

SUMMER FICTION '98

SIXTH IN A SERIES WRITTEN FOR USA WEEKEND

Ronnie was 17, hapless, headstrong. And when he gunned that Winnebago through air, water and melting ice, a family legend was born.

THE RUNWAY

ONE NIGHT when he was 17, my sister's boy Ronnie and his three best buddies borrowed his dad's Winnebago and went out ice fishing.

It was March in Minnesota, it was midnight, the moon was out, his parents were asleep. So Ronnie loaded up with beer and junk food, and drove out onto the ice of Lake Minnetonka, and the family's been talking about him ever since.

It crossed his mind when they drilled a fishing hole that the ice wasn't as thick as he expected, but no young man wants to be the Voice of Reason who throws a damper on the party, so he said nothing, and they had a merry night of fishing and drinking and Ronnie made a pot of spaghetti and a few sunfish were caught and as the sky began to turn light, they crawled into the bunks and went to sleep.

At 2 in the afternoon, Ronnie heard distant honking. He looked out the door. A man stood beside a blue pickup a quarter-mile away on shore waving his arm and honking.

There was open water between him and Ronnie and more open water across the middle of the lake.

The Winnebago appeared to be parked on an ice floe a half-mile wide and a mile long. The man pointed farther up the shore and Ronnie heard him yell, "It's shallower there. If you gun it, you can make it."

Ronnie was now completely awake and alert. He got behind the wheel of the motor home and backed away from the open water. His friends were sawing away in the bunks and he decided not to wake them up. It was a time to keep cool. He didn't need people yelling recriminations at him.

He backed up about 500 yards and aimed for that spot the man was pointing to. He put the pedal to the metal and the Winnebago hurtled forward, the engine wound out, and as it raced across the ice toward the open water, Ronnie remembered that the pot of spaghetti was sitting on the stove. Too late to worry about that now. He could hear the buddies waking up, muttering, as the motor home hit the open water at 60 miles an hour and a plume of water flew up and suddenly everything became airborne.

Cans of beer. Fish. Boots. Fishing poles. The pot flew past him and smashed into the windshield and the cabinets tore loose and his friends came hurtling out of the bunks, clutching their pillows, and then the Winnebago hit the shore, her back wheels screaming, and the engine howled, and then the horrendous sound of the transmission chewing itself into a hundred pieces, and then she came to rest in the brush about 50 yards up the bank. Spaghetti covered the dashboard and the busted windshield.

One of his buddies was screaming, "What did you do that for? Are you nuts?"

The man on shore waving his arms was my brother Larry. He managed to open the side door of the Win-



nebago and he stuck his head in and looked at the debris, the broken bottles and dead fish and busted plywood and spaghetti, and said, "You need a ride home?"

Nobody was hurt. Ronnie's dad, Bob, arrived 10 minutes later. The two of them stood and looked at the wreck. The rear axle was broken and so was the tie rod, the frame was twisted, the engine was mangled, and finally Bob said, "Well, I wish you hadn't done it, but then I suppose you wish you hadn't, too."

Ronnie said he was sorry.

Then Bob said, "I suppose

you're probably thinking it was insured, aren't you?"

Ronnie said, "It wasn't?"

"No," said Bob. "I only insure it in the summer when it's in use."

It's in a conversation like this that a young man and his father really get to know each other.

Ronnie said, "Well, that's OK. I'll pay for it."

His father told him that he didn't want to be paid for it. His mother told him she had always hated the motor home and was glad to get rid of it. But we are stubborn in this family. Instead of going to college, Ronnie got two jobs, driving cab by day and bartending at night, and settled down into a low-rent lifestyle, living in a basement apartment, no movies, no eating out, no new clothes, and drove a 1976 brown Toyota which he bought for \$50 one day from a woman who didn't know the car was out of gas.

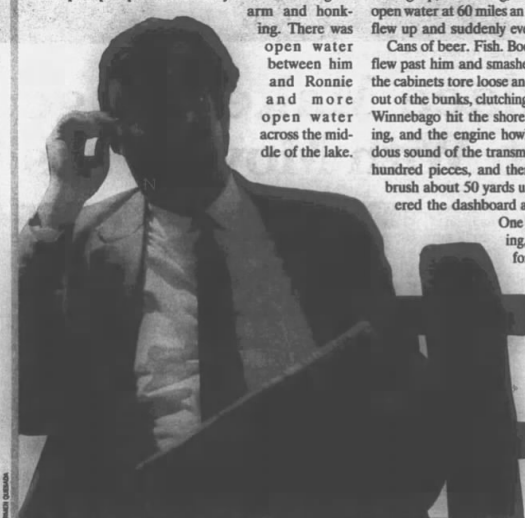
That Toyota is the ugliest car on the road. It's rusted and the shocks are gone and the brakes don't work and the doors don't open — Ronnie removed the back seat so you can enter through the trunk — and one headlight is out and there are no seat belts and the heater smells as if rats were cooking in it, but once Ronnie put gas in it, the car ran fine.

The Runway, where Ronnie bartends, occupies an old warehouse among the used-car lots on the east side of St. Paul. You walk in and the headbanger music is so loud it almost knocks you over and the odor of disinfectant tells you the patrons have been having

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By Garrison Keillor

America's best-loved storyteller — the author of nine books, most recently *Wobegon Boy* (Waves, \$24.95) — wrote today's story just for USA WEEKEND. Each week on *A Prairie Home Companion*, he weaves looney tales for millions of listeners on 400 radio stations.



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ON THE WEB

MORE ON THE WEB:
Read each story in the Summer Fiction Series as it's published every Friday. Also at www.usaweekend.com: the five Student Fiction Contest finalists, and a fiction-writing guide for students.

NEXT WEEK: "Acres,"
by Jen Schuchman of Greensburg, Pa., the winner of USA WEEKEND's 1998 Student Fiction Contest.

Continued from previous page far too much fun.

College kids go in there when they get depressed by school and they drink beer and bourbon and dance the Walleye, which basically is jumping up and down in the air as high as you can and then running head first into the wall and falling down on the floor and flopping. The band is called the Stark Raving Eskimo Nuns, an all-girl band, in which Ronnie's girlfriend Sheila Lappala plays electric bass. Their faces are painted white, their hair green, and they strike slutty poses and prance around a stage the size of a dining room table and play music so loud it removes tartar from your teeth. No kidding.

Sheilah is a senior in elementary education, and in the morning, after she washes the green gel from her hair, she goes to her student teaching job and reads to her kindergartners about Sammy Squirrel and his trip to visit Miss Groundhog, and the children have

no idea that while they slept, their sweet Miss Lappala was playing music for drunken people doing the Walleye.

She's Finnish, and tall and dark-skinned and lovely, with a certain wild streak. She and Ronnie take saunas together, the kind where the rocks get white-hot and you beat each other with birch boughs and then jump into a hole in the ice. Once she gave him a birthday picnic in January and served dinner in a snowbank. But now Sheila is leaving Minnesota for Oregon.

She announced the other day at dinner at my sister's that she is leaving in the fall to teach school in Portland. Ronnie looked terribly sad when she said it. My sister burst into tears and had to leave the room — my sister who used to refer to Sheila as "that girl with green hair" and then got to like her — she stopped in the doorway and cried out, "Why can't anything be the way it's supposed to be?" I guess that she has written the story in her head in which the young people marry and buy a house and have babies.

Two years he's been paying for that wrecked Winnebago, and my poor sister still wrings her hands and says, "He was such a good student. He was admitted to St. Olaf, you know. What a waste." And her voice breaks, though she has done this monologue so many times. "And now he's two years behind his classmates." And she adds: "I'd give

anything if this had never happened."

The problem with my sister is that she never got into trouble and doesn't know how important it is. She went sailing through college, majored in English, got a teaching job, married a nice man, they begat polite children and moved to a peaceful leafy suburb where nobody ever makes a wrong move, everybody carefully invests their money and takes the shortest route home and doesn't talk to strangers, but Ronnie was lucky to find trouble when he was still young enough to learn from it. How else is a person going to learn about honor or honesty unless his soul is severely tried?

Everybody has to do the Walleye someday. Maybe he could've talked Sheila into marrying him, but maybe he knew that if you tell a woman you love her and you don't, you're aiming your Winnebago toward very deep water indeed. ❧