at family reunions argue whether Manuel died from hypothermia or drowning.

Ross asked his twin brother to take a swim at Second Sandy Beach, where he planned to give him their father's waterproof, shatterproof watch for his birthday. He remembered the last time his twin brother interrupted his swim at Second Sandy Beach on Pelican Lake. Shortly after their mother's death, their younger brother developed a life threatening fever. Later, CAT scans at the regional hospital in Thunder Bay revealed Manuel somehow mysteriously developed a cerebral inflammation. The neurologist and infectious disease specialist later determined the brain abscess was caused by an immune suppressant drug the doctor had prescribed for him for his ankylosing spondylitis. Manuel required transport by air ambulance to the regional hospital

in Thunder Bay. In a mad rush from a meeting with doctors at the hospital, Norris cycled to the beach, waded into the water, and swam after him. He pleaded with him, saying doctors needed somebody to escort Manuel, to the regional hospital in Thunder Bay. The worried nurses and doctors thought he needed a patient escort because not only was he was critically ill patient, but he was disabled. Ross had been in the middle of preparing to move to Toronto to attend York University. Caught in the middle of a swim, uncertain what to expect, he volunteered impulsively. Then he found his life disrupted as he escorted his groggy and insentient middle brother aboard an air ambulance to Thunder Bay. For two weeks, Ross stayed at their disabled brother's bedside, helping him communicate with nurses, providing doctors and specialists with his medical and social history, while he recovered from neurosurgery and his severe brain infection and the accompanying surgical complications and original illness, which still threatened his life. His disabled brother made an incredible recovery, and his strength and resilience inspired him, helping him make a final decision about school.

Nobody else in his family had ever attended college or university, but Ross decided to attend York University in Toronto. Three years later, after nine straight semesters, with no summer breaks, he graduated with an honors bachelor's degree in economics and received a diploma suitable for framing and a handshake from the former premier of the province of Ontario. Then, after Ross e-mailed and hand delivered his cover letter, resume, and job application forms to dozens of businesses and organizations, he discovered he couldn't find a job in Toronto with a plain degree in economics. His twin brother joked he didn't have the right references, didn't sleep with the right women, or drink with the right college classmates. His brother also complained he was a loner because he didn't drink beer or liquor. He drank only coffee and espresso in cafes when he was reading academic texts and working on college assignment, essays, and papers. Meanwhile, York University, a place difficult to escape a sense of depersonalization, was so huge and impersonal Ross never had the opportunity to become acquainted with any professors.

Still, Ross hoped to move forward, to acquire his degree in education and his teacher's

certificate and teach junior high or high school students. Now that his fraternal twin agreed to join him at the beach for a swim, Ross wondered if it was a good idea for him to swim across the lake. Ross concluded the beach or the soccer field of the high school grounds was the only place to negotiate with his twin brother and discuss personal and family business, but he always had somebody else to play footie at the field, so the beach it was.

Somehow, Ross managed to persuade his twin brother to take off to the beach with him. After a leisurely bicycle ride, they wound up at the beach in the evening as the air started to cool and the shadows lengthened. Worried he had been drinking, Norris said he wanted to hike to Second Sandy Beach, which he frequented on hot sunny days during the summer, where he caught up on his reading, since Ross insisted they peddle their pair of mountain bicycles to the beach. When they arrived at the beach, the sandy shoreline was abandoned, even though it was a hot summer evening. He remembered a rock and roll band, famous a decade ago, was playing a rock concert on Front Street in town.

Norris said he wanted to swim out to Blueberry Island. Ross remembered the last time Norris swam out to Blueberry Island—the evening of the day their father died at about two am, they grieved the loss of their father. Ross thought his brother was taking a dangerous risk swimming out alone more than two kilometers to Blueberry Island, even though he was in excellent physical condition. Ross shouted in panic as his twin swam out to the island, fearing he was intent on potential self-destruction in his grief. Even though Ross was in no particular mood to swim after their father died, and was not in good physical condition, Ross decided to join him. They both swam and waded to shore safely.

A paired swim would be an excellent exercise in partnership, male bonding, goodwill, and brotherhood, Ross thought, something they both desperately needed during this time when they both agreed, they were disagreeing and arguing excessively. They were even getting into fisticuffs over Norris' drinking and antics. Norris' insistence on moving girlfriends into the house after the twins inherited the house and Ross attended university. Norris' habits of allowing girlfriends turn the house their mother left them into a women's shelter and food bank

left him outraged, indignant, and seething. As they waded into the shallow cold water and started to swim towards Blueberry Island, Ross simply explained he wanted Norris to discontinue this practice for economic reasons.

“If you’re going to let a girlfriend move into the house while I’m gone, you’re going to have to start charging rent; it’s as simple as economics 101. She has to start paying rent. You have to stop playing sugar daddy. You’re not even old enough to be sugar daddy. You’re only twenty-one, and the only asset we have is the house. You need to protect the house. I know you make barely enough at the restaurant to pay your way, but you know that while I’m at university I can’t help you pay the bills.”

His twin brother, he noted, as they swam towards Blueberry Island, was surprisingly agreeable and non-argumentative. Norris was the more physically fit, strong, and well-built of twins, but for a change he didn’t look so intimidating. Ross no longer knew what to think or say, although he admitted that, in the past, he was judgmental. They were fraternal twin brothers, young adults, aged twenty-one, who had mature adult responsibilities thrust upon them, when first their Portuguese father died of congestive heart failure and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and then their Ojibwa mother died of a blood disorder, leaving behind a younger brother who was autistic. Before she died, their mother insisted they continue to try to look after their developmentally disabled brother. Ross began to think he made a mistake attending university shortly after their mother died, leaving his brother alone to look after the house. His twin brother insisted he would handle the household with its associated responsibilities, though. Indeed, he managed to maintain the place right up to his sophomore year, the year before Ross acquired his degree in economics at university. Then the bank released Norris’s share of the inheritance. He started to drink, party, and have sex nonstop.

Ross hoped to start his year of teacher’s college, when he realized his younger brother, distracted by lovers, a few of whom insisted on freeloading, had fallen behind on bills, water, utilities, hydroelectricity, cable television, telephone, property taxes. He realized he had to move back home to try to help him out of the financial quagmire and the domestic mess. So he

returned to live in the house in which he was born and raised, the house he inherited, in Sioux Lookout, which he found cheaper than living in the city of Toronto. The money he saved he used to help pay and catch up on the bills. Now he wanted to try again to return to college and university, to teachers college. He wanted to discuss this personal business and the issue of his younger brother obtaining treatment for his addictions.

But his brother didn't seem to be paying full attention as they swam across the cool deep tea colored waters of Pelican Lake. They swam beneath a floatplane flying overhead and a fishing boat motored close by, and they waved him off. They finally reached the rock shoreline of Blueberry Island. He asked his brother if he wanted to take a break on the petite island shoreline. When he grunted, they trudged to a large flat rock in front of some stunted pine and spruce trees. When they reached the flat rock, where there had been a campfire with burnt logs and a blackened grille, Norris pulled out a can of Molson Canadian from the pocket of his swimming shorts, sealed with a Velcro patch lining, and drank the beer. Then he took out a pint of rum in a clear plastic bottle, cracked open the pint of Captain Morgan's spiced rum, and took a swig. This development Ross found discouraging. He fretted, tsk-tsked, and shook his head. Long distance swimming and alcohol consumption simply didn't go together. Handing him the bottle of rum, he asked him if he wanted to have a drink. He said he bought it for him, since it was their birthday after tomorrow and he knew he liked rum.

"What did you get me? Our birthday is tomorrow? Did you even remember?"

"I remembered. I got you a supersized bottle of Antabuse. Anyway, what happened today five years ago?"

Norris' eyes glazed. Ross realized it was best to keep silent about their father's death. Ross pushed the liquor bottle back to Norris. He asked if he was certain he wanted to swim back from the island. His twin brother was the far better athlete, but he wasn't confident it was a good idea to swim back across Pelican Lake if he had been drinking. Norris had won medals in high school sports and had played college soccer and hockey and won awards and accolades, but he simply wasn't confident of his abilities, strength, and endurance when he had been

drinking.

“I’m not drunk, I can swim back.”

Their bodies had dried in the setting sun but their cargo shorts and swimsuits were still wet and the temperature was starting to cool. Then he took the wristwatch he carried in the pocket of his swimsuit and wrapped it around his narrow wrist and latched it. He glanced at the watch. “What the fuck is this?”

“What do you mean, asking me, what’s this? Look at it. What does it say?”

“CNR. 35 years.”

“That’s Dad’s retirement watch, in gold, no less.”

“Where did you find this?”

“In his dresser, when I was going through some old papers.”

“Who cares.”

“You’re not impressed. That’s gold, silver, and the wristband is made from reptile skin. I think it’s inlaid with small diamonds. It’s even waterproof and shatterproof.”

“Who cares.”

Ross felt discouraged his twin didn’t sound impressed. When they lifted themselves off the flat rock, where they argued as they built a small campfire with wooden matches, they found wrapped in plastic beside some burnt sticks and logs and rocks. They waded from the rocky beach of Blueberry Island and started the swim back to Second Sandy, to resume their exercise in character and teamwork building. Ross glanced across the lake to Second Sandy and couldn’t see any swimmers or sunbathers. As they swam back, Ross reiterated, “So you understand that I want to finish university.”

“So you’ve got your degree in economics from York University, right?”

“You had to remind me.”

“Why are you sounding so negative?”

“I wanted to be an X-Ray technologist. I wanted to go to college to be an X-Ray technologist.”

“So be an X-Ray technologist.”

“The college of applied arts and technology wouldn’t admit me; I didn’t have the chemistry or the physics.”

“So take chemistry and physics.”

“Maybe I should have, but I ended up taking economics. Now that I earned the degree in that discipline, I think, the only way to put it to work is get a teacher’s certificate.”

“So now you need to get your teacher’s certificate.”

Ross realized they were both in a gloomy mood, but he was surprised at how agreeable his brother sounded. “Right, but how do I get my teacher’s certificate?”

“By getting your consecutive education degree at Lakehead University.”

“So you have been paying attention to what I’ve been saying.”

His brother kept a slow, steady pace in his breaststroke. Ross couldn’t help admire his swimming technique; he swam with finesse, but recently he had gained weight, Ross thought, from heavy beer drinking and constant meals of fried finger food at the restaurant where he cooked. Meanwhile, Ross became concerned he was slowing down and even seemed to have lost his sense of direction.

“Yeah.”

His brother paused his breaststroke. While he floated, suspended in the chill lake, treading water, he took a drink from his bottle of Captain Morgan’s rum, which he sealed and returned to the pocket of his swim shorts. Ross worried about sounding condescending, but the crucial question remained. “So you think you’ll be able to swim that far?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“I need your cooperation.”

He gulped some rum. “Cooperation. Now there’s a novel idea?”

Ross was beginning to think it was all a little too little too late.

“Do you think you’ll be able to look after the home and hearth, keep the home fires burning, so to speak, while I’m gone?”



“Of course, why wouldn’t I?”

Previously, they seemed to have reached an impasse, so Ross felt a sense of relief. As they swam across the lake, though, Ross noticed, the slow steady rhythm of his brother’s breaststroke became unsteady.

Norris started to slip beneath the waves. He said he thought it was what Ross wanted.

“What are you talking about?”

Ross reached out towards his twin brother, plunging his cold hands with pruny fingers through the water. He tried to boost and lift him as he treaded through the wavy water, but he realized that his twin brother, younger by a few hours, was barely conscious, that he was intoxicated. Norris was ready to pass out from drinking. Meanwhile, the twins were adrift in the middle of Pelican Lake, a kilometer separating us from the rock shoreline of Blueberry Island and the sandy beach of the lake shoreline in either direction, and there didn’t appear to be any boats, kayaks, or canoes cruising the lake surface. They continued swimming, a slow, plodding mechanical swim, but he urged his twin to grip his back as he kept slipping beneath the waves, which had started to become higher, more forceful. Norris appeared at increased risk of drowning, as he swallowed the water, coughed, and hacked. Norris, who sounded and smelled, as if he was drunk, started to argue and fight with him.

“Look, you do what you have to do, and keep swimming.”

Ross gripped Norris’ arm. “Just hold on and shut up.”

Norris reacted violently and pushed him away.

“You’re in no condition to swim,” Ross insisted.

Norris’s mood turned ugly. Since Ross first moved away from the town of Sioux Lookout to the city of Toronto to attend university, he noticed Norris had changed; he thought he had become a mean drunk. Although he had agreed he should move to Toronto to attend York University to acquire a degree, he had started to feel abandoned, living alone in the house for the first two years. Hence his invitations to young women and girlfriends.

“So.” He looked dead.

“You’ll drown.”

When Ross reached out to him to try to tow him to shore, Norris took a swing with his clenched fist. Then Norris unlatched their father’s waterproof retirement wristwatch and threw the luxury timepiece at him. When Ross dove through the chilly water, trying to retrieve the jeweled timepiece, he was intimidated by the depth and darkness of the lake. He merely caught a glimpse of the glint off the gold, silver, and diamonds, reflected in the dying sunlight as it drifted down through what must have been one hundred feet of water until it landed on the muddy bottom of Pelican Lake. When he emerged at the lake surface, he saw Norris struggling. He held his twin brother tight, wrapping his arm around his back from behind, realizing this was their last chance to get him to shore alive. But his fraternal twin whaled on him, flailing his shaky fist, pounding him on the back and shoulders, and called him a smug fuck. Norris shouted at him not to worry if he drowned, saying he would inherit his half of the house.

“Sell the house and you’ll have money for college and plenty left over for books and Starbucks coffee.”

Norris continued to chirp, but Ross’ mind was focused on the task at hand: swimming ashore alive. “Hang on to me, so we’ll get to shore.”

Then Norris took a swing at him and struck him in the head. That blow made Ross angry and outraged him, but it energized him, filling him with adrenalin. He pulled him by the arm and tried to tow him through the water, but he flung his closed fist at him again, striking him on the chin. Now Norris inflicted blows against him with his clenched fists. Still, he tried to tow him ashore and tugged at the loose drawstring on his swim shorts, as he attempted to keep them both afloat. But Norris hit him ever harder, slapping him on the back of the head, as he tried to keep him afloat and moving towards shore.

Norris glared at him with the most intimidating and angry look. He realized he felt a pain and hurt he had missed when he had gone to school. His twin brother was not academically inclined; he had always wanted to attend college, but Norris preferred working at a trade, and, above all, earning a decent wage or salary. He flirted with the idea of enlisting in the Canadian

military, or thought he'd be a welder on a pipeline, but instead he accepted a position to cook for the hospital where their mother had worked.

Ross felt he had to make it up to him, but, if he didn't leave his twin brother to his drunken rant and anger, floating in the middle of Pelican Lake, he realized, they would both drown. He could only hope the prospect of imminent drowning, the sensation of asphyxiation, the shock of sinking below the surface of the lake, choking on lake water, would rouse Norris from his drunken torpor, rousing him back to his senses and alert consciousness.

As Ross swam swiftly towards shore, he saw his twin brother, his mother's favorite son, drift below the waves. Before she died, he promised her he would look after Manuel, but she then revealed she worried about Norris almost as much as their autistic brother. He swam desperately towards the shore and reached the sandy beach in several minutes, a surprisingly brief amount of time for a lengthy swim. He scrambled ashore and gazed out at the lake just as the sun disappeared beneath the horizon of pine trees, and an orange glow filled the blue skies and lent a surreal hue to the billowing clouds.

He remembered where he saw his twin brother disappear beneath the waves rippling the lake surface. He figured Norris was lost, but he would try to rescue him, albeit with help from town. Ross certainly wasn't looking forward to asking for help from the police, but he didn't see any alternative. He glanced at his own wristwatch, a waterproof Timex, and the date indicator reminded him exactly five years ago their father had died.

Ross jogged along the beach to his mountain bicycle. Uncertain if he would head to the police station or a friend for help, he sped on his bicycle along the highway and peddled furiously along the paved pathway along the highway into town. When he reached the bridge over Pelican Creek, his front tire struck a pothole, where construction crew workers labored during the day. He flew over the handlebars and crashed to the gravel on the shoulder of the paved highway. As he hopped about in pain from the scrape on his shins and the pain in his arms, he wiped his nose and glanced at the blood. He remembered the sacrifices of his parents, a First Nations woman from the reservation of Lac Seul and a Portuguese immigrant from the

Azores, and figured that all was lost, unless he was ready for a fresh start.

The End

**John Tavares bio:** My previous publications include short stories published in a number of literary journals: one short fiction published in Blood & Aphorisms; one in chapbook by Plowman Press; one in Green's Magazine; one in Filling Station; two in Whetstone; two in Broken Pencil; one in Tessera; one in Windsor Review; three in Paperplates; one in The Write Place at the Write Time; three in The Maple Tree Literary Supplement; two in The Writing Disorder; one in Gertrude; one in Turk's Head Review; one in Outside In Literary & Travel Magazine; one in Bareback Magazine; one in Rampike; two in Crab Fat Literary Magazine; one in The Round Up Writer's Zine; one in The Acentos Review; one in Gravel; one in the Brasilia Review; one in Sediments Literary Arts-Journals; one in The Gambler. Also, I had about a dozen short stories as well as some pieces of creative nonfiction published in The Siren, then Centennial College's student newspaper. Following journalism studies, I had articles and features published in East York Observer, East York Times, Beaches Town Crier, The East Toronto Advocate, Our Toronto as well as community and trade newspapers such as York University's Excalibur and Hospital News, where I interned as an editorial assistant. I broadcast a set of my short stories as a community radio broadcaster for CBL5/CBQW in Sioux Lookout one summer. I have recently written a novel and am an avid photographer.