

*Tom Sheehan*

### **Decisions on the Ipswich River**

I was fishing off the bridge over the Ipswich River, a few hundred yards from the Topsfield Fairgrounds. This was a day nothing was supposed to happen, but you know what they say about that stuff... it usually does, like Mike Murphy's Law or Charlie Poulin's Law or whatever they call it. Yet enough had occurred already in the last 24 hours and the odds were in my favor, or so they said.

The dawn had popped open like the tulips along my driveway, one sudden and grand gesture inviting me into the midst of time and color, and fishing. I needed it big-time, for yesterday I was canned from the job where they found me indecisive; handling somebody else's money always bothered me. The fact is I didn't do any good with my own money, never mind another person's life savings. The whole scene had taken me back where I readily, perhaps wantonly, leaned on words my father had spoken many years ago. "When you have a problem, go fishing. God will slow everything down to the right speed and perspective for you."

So here I was in the small forest surrounding the Thunder Bridge over the Ipswich River, old Sol highly ablaze for the first time in a dreary month, the canoe vendor's truck unloading the third canoe in a half hour, and a set of parents with two kids in lifejackets getting ready to take a spin on the river. One of the children, a boy of seven or eight, by some extraordinary communicative skill, whether it was foot motion, eye direction or stare, an uncomfortable toss of his shoulders with a strange arm movement accompanying it, told me my original thought of an easy day was a lie. The first recognition of a special or disadvantaged child bloomed also tulip-like at the back of my head, a slow appreciation of something amiss, yet a solid apprehension finding root down in the marrow of my body. Somehow, without even struggling for shape or color or action, I could see a graphic piece of that prospective canoe ride down along the river. Almost, I swore to myself, I could hear the boy's earlier and loud demands for a canoe ride; it was April school vacation and I wondered what his usual day was like, if he had so insisted on this venture.

As the lone fisherman my equipment spread itself against the bridge railing and on a narrow cement buttress; casting rod and fly rod like matching twins, a deep green metal tackle box, a #10 can that once carried coffee now carried worms, a small plastic bag puffed with two bacon and cheese sandwiches, a large China blue thermos of coffee stood a foot high. Breakfast and a hungry trout still awaited me.

At the side of the road just off the bridge, against an expanse of thick woods, the truck driver in a plaid shirt eyed me slowly and then checked the tie-downs of four canoes still strapped onto a metal rack. Popping a cigarette in his mouth, he looked up and down the road. Traffic had been just about nonexistent on the road. The truck, originally loaded with ten canoes on racks, was the only vehicle in the past hour, and I thought the driver was by habit checking traffic to sneak a smoke break. He puffed and leaned against a tree and watched the family getting ready to launch the canoe, then slowly drove off. I pictured him doing laps around a big block and believed that he would be back to service other customers. I

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made my mind up about that. It had been easy, not like the ones at work where I rode too many fences, brooded in another world, as the boss said.

The boy tossed a large rock into the river, where my fly line was floating with the current, the Atlantic still a dozen miles away. In silent explanation, the father shrugged his shoulders at me, and he kept his hands busy at various tasks about the canoe. I saw his eyes measure odd distances and calculations. I thought his life must always be like this, at the ready, on the firing line, the full adjunct of life about to happen in strange ways. Then the boy screamed at a blue jay noisy and at thievery in a high maple tree, smaller birds darting like mosquitoes between the branches.

The father shrugged again in acknowledgment.

The mother touched the boy on the shoulder; I could feel the slight notification it transferred. The other child, a girl of 10 or 11 I guessed, shook her head at me very slightly, as though we shared a deep secret. The girl had a social sense about her, was probably a second mother to an obvious brother, and might, at times, provide excuses or direction. She had golden hair the sun made merry with. The boy's hair and thick brows were dark, and luxuriant under the sunlight.

The boy stepped into the canoe clumsily. It rocked a bit until I heard the father say, "Easy." The boy sat. The mother, blonde and petite in jeans and a gray sweatshirt, slipped past the boy and sat at the front of the canoe. A very minor breeze, carrying a sense of young maple in it, twirled in her hair as golden as the daughter's. My fly line danced a bit in the same breeze tunneling under the bridge. The girl slipped in behind her brother and immediately sat down amidships, one hand touching his shoulder, and I could almost hear her voice of caution, of comfort.

I watched the boy. Every sound, every movement on the river or about it, he noticed, a noisy bird, a falling leaf a squirrel had dislodged, a splash downstream proving the trout were still at home in the Ipswich.

The father, smiling once at me, with some message in it, slid the aft end of the canoe into the water and leaped agilely aboard. The mother had one paddle in hand, the father the other paddle. Skillfully they maneuvered the canoe midstream and began a glide toward the canoe rental center about three miles downstream. So comfortable were they I figured they knew the river intimately.

They were about fifty yards downstream, the alders and maples beginning the first of many closures against open light on the river, when what wasn't supposed to happen on this day did happen. That knowledge deep in my marrow had a sudden chill about it, in it. It curved and then flew along nerve endings all over my body. The hair stood up on the back of my neck in response to sudden groping. A Cooper hawk smashed down through the elms and maples aiming for a rabbit or a squirrel. I couldn't tell which, but the noise was pronounced and loud. Somewhere in the early plush limbs a cry let loose. The boy was on his feet, and the river suddenly let go under the canoe. A small charge of electricity hit at my fingers. All of it came at once: a single hungry trout at worming, life coming apart at the seams, my boss's face enhancing information as he told me how it was and how it was going to be, the canoe going sideways in a hurry and all four people quickly into the water. I heard the father scream.

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"Help!" he said, the panic major, the sound near guttural. He managed to say it twice. I knew he must be after the boy. The fence-riding popped loose in me. I had to help. I had not brought my cell phone with me. A quick look affirmed there was no traffic. I had to help, but I also knew I had to make an alert, a warning.

Screams and yells were still coming from the family. The panic had begun in my heart. The addled brain being tested again. Think! it said. Think! Decide! it said. Decide!

I saw my boss shaking his head. Dollar signs floated away into space. I saw that last look in the father's eyes, the one he broadcast when he pushed the canoe into the Ipswich River. The commotion was now beset with water and splashing and the propelling of arms and heads. I only saw three heads.

Nothing was on the road in either direction. I was it! Now was the time!

Where it came from I haven't a clue, but I heaved my fishing rods and tackle box and thermos and can of worms and my two-sandwich breakfast into the middle of the paved bridge, the sudden messy lot of them, and leaped down along the river. In a matter of seconds I was in the water. The mother had the daughter in the circle of one arm. The father was diving. He had pulled off his lifejacket and was diving! The water, I knew, would be cold. I had taken my walking boots off and my light jacket before I leaped into the river. As I broke water I heard a horn sound. I got to the father, saw some color and broke for what I was sure was the boy's life-jacket. It was the father's, empty, popping to the surface. I saw more color. I heard the horn again, then another horn. I saw the father, now near quick exhaustion, pointing under the alders. I saw the color of orange. I broke for the color. It was the boy. I pulled him close to me. I heard the horns again, swearing there were three or four different tones. The father was holding onto a low hanging branch. I knew he was in serious trouble. Probably more anxiety than exhaustion, I believed. His face had a near-tragic look on it, as if to say what the hell did I come out here for? I could not let go of the boy, sputtering, thrashing about, but still in his lifejacket. It sure made it easier.

But the boy's father was now in a full panic mode.

Over my shoulder, looking for help, I saw a canoe hit the water at the side of the bridge. The truck driver in his plaid shirt and another man pushed off. The paddles dipped with enormous strength and agility. The canoe truck and a pick-up truck were sitting near the end of the bridge. I knew my gear must have been crushed. Another canoe, with one man in it, was rapidly coming downriver from under the bridge. He was paddling furiously. A fishing rod was trailing over one side of the canoe.

The two canoes arrived within seconds of each other. The mother had gotten her daughter onto the banking. The truck driver had the father by the neck of his shirt and was pulling him while the other man paddled the canoe for shore. I held onto another low-hanging limb, nearly touching the water, until the fisherman, who had been upstream and who had heard the horns, came to my side. On the way he had slipped his life belt off and draped it over the father's neck. "Rest easy, boy," he had said. "Rest easy."

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We got everybody safely ashore. Thanks were given. Names were swapped. Hugs came from the mother, sheepish nods from the father. The girl smiled in her wetness. One day she'd be a beautiful woman I was sure. The boy kept looking up into the trees where the Cooper hawk had made his sortie and his noisy strike.

The truck driver said, during a pause in the thank-yous, that he would have kept on driving by while looking for a couple who had not yet showed up to start their canoe trip. "If you hadn't thrown your gear into the middle of the road, I'd be up at the diner getting another coffee right about now. I damn well knew something was wrong. You were out of sight. I heard commotion. I saw commotion. But I would never have stopped if it hadn't been for your quick thinking. Quite a thing, my boy. Quite a thing."

The canoes eventually were loaded and the truck driver headed back to the canoe outlet with the family. The driver of the pick-up truck kept smiling at me, and nodding. The fisherman headed back upstream when I told him I had had a good hit.

The boss, hearing about the incident from some source, called me and said he wanted to talk to me. I said I was going fishing again, to get the one I lost, and then I told him I was not very good with money. I was going to look into another career. He said he understood my feelings.