

27. Tamarack Creek

May 2006

At the closing for the Mud Lake house, one of the line items to be paid by the seller was a fee to the mortgage company to remove the house from foreclosure. This fee was in addition to the back payments owed that were also to be paid by the seller. The fees reduced what Trent walked away with by half.

After we woke, Trent said he wanted to go shopping. He wanted to buy kayaks. I understood. I had done something similar, after some stock my grandmother had given me fell until what had been worth several thousand dollars was worth three hundred. I sold the stock and bought a guitar. Trent bought four beige kayaks (two for us, two for other people we might go kayaking with), four life vests, four paddles, and two wetbags.

At the store, Trent told the salesperson we had been kayaking on the Muskegon and wanted to try something new—what about Tamarack Creek? She said she had never kayaked Tamarack but others had, there should be enough water this time of year, and it would be cold if we fell out but we should be fine.

She was wrong.

Alarms have gone off in my head about situations and people and places, but I have trained myself to ignore them. I tell myself everything is fine, I am fine, everything will be okay.

I stayed on Tamarack Creek even though the alarms were wailing.

The plan was to get to the creek by eight in the morning, because Trent and the person at the kayak store calculated the

trip would take eight hours. We were late. We had bought a Jeep to replace the Sable, and this was our first time putting the Yakima rack on the Jeep, and putting the kayaks on the rack, and gathering all our gear. Trent had taught me previously to “always put your ID and twenty bucks in your life vest,” and I was pleased I had remembered without his prompt. But the process was slow, and we didn’t pull off M-82 onto the dirt road that led to the put-in point until about nine in the morning.

Whenever I go on adventures, I keep a dual-column account in my head, a list of things working for or against me. Today, being an hour late was a checkmark on the negative side. But the day was sunny and warm and we were both feeling good. I put a checkmark on the positive side and figured we were even.

Trent and I each had canoeing experience. Mine was minor, a few backpacking and canoe trips in the Boundary Waters of Minnesota and Canada. Trent’s was extensive, canoeing the Kalamazoo and all over Mud Lake and the streams that run in and out of it. We had both kayaked only twice.

I had lobbied with Trent that our first trip in our new kayaks not be on water we’d never been on before, but didn’t push it. Trent wanted a fresh experience on the Tamarack, and I went along. I figured the worst that could happen was we would get wet.

Of the four kayaks we had bought, two were long (14 feet) and two were short (11 feet). We decided we’d use the longs on the Muskegon and the shorts on smaller rivers where we’d

need better maneuverability. We brought the shorts to the Tamarack.

We put on our life vests—mine was bright yellow; Trent's was khaki colored. As we slid the kayaks into the water, Trent reminded me that kayaks are unsteady and to be sure to step into the middle of the boat. The narrow creek ran between steep wooded banks. The previous winter had seen lots of snow, which was followed that spring by a lot of rain. The water was high and fast and cold.

I got into my kayak ungracefully but successfully and was pleased. The first hurdle had been cleared. Waiting for Trent to get into his kayak, I held on to a branch on the bank so the current wouldn't carry me downstream. Something behind me made a splash, and I turned carefully to see Trent hauling his kayak back up the bank to a different put-in spot. He was wet. That was a mark in the negative column. The tally was no longer even.

We kayaked the short distance from the put-in point to under the overpass for M-82. The flat bare earth under the overpass was a popular place to fish, but no one was fishing that morning. The sun came through the leaves in dappled light. The air was fresh.

Deadfalls

A deadfall is a tree that has died and fallen across the water, partially or completely obstructing progress down the river. We soon came to our first deadfall, a large leafless tree stretching from one bank to the other, with too little clearance to kayak beneath. We angled our kayaks to the bank on one side

of the creek, pulled them out, hauled them past the deadfall, and put them back in the water.

Each of the kayaks weighed fifty-one pounds, the paddles were two pounds or so, the wetbags a few more pounds. Water in a kayak added eight pounds per gallon. Hauling the kayaks around a deadfall was hard physical labor.

The creek makes sharp turns as it flows to Croton Dam Pond, lurching from right to left like a drunk in a narrow alley. The turns meant we could never see farther ahead than ten yards, twenty if we were lucky. We came around a turn to see a huge deadfall, but with enough clearance to pass underneath on one side. We paddled to the clearance, folded ourselves forward in our kayaks, and let the water carry us under the trunk and beyond the deadfall. The next one came fast. Trent paddled quickly to get ahead of me. He said we could clear it underneath, but not by folding forward, because our backs would get scratched, maybe hung up in the tree. He said we needed to scooch down in our kayaks, face up like a kid in a bathtub. I scooched as low as I could and watched the bark pass inches from my face.

Sitting up, we both saw the creek straighten out, leading to a series of deadfalls. We exchanged discouraged but resolute glances. These deadfalls were smaller trees with lots of branches that denied passage. The right bank was steep rock, so we paddled to the left. Again we pulled our kayaks out of the water, hauled them through the brush, and put them back in the creek.

My accounting was recording more checkmarks in the negative column, one for every deadfall. But I awarded us one in

the positive column for getting so good at getting our kayaks out of the water and back in again.

We paddled through an open stretch of water and saw a man standing in the trees of his backyard. He had probably come down to the creek to see what was making all the noise. He called out to us.

"Where you headed?"

"Croton Pond."

"Oh."

"Think it's about eight hours?"

"Maybe... twelve."

Four check marks in the negative, one for every extra hour. I looked ahead, saw more deadfalls, and decided it was time to stop the accounting. This trip wasn't fun. It was work and I needed to concentrate.

Slammed

I was feeling pretty good about how well we were moving our kayaks. Some of the deadfalls came only part way into the narrow creek, and we could paddle around them. Some had enough clearance for us to go under. The rest we portaged around. Besides the deadfalls, I was worried about three things: water, exhaustion, and darkness. We were expending a lot of energy paddling and portaging to get around deadfalls.

We would need food, which we had enough of, and water, which we didn't. Since our trip length had increased by fifty percent, I wasn't sure we were physically up to the challenge. And since the trip would take twelve hours and it was about ten o'clock in the morning, we would be kayaking the last four hours in the dark. I didn't know if that was even possible.

The world became tiny. It included a creek, a steep bank on one side with dense, dark woods all around, two people in two kayaks, and at least one of whom didn't know what to do. I decided to think about what to do after the next deadfall, which was coming up fast.

The tree was larger than some but not huge. The trunk was maybe the size of a telephone pole and lay along the surface of the water, dipping into it on the left side. It looked as if there was enough room between where it went under the water and the bank to paddle around it on the left. Angling my kayak to the open space, I dug my paddle into the water and pulled. But the water swirling around the deadfall and the rocks beneath made strange eddies that grabbed the back end of my kayak and turned me ninety degrees. I couldn't get the kayak back in line, even though I paddled as hard as I could. My kayak was being pulled sideways into the deadfall.

The kayak hit the side of the tree hard, but it and I were both okay. When you're kayaking downstream, you don't realize how quickly the water is moving. When you're stopped and the water is punching your kayak against a deadfall, you realize it's a lot faster than you thought. I was stuck.

If I tried to get out of the kayak on the high side, where the water was coming from, the water would slam me into the kayak. The only option was to climb out onto the tree. I got my arms curled around the top of the tree, but as I pulled myself out, the reduced weight in the boat allowed the water to grab my kayak and flip it. The top half of my body was curled around the tree, the bottom half was in the water, the rushing creek pounding my kayak into my back and pulling at my legs.

It took everything I had just to hang on to the tree, to not let the water suck me under. I've always had strong legs but weaker upper body strength. I tried to pull myself up onto the tree, but it was like trying to do a pull-up with a weightlifter hanging from my legs. Somehow, the water swept the kayak away, and I saw my little beige boat slip ahead of me and get caught in the next deadfall. It felt good not to have the kayak pounding my back anymore, but I still had a problem.

I wasn't going to be able to pull myself up. I would have to let go of the tree, push myself down into the water, let the water take me under, and then swim up to the surface. If I waited too long to let go, I would be too exhausted to execute the move. If I didn't push down hard enough, the life vest would keep me afloat and the river would pummel my head into the tree trunk. I hoped there weren't any branches under the tree that might hang me up and keep me under longer than I could stay there. I was getting ready to let go when Trent spoke.

"Stay there."

He was on the rock ledge to my right, stepping out onto the tree. I didn't watch, partly because it was too hard to turn my head, and mainly because I didn't want to think about how the tree trunk was just barely wider than his boot and what would happen if he fell off. I hung on until I felt Trent's hands grab my shoulders, pull me up, and drag me back to the rock ledge. We stood there, backs flat against the rock, catching our breath, looking at the water. We both now knew that getting wet wasn't the worst that could happen.

Under

Other people, more psychologically healthy people, would have called it quits. I was wet, I was cold, I was tired. My arms ached from hanging on to the tree, my back hurt from being pummeled by the kayak. But I didn't want to be the reason we stopped the adventure. I didn't want to be the weak link.

We picked our way down the rock and into the water, on the other side of the deadfall that had nearly done me in. Our kayaks were trapped against the next deadfall, and we swam to them. As I got close, I noticed my wetbag was missing from the front of the kayak. The four buckles were still there, locked into their rigging clips, but the bag was gone. The water had ripped it away.

Back in our kayaks, we approached another deadfall with whitewater swirling around it. This time I was determined not to get slammed into a tree. As the creek grabbed the back of my kayak and spun it around, I readied myself. When the kayak got within a few feet of the deadfall, I slipped out of the boat and into the swirling water. I dove under, swam a few strokes, then popped out on the other side of the deadfall. I called back to Trent.

"Go under. It's easier."

Trent slid out of his boat and went under the water. I waited for him to pop up, but he didn't. It seemed to take longer than it should have. He finally came up, close to me. His face was red with blood and he couldn't see. I grabbed his arm and led him to the bank, pulling him toward a small ledge. I left him there and rescued our kayaks. When I got back, dragging the boats, Trent had taken off his T-shirt and was wiping his face with it. Luckily, the gash was across his eyebrow and

not anyplace worse. He sat on the ledge and I stood, surveying our situation. The banks on both sides of the creek were steep rock—we wouldn't be able to climb out. There was no option but to go back onto the water.

Out

We paddled around a couple of small deadfalls, then spotted a patch of grass on a low rise of earth. It was the landing point for a beautiful house with a backyard that sloped gently to the creek. We had been paddling in deep shade from the trees, but this was a sunny clearing. It was a perfect spot to get out.

I landed my kayak, stretched my legs, enjoyed the sun on my face, and waited for Trent to join me. He pulled up alongside the bank but didn't get out of his kayak.

"I think we should get out here," I said.

"Why?"

"Because you're bleeding."

"I'm fine."

"You might be fine, but I'm not. I want to stop."

"But we're going to Croton."

I looked at the blood coming through the T-shirt tied around his head and realized the wound may have damaged more than just flesh.

"We're not going to Croton. We're not going to make it."

"We can make it."

"It going to get dark, Trent. It's already after twelve and we're not even halfway there."

"I think we can make it."

"If you go, you're going alone. I'm getting out here."

This was the first time he appeared to consider my proposal.

"But we don't know where we are."

"We don't. But we know that M-82 is south of here and south is that way."

I gestured toward the sun, then reached down and pulled my kayak to the higher ground of the mown grass of the backyard. Trent followed. We dragged our kayaks through their backyard, leaving a marked trail in the grass. When we got to the front yard and dropped the kayaks by the mailbox, my arm sang with relief. Now our trail was marked by wet rubber sandals on asphalt. It was strange to be walking through a neighborhood of neat homes when we had been fighting for our lives only a few yards away. We came to a house with a sign advertising childcare. I knocked on the door and begged a ride back to the Jeep, which turned out to be only about a mile away.

Money is hard to come by in Newaygo. I gave the woman a wet twenty-dollar bill for her trouble and for gas. When I drove back to Trent, he was wandering in the street, still with the bloody T-shirt around his head. In the emergency room, they took an X-ray and cleaned and stitched his wound. The doctor said everybody thinks river water is clean, but it isn't. Looking straight at me, he said that if something like this ever happened again, I should immediately rinse the wound with clean water. He must have sensed Trent was prone to injury.

We never again kayaked on Tamarack Creek, and every time we drove on M-82 where the bridge crosses the creek, Trent would say, "Tamar-ak-ak-ak-ak-ak-ak."