The Challenge

Joan Rutkowski

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SURVEYING THE SURVEYORS

By Scott Tomkowiak

Several years ago, I stepped into a popular fast-food restaurant to get a bite to eat. While waiting in line, I was approached from the rear by a total stranger. She was a massive woman, standing about five foot nine and weighing approximately two hundred and fifty pounds. She looked like my Uncle Dwight in drag.

"Excuse me sir, may I ask you a few questions?" inquired the woman with a clipboard in her left arm.

"Yeah sure, go ahead," I retorted.

"I'm taking a survey for the McDonald's corporation and would like to know some of your thoughts and feelings about it."

"What do ya want to know?"

Well, first of all, have you ever been in a McDonald's restaurant before?

"Oh sure. I've been served over one thousand times. I keep an accurate count just like you guys, you know!"

"When was the last time you were here?"

"Never. I don't live in the neighborhood."

"I see. Maybe you can show me on that map over there."

She waddled over to a rather large street map that was mounted on an easel. A foldable pointer was in her right hand.

"Now then, where in this area are you located?"

I pointed to the building. "It's a life about eight hundred miles from here in Illinois!"

"Oh," she slurred with a face redder than a tomato.

Rutkowski: The Challenge

By Joan Rutkowski

Great splashes of dark, icy water flew against their three faces with a stinging force that felt like windblown sleet. The roaring, rushing river crashed against their canoe threatening to sweep it against the rocks in the center of the river.

Concentration with the physical effort of moving their arms in unison to keep the canoe upright had replaced the sickening sense of fear that had been with them the past hour.

Fear had not been a companions of the three young people during the first part of their trip. The trip began with a sense of excitement and exhilaration at the new challenge the usually calm river with its occasional swift areas and bubbly rapids was about to present to them. The heavy rains of the past two days had brought the river to a state of fury at being controlled and it would soon split its cloudy, churning froth over the banks and into the deep pine woods.

The rising waters had caused justified concern to the staff directors at the Backwaters Training Camp about the safety of the newly trained camp counselors. Communication with the two rangers from the nearby ranger station very nearly put a damper on the "graduation" celebration planned by the eight graders at The Bridge, a rustic log tavern perched on a sandy ridge where the huge cement and steel bridge spanned the river. There were tense minutes for all of them while the decisions were being made.

Jeff and the two girls who were his friends and his crew waited in the sandy hollow edged with tall, skinny pine trees where they were protected from the brisk, chill wind. They were near enough to the pier so they would be able to hear the announcement as soon as it came from the camp director who was talking with the rangers.

"Jeff, what'd you think they'd decide? That big ranger, the one with the wrap-around tinted glasses, keeps waving his arms at the river and looking at all the girls. My guess is he won't let us go. He's probably one of those guys who think they know what's best doing it his way all the time."

"I think aha, he's right! We probably won't be able to move up from the dock and go down the river."

"Well, you're right. It looks like we'll be stuck here."

The girls stood up and went into the cabin.

"Jeff can find a better job later and then go down the river alone," the girl whooped. "He's doing his job trying to be sure he doesn't allow us to do anything foolish. Seeing to the safety of this camp is a heavy load."

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Chrissey, the eternal optimist, was already adjusting her life vest.

"They're going to let us go — I just know it! I read my Leo this morning and it said 'A day to use your Lion's strength and get the Lion's share.' I know that means 'paddle hard and you'll get the brass ring.'"

Jeff laughed and grabbed her around the shoulders. "The brass ring comes with the merry-go-round! I'm not sure I want such a mixed up kid in my canoe!"

Kelly gave Jeff a playful push and said, "I think it means 'Paddle hard and Jeff'll buy you the Lion's share of the beer!'"

Chrissey grinned. "How 'bout that, Jeff? You gonna buy the first round?"

Jeff rolled his eyes in mock dismay and yanked out his wallet, opened it slowly and began flipping through his credit cards, one by one. "Think they'll take a VISA at the Bridge? Or maybe taverns don't take charge cards. Well girls, maybe they'd hold my gold fraternity ring for a few beers," he said, suddenly pretending to twist it from his finger.

Kelly threw up her arms. "Oooh, we have a big spender here! All three weeks we've worked together, stayed right here at camp with no place to spend money but at the pop and candy canteen, and he's telling us he's broke. Now the true nature of this beast, this captain of our crew who evacuated every ounce of our frail, feminine strength to make his canoe move faster than anyone else's, has emerged!"

"Pretending he hadn't heard her, Jeff continued poking around in his wallet. "Alas, would you believe I see something green and crisp folded up behind the AMOCO card?" He slipped it out of his wallet and began unfolding it. "All is not lost, my lovely friends. Ole Jeffery comes through again — we have here a certain Mr. Andy Jackson, not once, but twice! Now that should buy all our beer and a little something solid to go with it!"

The girls whooped and laughed and hugged him, and for a second they eyes met one another and the excitement of the outing was shining in all of their eyes.

Just then the camp director's voice came over the horn calling, "Attention! All crews down to the pier!"
decide
a
them
bow
Then
—
river
tennies

Trying on section as cold they had in rocks the birdsong part girls had never been there putting hard to keep the canoe away from the center of the river. In a short time they would be entering the high banked section of the river he had just been thinking about. He knew they would be boxed in by the near vertical banks for at least a mile. It was also an area which, Jeff remembered, was heavily grown with rocks.

For a moment the three looked at each other, scarcely able to breathe. Then almost as one, they scrambled out the hollow and ran toward the pier, where they were helped by two lumbermen. They had been carried in simple lifeboats that were quite quiet, broken only by the lovely chiming music of that bird.

The splash of a good sized whitecap on Jeff's feet abruptly returned him to the present. The river was rougher here, and there were more branches and small logs moving about. They had been warned that the girls would be paddling hard to keep the canoe away from the center of the river. In a short time they would be entering the high banked section of the river he had just been thinking about. He knew they would be boxed in by the near vertical banks for at least a mile. It was also an area which, Jeff remembered, was heavily grown with rocks.

They had just started toward their canoe when Jeff called a halt. "Listen! I know a man we really want to make it to The Bridge — it'll be a great party. But let's make a pact right now that any time one of us ships a feeble kick, the second will shout 'hold on!' so the third will know it's time to stop, or that reason wants to stop, the others will agree with no questions asked, and we'll go ashore. The signal for quitting the trip will be to hold your paddle straight up, and your bodies remain in the boat. The first you'll be able to hear each other. Since I'll be in the rear, I'll just have to shout if I decide to go ashore. But I've got a big voice.

The two girls had held back and they joined him in a circle. Jeff lifted their joined hands high and held them in a tight clap on friendship, and then gave them a little shake and said, "Let's go!"

As they approached the pier where their silver colored aluminum canoe with the black hollow Number 5 painted on both sides, one at the bow and one in the rear, was tied up.

Kelly was first to get into the canoe because she was sitting in the bow. Jeff knelt on the pier and steadied the canoe while she gripped the right gunnel and hopped lightly into the center of the canoe. Keeping low, she reached her left hand across to the other side and eased herself forward slipping her weight along the canoe bottom to the seat behind her.

Jeff spotted her kneeling pads on the pier where she had left them and called out to her, "Hey, MelanKelly Baby, you forgot your knees," and tossed them to her.

Kelly smiled a little at herself as the name called her. She had come to camp with a heavy heart after the break-up with her "serious" boyfriend, and she had felt lonely and blue, her unhappiness obvious in her unsmiling features, which at the same time, were almost trying to make her smile "re-enter the human race" as he put it. He still called her name even though she no longer held her heart close.

As he passed by her, he glanced at her, and the sight of his light was light with the grace of a good athlete. He moved swiftly and easily from the center position to his position at the rear. It was his job to do the steering. There was a little foamy wave at the bow of the canoe that Chrissey was aching with chagrin to see Jeff welcomed by
ed Chrissey to wait. "Hold it a minute, Chrissey, 'til I bail out this water. No sense in starting out with wet jeans and freezing your tush. And suddenly Jeff thought how Chrissey's little ruffle wigged when she walked.

The canoe bow was to the left, and as only one in her position she might be kneeling on one knee, her other leg stretched out with her foot braced against the struts.

The two girls were afloat; the lower half of a large plastic beach bottle cut down for that purpose, and began scooping up the water and pouring it overboard into the gray, murky water. Grabbing one of the hinges, she emptied the rest of the water and made the mid section as nearly dry as he could.

Chrissey bent low and stepped in, careful to hold on tightly, and sat down on her kneeling pads, Indian fashion.

Jeff called to Kelly, "Unite us and I'll shovel off. Get this slick stream movin'!"

Chrissey and Jeff already had their paddles moving as Kelly quickly rolled a rope over a little coil and hung it on the hook in the bow, and took up her paddle, too.

Within a scant minute of being at cross purpose with the current, the canoe started to make headway, the current wheeled, and it was almost as if an arrow sprung from its bow. The current was strong and swift; there was no need to use the paddles to propel the canoe, only to steer it.

From his position in the rear seat, Jeff called to the girls, "Looks like you'll be a few miles from here this trip.

Arranging his long legs comfortably was not an easy thing for Jeff to do, but he finally found a tolerable position and settled his back against the struts of the canoe. The sky was all too many of admiring trees, and the rain was a steady dripping with rain, slipping past faster than ever before. He realized that the canoe had never moved as swiftly — it was a new experience now to feel the wind spray with you instead of against you.

This stretch of river was fairly straight with tall pines on either bank.
The river had already risen high enough so that some of the closest trees were standing in water. Branches and a few good sized logs whirled and tossed and cut the current with a sudden, smooth impact. Downstream the rocks were the right of the canoe and as long as they kept left to the center of the river, it seemed to Jeff there would be no danger from the current. He knew the river was cool and smooth in that area, the sharp rocks were the right of the canoe. Most of the rocks were to the right of the canoe and as long as they kept left to the center of the river, it seemed to Jeff there would be no danger from the current. He knew the river was cool and smooth in that area, the sharp rocks were the right of the canoe.

Up ahead Number 3 and Number 4 canoes had disappeared from view as they rounded the first of several bends in the river. Number 6 apparently had been overtaken by the girls, who had been checked a few minutes earlier. So they were alone on the river. The sky gave to hint of its next move — it was just a heavy, gray blanket, reminding Jeff of a storm front that had been forecast for this area.

Except for the rushing river, it was very quiet. No birds sang or called in the heavy forest, and there were no chattering squirrels running up and down the trees. Training on the river had been so different. The mornings almost cold and frosty had driven all the birds off the mist and warmed the air, and the woods were full of lively, chattering squirrels. Some of the birdsongs he could identify and others he couldn't.

In the very deepest part of the forest the river ran between high, sandy banks and the trees seemed twice as tall, their twisted roots exposed as they clung to the banks as if in agony of clutching and fear of falling. It was in this kind of denseness that he seemed most informed of how the trees were moving, as if the wind made them swaying.

All the trees were green from the top of the highest trees. The sound was like lovely, clear chimes which echoed through the forest and made Jeff
Patience
By Pamela Hecker

On a crisp clear autumn day, seventeen year old Gabriele Brecht entered her home for the last time. The house had been sold to include the furnishings, so Gabriele had not been able to keep them all. Only the decorative acces-
sories and personal items had been purchased on consignment. Gabriele stood in the center of the room. She wondered why she had not also been included with the sale of the house, since a few weeks ago her past was being moved out.

Gabriele entered the room, and stopped once again onto the sofa, with her feet and legs stretched toward the imaginary heat of the empty fireplace. The familiar scent of her mother's cologne was interwoven with the floral fabric of the sofa cushions; and she was reminded of happy times. She knew the girls were thinking the same thing she was — if they timed their move right, they would use all three paddles against the log as a push-off point for leverage against the current. If they could push themselves downstream, while the paddles didn't split, they might be able to get out of the fast current.

"Dig a hole and plant you deep, with lots of soil around your feet."

As her mother said the rhyme, she would draw back the blankets, put the center of the bed, then Gabriele would climb in and bury her mother back into the covers. Then Gabriele would choose an imaginary plant, flower, or vegetable to be during the night and her mother would sprinkle its kisses to help her grow. She would be a cornflower, once her mother's canvas, and paint the room had solid dots of colored pigment on the tile floor; giving hints of the once artistic domain. Gabriele pulled her jacket tighter around her shoulders as if the emptiness of the room reflected her own vulnerable state. She turned from the room and began to climb the staircase, caressing the banister with such sorrow that her vision was momentarily blurred, and she tripped on the steps halfway up the stairs. She stopped the door to her bedroom, stopped, and chose to lean on the door frame rather than enter. It was as if some inner voice warned that all the self control she was so desperately trying to maintain would be lost if she were to cross the threshold. Sounds of laughter and recent tears seemed to mock her, and she was convinced she was left alone in the sunlight that was seeping through the heavy window shades. She remembered Sarah, her oldest friend saying,

"You are so lucky, Gabriele, to have a mother like yours. My mother could never survive without my father; let alone be a success like your mother."

Gabriele replied with pride in her voice.

"My mother is very independent. I guess she doesn't need a man around."

The last few months had changed everything. The night in July would forever be imprinted on her mind. She had just returned from a camping trip with her father. She felt dirty and sick and had only wanted a bath. Feeling cool and refreshed from her bath, she had entered her bedroom to find her mother sitting at the dressing table staring into the mirror. Her mother had turned and said,

"Gabriele, I have the most exciting news to tell you — Dietrich and I are getting married."

Gabriele had quickly put her head down and begun rubbing her hair dry with a towel. She had needed time to answer and could not let her mother see her expression of shock.

"Why, that's wonderful. I'm so happy for you!" That was what she had said. But what she felt was entirely different. She had wanted to scream and protest.

"Why do you want to get married? You're successful and we have no problems."

"Well, you should be happy about it."