

A Float On The Delaware

By Kurt Arehart - 2023

Kevin peered down the river to the next set of rapids. Lots of chop to the right with a likely channel far left. He'd have to dig hard to get his boat over there. His partner sat low in the boat, directly on the hull ahead of the thwart, where she could do nothing to help. And she had no intention of trying, with her paddle laying next to her untouched. She held fast to the canoe's gunwales and shivered with cold and fear. Completely, utterly checked out.

"Alright then", he thought. "Let's get after it!"

In 1980 most men wore suits to the office every day, and they surely did at GE Capital in Stamford, Connecticut. Kevin was still wearing his as he climbed the steps to his third floor apartment flat while loosening his tie. On the landing outside his door he encountered Karen, his landlady. Kevin and two roommates had moved into this luxury condo flat just three weeks earlier and there had been little contact with Karen since. She was no older than Kevin's twenty-five years and so the condo had to have been a gift from her parents. In Fairfield County large gifts from parents were not uncommon, Kevin was learning.

"Oh, hey Karen! What's up?"

"Hi Kevin, everything OK with the condo?"

"Yeah, sure! As far as I know, all is well. Something wrong?"

"No troubles at all. That's not why I'm here. I'm going on a whitewater canoe trip on the upper Delaware this weekend with some friends at the Junior Civitan Club and we've had a cancellation. If you are free, it would be great to have you jump in and take the spot."

"Wow! Fun! It's been a few years since I've handled a canoe. Are we talking flat water or rapids?"

"Just enough whitewater to keep it interesting, mostly class I and II, nothing too bad. So you've done some paddling?"

"Yeah, some. But very little beyond flat water. But it sounds fun. What's Junior Civitan?"

"Oh, it's just a civic group for young professionals here in Stamford, mostly social stuff with a volunteer project mixed in once in a while. I promise you, no secret ceremonies at midnight", she said with a smile.

"Sounding good! What about cost? I'm just getting on my feet here." Kevin had just moved to the very pricey Stamford, Connecticut a month earlier and was far from flush.

“That’s the good part. The guy who canceled last minute is not getting his money back if I can help it, so I guess he bought your ticket for you. And we’re pitching tents along the river for both Friday and Saturday night, so it’s low cost anyhow. We’ll need to leave Friday evening by 4:00 pm. You in?”

“I’m thinking so! Let me check a few things and call you later this evening?”

“OK, but do try to decide tonight. Otherwise I have to move on and call someone else.”

Once inside, Kevin encountered Susan, one of his condo-mates, who placed a glass of chardonnay in his hand.

“What was THAT all about? Gettin’ harassed by the landlady?”, Susan offered mischievously.

“Maybe”, Kevin said, returning the grin. “Karen just asked me onto a canoeing weekend.”

“Boyyyy, you better watch yourself! That woman is comin’ for you!”

Susan was three years Kevin’s senior and was playing the big sister with obvious pleasure. They had known each other less than a month but already were good friends, with her away most weekends with her long term boyfriend. Susan viewed the notion of managing Kevin’s love life as a calling, and an entertaining one at that.

“I don’t know. Karen didn’t seem to be leaning that way. I think she is just pissed at some guy who bailed on the trip and her at the last minute and is just trying to fill his spot.”

“Uh huh. Well, you just be careful out there, sweet thang.”

“No worries, Ma, I promise to make good decisions.”

Part of the deal was a seat in a large van to make the trek across White Plains, the Tappan Zee Bridge, and bits of the New York State’s highway system before arriving in Carpenter’s Point, New Jersey, on the Delaware, just below the New York State line. Perfect traffic conditions would have put us there with daylight to pitch our tents. The traffic had been less than perfect.

So Kevin pitched his tent in the near darkness, then sat at picnic tables drinking a few beers with a handful of newly met folks. Karen had done some basic introductions in the van but now was off at another table, showing no particular interest in Kevin. Fair enough. Involvement with one’s landlady would have been a bit odd anyhow.

None of the picnic table conversation was holding Kevin's interest. Young professionals playing can-you-top-this in the career prospects arena was not what he wanted. So he sipped his beer and let his thoughts wander.

Kevin had put up plenty of tents in his day, and knew how to pick a site with good drainage in case of rain. After pitching his on a gentle grassy slope, he tried advising others against obvious problem locations, sites where water would pool if rain came. Some listened, some did not.

He had paddled plenty of canoes, and was good with his paddle, ruddering a bit at the back of each stroke, correcting course as necessary. He had long ago learned how to handle a paddle for maximum power in the water and then feathering for minimum wind resistance when coming forward to dip in again. He took another sip and gazed around him in the low light, trying to gauge where he might fit in terms of canoe competence. Impossible to say. The morning would tell.

Saturday morning saw a simple cold breakfast and coffee set up on the picnic tables and then the group of thirty climbing into vans to shuttle upstream to Pond Eddy, New York for put-in. We would make a day of paddling back down to our campsite in Carpenter's Point.

The outfitter river guides greeted us at the Delaware's edge and ran through a standard safety briefing around what to do if you get tipped over, how to avoid foot entrapment, how and when to the right the canoe, life jackets on at all times, and so on. The briefing then turned to some paddling basics. These talks have a tendency to confuse some folks and frighten most into paying strict attention.

At the conclusion, the lead guide asked, "Who here has experience canoeing?" Of our group of thirty, about ten hands went up, Kevin's included.

"And who has ever paddled in Class I & II rapids?" Three hands, Kevin's included.

Kevin and the two other worthies were paired off with zero-experience partners, selected for their visible fear and desire to be almost anywhere else. Perfect.

After being issued PFDs (Personal Floatation Devices, AKA life jackets) and paddles, we were assigned canoes. Here was a pleasant surprise. These were really nice Old Towns, with fiberglass hulls and wicker seats woven onto ash frames. The thwart was ash too. Kevin got a red one, and it was almost new. Sweet!

Most of Kevin's canoe experience came in dented up old aluminum boats, leaking a bit at the rivets. This Old Town might not be much lighter, but sure looked sleek and comfortable.

Kevin set about trying to warm up his reluctant partner, Monica.

“So, Monica, isn’t this a beauty of a boat?”

No response.

Monica initially seemed like she’d rather be somewhere else, but warmed noticeably when they launched successfully and Kevin showed a sure hand in the stern, easily offsetting her paddling regardless of which side she chose, keeping the canoe on a good heading.

The first rapid was a confidence builder: an easy Class I with a wide center channel. Kevin lined the canoe up with the flow and they sluiced through nicely with a few whoops for good measure. Monica laughed a bit and warmed to the work.

With Pennsylvania on the right bank and New York on the left, they paddled beneath cliffs and striking rock formations, through lush vegetation and the dramatic Hawks Nest gorge, occasionally sighting bald eagles & osprey.

Again and again they would approach a rapid, assess the channel, decide on a course of action and execute it. On some of the Class IIs a few other boats were getting caught sideways and flipping into the cold river, with guides coming to the rescue. Through it all Kevin and Monica were dry, warm, triumphant.

Around noon the guides called the group to a beach on the New York side for a lunch break. Some of us were still dry and happy, but a goodly number had dumped out at least once and were cold and less happy. A few were REALLY unhappy.

The head guide had noted Kevin’s handling skill and asked that for the afternoon he take on a different partner, Silvia, who had been thrice drenched and was hating life at the moment. So the happy Monica was lost and a trembling, blue-lipped Silvia took her place. Another ninety minutes of paddling and we’d be pulling up to camp. This, Silvia must survive. They launched.

Silvia was clearly done. She would not sit on the front seat: too high and unstable for her. Instead she got as low as she could, sitting in the hull, forward of the center thwart and behind the front seat. Her paddle laying beside her, she gripped the gunwales with dread, waiting for the next flipping episode that would again plunge her into the chilly water.

Kevin spoke reassuringly, told her what their attack would be for each rapid, then executed it without any aid from Silvia. Her paddle lay untouched.

After three successful passages through a series of Class I’s and then a tricky Class II, Silvia started to stir. She was drying out. She was starting to believe. She slowly maneuvered up into her front seat and took up her paddle. She began to talk, then paddle a bit when needed.

Silvia was having fun. There came a long stretch of calm, flat water, and by this time Silvia was quite animated, and they spoke on a wide range of topics.

Then came the biggest water of the day, more of a Class III on that day's high water. Kevin studied it a moment then saw a narrow channel well to the left and flowing back to center. They'd have to pull hard to make the head of the channel and then swing the stern around quickly to line up with the narrow, fast flow. Silvia was digging too and that helped. At the last instant Kevin ruddered hard and the stern swung into line and they flew through cleanly, both whooping with exhilaration.

Now Silvia was into it. She glanced back often and in the following calm she drove conversation. For fifteen minutes they ran through standard preliminaries: where are you from, where did you study, where do you work, what sort of work. Then:

"So, you came with Karen?"

"Well, not really. She invited me to fill a late cancellation, but I don't really know her well at all."

"So you are here alone?"

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"Well that's kind of a shame." This in a tone suggesting that he likely would not be alone this evening. To the hero his due. Or something like that.

Around the next bend the campsite came into view. Nothing left but a quarter mile of calm flat water to the bank.

"Hey, we DID it!" Kevin enthused.

"Yes we did." More warmth in her tone. A promising evening then. Kevin was often slow to pick up on such things, but he was getting the message clearly now.

Thirty feet to the left a canoe was passing. This fellow was a trip organizer, and he had a cooler in his boat.

"Anybody wanting a cold beer?", he called across.

"Sure!" Kevin crowed. This day just kept getting better.

With that, the beer man flung a can toward Kevin. Not wanting to risk beaming anyone, he came up a bit short on his toss, and Kevin leaned out for the catch.

Silvia was also learning left at that moment, and that's all it took. The lovely red canoe flipped, depositing Sir Kevin and his Lady Silvia in four feet of cold river with a muddy bottom.

That night in his tent, Kevin's sleep was not disturbed.