

Joy Ross

The Klepper

WHEN YOU WERE IN THE BOAT, you were unswampable. "That's the beauty of a kayak," Cal said. "It's not tippy like a canoe." His voice was muffled and wobbly, like the voice of a man under water. It was darker than he'd realized in the rafters of the garage.

"I remember you saying that," Gavin agreed. He stood with his hands in his pockets on the concrete below. "Need a flashlight?"

"No, no," Cal said, feeling his way around. "It's right here."

He'd been edging the grass in the late August heat when Pauline brought the phone out and said it was Bob Gavin; he had talked to Gavin only occasionally since turning the northern region and its policyholders over to him, and retiring. He had a list of lakes he wanted to get to, and it had been a smooth transition, he thought, almost a relief.

"We were thinking of checking out a few of the places you talked about," Gavin had said. "Jack is old enough to row, and you always said the kayak is safe for kids."

"She'll take you out," Cal admitted, "there's a lot left in her," and he agreed to show the boat. He knew that kayaks were \$3,000 new; he'd never considered what he could get for this one, twenty-five years used.

Cal found the canvas bags in the dark, two big bags and a smaller one. The big ones held the ribs and spine of the kayak, the smaller one its outer skin and oars. It was a 17-foot-long cruiser, a lake kayak that rode high in the water.

He was forty-five and buying bicycle tires for the kids when he saw it in a sporting goods store, on sale for \$250. Beside it was

a full-colour photo of a man paddling into the wild blue yonder of a northern lake. Cal had seen the boat, and wanted it, had convinced the store to hold it overnight. He had gone directly home and emptied the massive jar into which he'd tossed loose change—nickels, dimes, quarters—from the pockets of his business suits every night for the past fifteen years. Pauline watched in amusement while he counted. Even with the girls dipping into the jar regularly for spending money, there was plenty for the boat, and he bought it, without ever having rowed a day in his life.

"That's as heavy as it gets, piece of cake to carry," Cal said, as he handed the last bag down to Gavin. He had meant to get it down sooner, have it dusted, the pieces sorted out; something had come up, though he couldn't remember what. The canvas was faded to a grey-green, but it was in good condition, without a tear. The kayak inside was in good shape too, just a few scuffs on the rubber underside. It was almost as pristine as his newer boat, the one-seater.

He came down the ladder to find Gavin hefting one of the bags, trying to get the feel of it.

"You can see what's nice about it," Cal said, eyeing him. "It's collapsible; you can take it anywhere. You don't need some big expensive truck to pull it, or even a roof-rack on your car; you just glide right up to the beach, dry off, take the thing apart, and go home."

"Sweet," Gavin said, smacking the side of the canvas.

"And there's plenty of cargo space, front and back, camping gear, lunch, whatever," Cal said. He dusted off a bag and laid it flat. They'd had an earthquake in the valley the year he bought it and he'd become a celebrity in a two-block radius because he set the kayak up in his living-room the first time he put it together. "When California drops off into the ocean, he wants to be prepared," the neighbours joked. He told the girls new quakes were not a problem—he'd stuff one of them in each end, one in the middle between their mother and him, and away they'd go. He'd left the kayak up for two weeks, until one of the girls fell across it trying to get to the piano. "Cal's ready for the Big One," the joke went, but it was just a beautiful boat, that Klepper, two seats, bright blue. The new one was red.

He had checked out a book on kayaking from the public library and in very little time had mastered the stroke, a dip-push-pull that moved you through the water economically. Relax your

shoulders, relax your back. Pauline had picked it up right away; she had an elegant stroke that produced minimal splashing. The girls took their turns, doing their best to dip and pull, dip and pull, chatting away about school and whatnot. Sometimes they were startled by a speedboat and he'd have to grab a paddle and hold things steady, but that was rare; they were increasingly adept at paddling.

He knew Pauline and the girls mostly humoured him, but it was the extra paddler, Cal thought, that made the kayak stable; it moved surely through the eddies and wakes of much larger boats. You could follow the bend of the shore into otherwise inaccessible coves, or cruise the lakefront homes, admire and assess the sailboats at their docks. "No charge for the view," he told the girls.

For a good fifteen years after he'd bought the kayak, they had spent two weeks every summer paddling, sometimes at Lake Tahoe, sometimes much farther from home. The first daughter was a good navigator; the two of them liked to spread out maps on the dining-room table and pick out a lake on the name alone. Coulter Bay, the Grand Tetons. The very act of unfolding a map was, to him, like rounding a curve in the shoreline, and seeing things stretch out before you, the days and weeks ahead, nothing but blue sky, high clouds, and the feel of sunshine baking his neck.

"Unzip that bigger bag, and find the large round parts," Cal said, watching Gavin struggle with one. They were already perspiring in the heat. The garage doors were open, and he could smell the grapes on the back fence, ready to make juice soon; there was that and the pruning he liked to do, a few summer chores left.

"Is this what we're looking for?" Gavin asked. He pulled out the kayak's wooden ribs, scraping them on the concrete. Cal opened the second bag and drew out the boat's spine, two long sections hinged in the middle. He set them carefully on the floor, end to end, and opened them up. The ribs locked across them, snapped into place with metal brackets, and there you had your boat.

Gavin got his side of the brackets in, and Cal snapped them across. "That's the ticket," he said.

"So where was that lake in Oregon?" Gavin asked. "The one with the island, where your daughter lost the boat?"

"Spirit Lake," he said. "In Washington. She didn't lose it, though, it just got away from her."

"Oh, that's right," Gavin said, fiddling with the bracket.

"All three were good paddlers," Cal said. And they were; it was a fluke, the time the kayak got away. He and the second daughter had rowed out to some interesting-looking ruins on an island in the lake, had explored what they decided was an old trapper's cabin, and had come back a few hours later. Somehow the boat had slipped its tether on the beach and floated all the way back to the island, where it had been retrieved by a guy in a powerboat. After that, they joked about calling the boat "The Getaway."

Gavin stood across the kayak from Cal, surveying the light wood frame on the floor. "Now what?" he said, rocking back on his heels.

"The skin's in there," Cal said, nodding at the last bag.

The zipper was a little rusty, and Gavin struggled before it came apart with a small red puff.

"Get that out; there you go," said Cal. The kayak's shell was canvas on top, rubber on bottom, with inflatable air pockets along each side. That made the Aerius Klepper light and stable in the water. You'd have to dive out of that boat, Cal had said; it would never turn over on you. And if it ever did, the boat would float upside down and you'd be fine, you'd just right the boat and climb back inside.

"The Klepper, you know, was sailed across the Atlantic," Cal said, watching Gavin tug at the shell. "This very model." He bent to hold the canvas open.

"That right?" Gavin said. He stepped back and pulled at the rubber underside still tangled in the bag.

"A guy did it in 1962," Cal said. He had planned to get a sail for his own boat at one time. Why was it that he never had? he wondered.

Gavin got the shell free and the two men unfolded it, laid it flat alongside the boat, and slipped the nose of the kayak inside, pushing it all the way to the front of the canvas.

"Ready for the back end?" Gavin asked.

"Right," Cal said. "Slide it in. That's the ticket."

They pulled the canvas taut across the frame, snapped the frame together in the middle, and the kayak sprang to life, ready to launch.

"What now?" said Gavin.

Cal was trying to remember, was it really five years since he'd had it up like this? Before Pauline's latest surgery, they'd al-

ways been off at one lake or another; now, though, her stomach muscles were too weak for her to row. He'd bought the one-seater and packed the two-man kayak away for a while. He still took it out, though—sometimes they visited friends who lived near Lake Havasu. And right after Cal had retired, his brother-in-law had met him at Lake Shasta and the two of them had gone boat-camping all the way around the lake, three nights. The girls had always been too little to do it, and then later, there was Baton Twirling Camp and oboe workshop and what-have-you.

He kept the kayak partly for them, in case one of them got in a position to take it. The oldest lived in the city, and so far, hadn't asked about it, but then she was blonde and had always sunburned easily. He'd asked his second daughter if she wanted it, but her husband was not too outdoorsy a guy, Cal thought. "I'll talk to him, Dad," his daughter said. He took that as a no. The youngest and her husband were whitewater types, and went strictly fiberglass these days. But you never knew.

"What's next?" Gavin repeated, surveying the kayak on the floor.

"You have to fill the air pockets," Cal said, uneasy. "We don't have to do that now, though."

"I don't mind, I'd like to see how that works," Gavin said, looking around. "Do you have a pump?"

"No," Cal said. He didn't know why he lied.

"Well, we could do it ourselves, right?" Gavin said. He dusted off his hands. "Didn't you say you could blow it up yourself?"

"Yes," Cal said, and paused. "I suppose." He motioned to the tube and watched Gavin hitch up his khakis and squat beside the boat. It takes longer than that, Cal thought. You really have to kneel. He got down on the concrete on the other side of the kayak, took the other tube and began breathing into the boat, deep breaths, deep sighs; he could hear the air pushing its way into the rubber. It took awhile, reviving the boat this way, and he closed his eyes to concentrate on the flow.

It was a great boat, he thought, breathing into the tube, the rubber growing round and fat. It seemed to have opened up a long, flat, middle stretch in his life when things began to go right, when the girls were finally in school and Pauline had been able to resume teaching, and they had decided not to move but had been able to add on to the house, when he'd been put in charge of the territory from Stockton to the Oregon border, so that he spent

minimal time in the office pushing paper around and more time on the road, his own boss. Whenever work had failed to pan out as he hoped, there were other days ahead, new possibilities—new lakes, or mornings on a familiar one. He liked putting the boat up right on the beach as Pauline read the paper, and the girls tossed pebbles or filled up the kayak with pine cones. “Look, Daddy, look here, look what I found.”

Once you left the chaos of the shore behind, you moved into a world where everything seemed permanently suspended in the appropriate place—lake, sky, mountain rim, birds, the shouts of people onshore, the hum of boaters further out, the splashing of water beneath the bow. You could get up some speed, rest the paddles in front of you and glide along for quite a while before you had to work at it again.

He squeezed the rubber tube, testing it for air. The new boat was just like the Klepper, but it was down-sized, three feet shorter. It was faster in the water, almost too manoeuvrable. That’s the only thing wrong with it, he thought, not enough cruisability. It rushed him, the new boat. He had lakes still to get to, but it wasn’t going to be right to do them speedily.

He stopped puffing and looked up.

Across the kayak, Gavin was blowing away, serious and red-faced. The tube was plump, almost full. Gavin saw Cal look up; he pinched off the tube and tried to catch his breath.

“So,” he said, a little winded, “does the boat have a name?”

“No,” Cal said. “I never settled on anything. I just call it the Klepper.”

In truth, he’d considered all sorts of names from the day he put it up: his Sacramento High mascot, his Air Force fighter group, bird names, and things that just sounded good to him, like the Morning Mist. There was Lila, the girl he’d had tea and toast with twice in London during the war, but that would hardly have been fair to Pauline. He’d been all ready to name it Spirit, after the lake, and then Mt. St. Helens had blown up and obliterated the place, the lake just wasn’t there anymore. That was hard to believe, even after he’d seen the spread in *National Geographic*. He still had a picture of the lake, as it had been. It hung over the telephone table in the hall.

“Well,” Gavin said, from the other side of the boat, “I think this is just what we need.” He stretched his legs and shook out the creases in his pants. “Is \$1,500 fair?”

"You might just want to take it out, try it," Cal said. He was puffing a bit in the night air, and frowning. The light had faded on the drive and, inside the garage, bags and paddles and boat accessories were scattered under the fluorescent lamps. Seat pads were stacked in one pile; against them were the life preservers.

"No," Gavin said, brushing himself off, "it's just what you talked about. It's exactly what you said." He bent to give the kayak an approving pat, to rock it from side to side, testing it out. "Could we get it on top of the Explorer, do you think?"

"We ought to take it down," Cal said, and he was working up an unfamiliar panic. "It can be tricky if you haven't done it once. The instructions are in German."

"I'm sure it will be okay," Gavin said, looking puzzled. "I can always give you a call."

Cal couldn't think, it was coming at him way too fast; he had not counted on it turning over on him this way, couldn't seem to catch his breath. He couldn't right it, all he could think of was wanting it all back, all of it, the blister he got his first day out that had to be drained in the emergency room, the girls gabbing away about some giant bean plant in their classroom or the newest heartthrob in a teen magazine, Pauline splashing him from the front, or waving absently from the shore. He could smell the grapes gone squishy with lake water in the bag, hear the birds calling high overhead, see the pines along the shore slipping silently out of view.

They loaded the kayak on top of the car and Gavin backed out, flashed his lights, then turned and drove away. The air was cool and Cal came in. There was dust on the concrete floor, a small oval where each bag had been. The cheque fluttered on the workbench like a leaf.

Outside, water lapped in the birdbath—it was so familiar; he could hear the white sand ishing under the bow of the kayak, see it begin to slip, the rope starting to tug free. The rock was too small to hold it forever, it was drifting away from him now and he was astonished, this is what it comes to. The house was quiet, the overhead lights hummed, and beyond them, the garage doors opened to the night.