

RIVER RIDE

By, Deborah Leonard

The late summer day was ideal for a visit to the river with my new kayak. I loaded my plastic vessel through the back doors of the Suburban, angling it just so the bow pushed at the passenger's seat, while the stern crammed up at the closed back doors. I remembered in time that I'd need to pack my oar as well. I'm new at this. I mentally checked my attire.... water shoes, melon color Capri pants, baseball cap and white tee. I had no pocket for the car keys so I grabbed a fanny pack, the plush toy kind in the shape of a pig. (Jonathan, a young boy, gave it to me a few years back as a joke because of my fondness for all things porcine.) I couldn't find the halter for Lily, my overactive wheaten puppy, so a regular collar would have to do. I'd have less control with it, but I was anxious to get out there. And we're off. Arriving at the "putting in" spot by the ancient Pinchot Sycamore tree, I see only one car in the parking lot. I leave the dog in the car and pull out the boat, oar and life vest. With the gear tucked in the kayak I carry it down the steep, short embankment to the Farmington River. There a woman watches her large yellow lab splash about in the shallow water. Back I go to get Lily, who by now has jumped around in the car and beeped the horn twice. She is over zealous and pulls me down the slope to the boat. The yellow lab spots my little dog and races at us. Lily strains at the short leash as "Neil" barrels over her. We dance and hop to get rid of him. His owner, presenting a vacant stare, finally comes closer asking Neil the dog to "please go back to the water and swim again". Neil obviously doesn't understand sentences and upset-Lily and I are very wet. I put my dog into the kayak and wade out, thankful for my water shoes. Hopping in, I start to push off. The water is only five inches deep and I have to rock back and forth like a tire stuck in snow. We ease off the stony bottom and only then, in the absence of Neil, do I realize the intense noise coming from the trestle bridge one hundred yards away. The old metal structure that we just drove over is encased in white plastic. It is undergoing renovations. High-pitched engines and clanging machines cause Lily to flinch, cower and try to bolt from between my legs. "Danger" I warn, and she stills her twitching body. We are going upstream and have to pass under the bridge with its deafening groans. This is my fourth time kayaking – Lily's third. We move out to the middle of the river straining against the current and soon are turned and going downstream. Digging in, I push us back towards the bridge. Now the bow will not move. We hit a sandbar, fat and wide in this all too dry summer river. I literally shovel through the sand doing that rocking thing with Lily wedged between my knees, trying not to scream back at the noise coming from the bridge.

My kayak is nine feet long. I call on big muscles to push upstream under the bridge and beyond. Lily turns back to me with a questioning or pleading look. We now are slowly making our way. The pace doesn't reflect my efforts. I settle into constant rowing. Right left right left. My nose itches, and the pause to scratch it causes us to lose all momentum. Up ahead a kingfisher patrols the water, gliding and crying from bank to bank. Lily now thinks hunting season. She is not ready to relax. At this time I notice that the water is about four and a half feet deep. I now wish I had put my life jacket on instead of using it as a back support.

The day is so perfect. It is too beautiful to take in everything at once. The light and shadows on the river make an exquisite quilt. My wavy wake dissects it like a crumpled velvet ribbon. Just ahead a great blue heron is wading. As we approach, it becomes a statue. As we come along side the bird, it lifts off like a puff of smoke, effortlessly wafting inches above the water. It alights about thirty yards downstream. Lily doesn't care about things that don't move or make noise. She is already doing a small rain dance for the two kingfishers engaged in *Star Wars* acrobatics ahead of us. Five pipers race up the shore on the left - nervously searching for lost keys or maybe small insects.

We have entered their world. I haven't seen another person since we left the shore. It could be any year, any century. The sandy banks and damp ebony trunks have always smelled like this. The only noise now is the birds, scampering chipmunks or squirrels and my paddle hitting the gold and black quilt. Every once in awhile, sweet grapes or wild flowers let us know they are near. A gentle breeze gives us a caress that makes us feel welcome.

An hour has passed. My left shoulder burns but I am not about to leave this dream world of perfect temperature and luscious scent. On the east bank my eye picks up an intruder—something too red and too white for this neighborhood. Lily and I make our way closer. Now, not only has time no relevance, but space and proportion as well. A plane has crashed into the muddy shore. The body is upside down. Debris litters the makeshift runway. I feel I am a giant or extra-terrestrial coming upon some earthly disaster.

Where am I? The wings are apart from the body and at a distance. It is a remote-controlled model - very expensive and very desolate. The pilot might have some idea where it went down, but the river's edge is a tangle of shrubs, vines and roots. It looks to have occurred recently.

I ease our craft closer to the shore to inspect the downed flyer. Now, Lily's curiosity and the proximity to land prove too much. She leaps up and out of the boat. Her wheat coloured body sinks into sludge, thick, black and gooey as new road tar. She strains to free herself. Stepping out of the boat I immediately sink into the ooze. As I try to lift Lily back into the boat I realize too late this batter is pulsating all around us. The water in which I am calf deep is roiling with mosquito larvae! Millions upon millions of writhing thread-like bodies crowd us. I shudder without consent. Pulling the dog out of the insect stew causes each paw to slurp, not unlike straws sucking up the last of a smoothie. We reenter our beige vessel. Lily has had enough confinement and tries to catapult off my legs. My grip is not enough and the slippery leash is pulled taut as she makes her way to shore with great effort. I too must disembark again because she won't come back on her own. I look at the plane. I look at the wings. The fuselage is about four feet long while the wingspan is five feet wide. It is basically in good condition. Someone will be missing this pricey toy. A storeowner had told me an amusing story about his remote- controlled plane. Perhaps it belonged to him. Or he might be able to put me in contact with the pilot of this ill-fated flight. I wedge the bulky body piece into the small hold behind my seat. Not much actually went in anywhere, but I crammed the nose in as far as the contours would allow. Remember my feet are in soft dark peanut butter and one hand holds a leash with an unhappy puppy attached. The five-foot wings are next. One end slips under a bungee cord riveted to my kayak. Its intent was to hold something frivolous like a water bottle or small tarp I presume. My face itches and I have to scratch, giving way to another shudder. With balance and grace that would give the Ballet Russe pause, I settle us both into the now fantastic craft.

Thank goodness we are traveling down stream. The balance is affected, as appendages at all angles snag air currents. As I start to relax I begin to look at myself. I believe I can still see some of the pale melon color of my pants. My white tee has Rorschach designs. And the once pink piggy fanny pack... it's only fitting it should be ensconced in mud. Slowly I realize what a sight I must be. We move down the river. Black mud-encrusted, dog as first mate, filthy and oddly dressed middle-aged woman riding in a kayak that appears to be giving birth to a plane. Please don't let anyone be in the parking lot, I pray. Please let me slip in unnoticed. Back under the still-clanging bridge, with more than a little trepidation, I row my spoils home; a comic Norsewoman with a wheaten pup sitting proudly as the bow ornament. We glide. Thankfully the shrouded bridge conceals the views of passing cars. I could see the spot where we put in.

The shore is empty! Lily jumps out as I pull the kayak onto the beach. I grab my dog and wade out up to my knees. With a plop I let her grubby body rinse off in the not still water. I tell myself we look better. Mosquito wannabees are air-dried on my pants. I scramble up the steep hill carrying a dripping dog. I did not want her rolling in the sand. I dump Lily loose in the cargo hold of the car. No one was in the parking lot. I slip off my fanny pack. On my third trip to the car I have company. I know I do not look as good as Lily. Carefully I stow the kayak. Then I place the body and wings of my new treasure in the car. I don't need to worry about bumping into Lily because she had long since jumped back and forth over all the seats and now settled her soaking body in the drivers' place. Wearing now camouflaged clothing, I work as if it was my everyday job to load boats and broken planes into cars. It is finally time to leave. "Move," I say as I plop down into the swamp-like interior and slowly start to drive away. Only now do I turn to look at the picnickers. I have been noticed. I definitely have been noticed. What a gorgeous day for a trip on the river.

Epilogue

This is a true story. Interestingly, the owner of the plane staked his claim *exactly* one year following the discovery of the wreck.