

# A Lesson in Perseverance *(or the Day I Canoed Alone in the Wind)*

By Sheri Spencer



Since it is a rare occasion for me to partake in any form of lazing on a lake, when I, after years of yearning, finally went to Algonquin Park for the first time, I couldn't think of any reasons why I shouldn't relish in a canoe rental that whimsical afternoon. My inexperience, of course, left me blissfully oblivious to the many reasons why that might not be wise.

After precariously lowering the 15-foot Kevlar canoe off the dock (without falling in with it, to my own surprise), I climbed aboard, merrily peeled off my shoes and socks — knowing full well it was likely only a matter of time before I'd inevitably err and fill the canoe with water — and pushed off.

The lake rolled in a soothing rhythm that, within minutes, swept me into the romance of oneness with nature and the open water. But once I'd paddled across the bay, I began to notice I was having a little difficulty keeping the canoe on course in the gently rolling waves. Still, I was so giddy that I dismissed it as nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

Soon enough, I reached the main body of the lake and drifted along with ease, taking photos, breathing in the fresh autumn air, and happily letting myself get carried away in the rapture of it all. After about an hour of leisurely paddling, I came to the end of the boot-shaped lake and conceded it was time to head back.





As it turned out, I was also haplessly carried away by the current. That was when I learned just how much power an insignificant, wee bit of wind can wield over an unsuspecting canoeist. What began as a gentle ripple had turned into a battle of wills: Me vs. Nature. And when you're bobbing helplessly in a craft powered exclusively by your own stubbornness and limited muscle power, Mother Nature has you by the cojones.

Every time I even tried to turn the canoe around, the bow snagged on those mocking waves. If I paddled harder, I'd rocket off at an angle — either straight for the rocky shore or out into the bigger swells at the lake's centre. It's amazing how quickly bliss can mutate into low-level panic when you feel yourself being swept away.

Once (okay, okay — probably more than twice), I nearly capsized while trying to straighten out and push off the rocks. Only after an especially close call, I decided I needed a better plan. So, I paddled backwards.

It wasn't exactly graceful — I gritted my teeth and sang upbeat rowing songs to myself in a desperate attempt to keep my spirits up — but it worked. Sort of. I was more envious than I'd like to admit when I saw groups of twos and threes gliding against the current like it was nothing. Meanwhile, there I was, fighting for my life in a canoe facing the wrong way. Backwards-paddling between small islands made it marginally easier, at least. Marginally.

After an hour of furious rowing, and covering barely half the distance back, my arms were somewhere between jello and lava. I couldn't even pause to rest. No, if I stopped rowing for even a beat, those smug little waves would shove me backwards, and it would take triple the effort to regain the momentum.

I would love to say I laughed at the challenge with a cocky confidence, finesse oozing with every stroke. In reality, I wobbled enough times to make me wonder if I was about to take a bath. I even caught myself considering if it might be easier just to hop out and drag the damn thing back along the shore.



But what kind of adventurer would I be if I let a “puff of wind” hold me hostage, taunting me with every beautiful lick of water against the hull? I couldn't bear the thought of giving up.

I couldn't bear battling the current much longer, either.

Somehow, I dug in and found whatever reserves of fire my burning arms had left, coaxing the canoe around the inlet and back into the bay. The sight of the dock brought a surge of hope, relief, and sheer elation. I still couldn't turn the craft around without getting caught in the current, though, and found myself either shoved toward rocks or veered back the way I'd pained to come — but with my last scraps of strength, I made it.

For all the highs of that candid escapade, when I finally hauled myself back onto the dock, I wanted to hug those sun-warmed planks.

In hindsight, I've learned my lesson about canoeing (alone) in the wind. But aside from the breeze, I couldn't have asked for a more perfect day. A partner might have made the return trip easier, sure, but we can't always wait for others to share every experience with us.

If we limit ourselves to what others are willing to do with us, we limit what we dare to do for ourselves. Sometimes, we need to take on the challenge alone. And when we do — when we push through the exhaustion, muscle past the doubt, and overcome those seemingly ridiculous struggles by sheer will — we don't just get the satisfaction of proving we can handle “more work” alone, we also get to kiss the dock when we finally make it back.

