

The Kayak

by Debbie Spring

The choppy waves rise and fall. I ride the wave. My kayak bobs like a cork in the swirling waters of Georgian Bay. I love it. I feel wild and free. The wind blows my hair into my eyes. I concentrate on my balance. It's more difficult now. I stop stroking with my double-bladed paddle and push my bangs from my face.

This is my special place. Out here, I feel safe and secure. My parents watch from the shore. I have on my life jacket and emergency whistle. I am one with the kayak. The blue boat is an extension of my legs. I can do anything; I can go anywhere. Totally independent. Totally in control of my life. It's so different back on shore.

I approach Cousin Island, where I have to steer around the submerged rocks. In the shallows, a school of large-mouth bass darts between the weeds. A wave pushes me towards the rocks. I push off with my paddle and I head out towards the middle of Kilcoursie Bay. Powerful swirls of wind and current toss me about.

The clouds move in, warning signs. I turn the kayak and head back to shore. The waves peak wildly as the storm picks up. My arms ache.

I don't want to go back to shore. Nobody lets me grow up. My parents treat me like a baby. I'm sixteen, too old to be pampered. I'm already a woman.

Just off my bow, a loon preens its black mottled feathers. It sounds its piercing cry and disappears under the water. I hold my breath, waiting for it to resurface. Time slows. Finally, it reappears in the distance. I exhale.

I notice a windsurfer with a flashy neon green and purple sail, gaining on me. My stomach does flip flops as he races, dangerously close. "Look out," I yell. I quickly steer out of the way. He just misses me. Stupid kid, he's not even wearing a life jacket. I shake my head. The boy is out of control. He's heading straight for the rocks at Cousin Island. "Drop the sail!" I call.

He does and not a second too soon. He just misses a jagged rock. I slice through the waves and grab onto his white surfboard.

"Can you get back to shore?" I ask.

"The windsurfer belongs to my buddy. It's my first time. I don't know how." His voice trembles. Is it from the cold?

The windsurfer looks around eighteen. I take a quick glance at his tanned muscles and sandy, blond hair. He seems vulnerable and afraid. His blue eyes narrow. "Now what?" he asks.

I reach into the cockpit and take out a rope. "Hold on." I toss the rope. He misses. I throw it again and he catches it. "Paddle to my stern with your hands." His board moves directly behind me. "Tie the other end through that yellow loop." I point.

He fumbles for what seems like several painful minutes. "Got it."

I stroke hard, straining to move us.

"Hit it," the boy calls.

"What?"

"That's what you shout, in water skiing, when you're ready to take off."

I smile. Slowly, we make our way. My paddle dips into the water, first to the right, then to the left. Beads of sweat form on my forehead. Suddenly, I surge ahead. I turn around.

"You let go." I circle and give him back the rope. "Wrap it around your waist."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. What's your name?"

"Jamie." His teeth chatter. The water churns around his board. He is soaked. I don't like the blue colour of his lips.

"I'm Teresa. Don't worry, Jamie. It will be slow because we're going against the current. I promise to get you back in one piece." It takes too much energy to talk. Instead, I get him chatting. "Tell me about yourself."

"I thought I was good at all water sports, but windsurfing sure isn't one of them," he laughs.

I don't mean to answer. It just comes out. "Maybe with practice."

"Dumb to go out so far. I don't know what I'm doing." He changes the rope to the other hand, flexing his stiff hand.

The wind changes. A big wave hits Jamie sideways, knocking him into the dark, chilly water. He shoots to the top for air and tangles in my slack rescue rope.

He is trapped underneath the sail.

"Jamie!" I scream. The wind swallows my voice. Quickly, I position my boat perpendicular to his board, like a T. I drop my paddle, grabbing the tip of his sail at the mast. I tug. Nothing. The water on top of the sail makes it heavy. I drop it. I try again. One, two, three, heave. I grunt, as I break the air pocket and lift the sail a couple of inches¹. It's enough to let Jamie wriggle out. He explodes to the surface, gulping in air. He pulls himself safely onto the surf board. I reach over to help untangle the rope from around his foot. I can see an ugly rope burn.

My kayak starts to tip. I throw my weight to the opposite side to keep from flipping. My heart beats fast. "Keep hold of the rope."

"Got it."

"Where's my paddle?" My throat tightens. I search the water. "There it is, I sigh with relief. It's floating a few feet² away. My hands pull through the water, acting like paddles. I reach out and grab the shaft of my paddle.

"Hang on, Jamie." The waves swell. The current changes and we ride the waves like a bucking bronco.

I have to keep away from shore or the waves will crash us against the granite, splitting us in half. Just as we clear the rocks, a cross-current hits me. My kayak flips. I'm sitting upside

down in the water. Don't panic. Do the roll. I get my paddle in the ready position. Then I swing the blade away from the boat's side. I arch my back around and through, keeping my head low. I sweep my blade through the water, pulling hard. I right the kayak and gasp for breath.

"You gave me a heart attack." Jamie looks white.

"Caught me by surprise." We drift, while I catch my breath. The clouds turn black. The water becomes dead calm. "For now, it will be easy going. It's going to storm any minute." I paddle fast and hard. The rain comes down in buckets.

"I'm already wet, so it doesn't matter," Jamie jokes.

I like his sense of humour, but I'm not used to talking to a guy. I've never had a boyfriend. Who would be interested in me?

"You don't know what it's like being so helpless," Jamie says.

I bite my lip. The kayak drifts. I see my parents waving from shore.

My father runs into the water to help. Everything happens real fast. He takes control. Before I know it, Jamie and I are safely back. My mother runs over with towels. Jamie wraps the towel around himself and pulls the windsurfer onto the sand. I stay in my kayak. Half the kayak is on land. The rest is in the water. I feel trapped, like a beached whale.

A turkey vulture circles above me, decides I'm not dead and flies away. I feel dead inside.

Jamie comes back and stands over me. "Do you need help?" he asks.

I shake my head, no. Go away! I scream in my head. Go away, everybody!

"Thanks for saving my skin," Jamie says.

"Next time, wear a life jacket."

Jamie doesn't flinch. "You're right. That was dumb." It is pouring even harder. Jamie hugs the wet towel around him. "Aren't you getting out?" he asks.

"Yes." Tears sting my eyes, mixed with the rain. My mother pushes a wheelchair over. My father lifts me. A blanket is wrapped around my shivering shoulders. I motion for my parents to leave me alone. Surprised, they move away, but stay close by. Jamie stares.

"Say something." My voice quavers. A fat bullfrog croaks and jumps into the water. I want to jump in after him and swim away somewhere safe. I say nothing more.

"Teresa," he clears his throat. "I didn't know."

I watch his discomfort. I've seen it all before. Awkwardness. Forced conversation. A feeble excuse and a fast getaway. My closer friends tried a little harder. They lasted two or three visits. Then, they stopped coming around.

The silence drags on. A mosquito buzzes around my head. So annoying. Why can't they both leave? It lands on my arm and I smack it.

"Do you like roasting marshmallows?" asks Jamie.

“Huh?”

“I like mine burnt to a crisp.”

I hate small talk. My hands turn white, as I clutch the armrests of my wheelchair. “What you really want to know is how long I’ve been crippled.”

Jamie winces. He doesn’t say anything. I wish he would leave. The air feels heavy and suffocating. I decide to make it easy for him. I’ll go first. I push on the wheels with my hands. The sand is wet. The wheels bury, instead of thrusting the wheelchair forward. I stop pushing. Another helpless moment. My parents are watching, waiting for my signal to look after me.

Jamie puts his hand on my shoulder. “Would you like to join me and my friends at a campfire tonight?”

“I don’t need pity,” I retort.

Jamie smiles. “Actually, I need a date. Everybody is a couple, except me. Where’s your campsite?”

“Granite Saddle number 1026.” Why do I tell him? What’s the matter with me? I stare at my wheelchair and then at my kayak. My eyes water. Through tears, I see two images of me: the helpless child on land and the independent woman on water. I blink and the land and water merge. I become one.

I smile back at him.

Jamie pushes me past my parents. They stare at me, in confusion. “It’s okay. I’ll take Teresa to your campsite.” My parents walk behind at a safe distance, moving slowly, despite the rain. We stop at my tent. I smell the fragrance of wet pine needles.

“I’ll pick you up at nine.” An ember flickers in the wet fireplace, catching our eyes. Sparks rise up into the sky. Jamie takes my hand. “One other thing.”

“Yes?” I choke out.

“Bring the marshmallows.”