



Photo: Suzy Allman

## RIVER DANCE

BY JOHN MANUEL

**THIS SUMMER**, my wife and I will set our canoe into the headwaters of the Blackfoot River in Montana. We will paddle for five days among the cottonwoods and junipers, gliding as though on a dance floor through meanders and riffles, then jitterbugging our way down the Class II-III rapids above Missoula. There is a chance that things could go wrong. We might take a spill, suffer an injury that will end our 30-year-long career on the water. But more likely we will add another layer of varnish to the deep grain of our relationship, one whose best moments have been in a canoe.

There is a saying that those who sleep together shouldn't paddle together. But that's not giving the sport or its practitioners a chance. I believe that tandem canoeing can as easily be a barometer for the long-term success of a relationship as for its failure. The canoe, literally and figuratively, forces two people to work together. The journey on a whitewater river can present in a single day challenges and opportunities that a couple might otherwise only experience over a lifetime. How two people interact under such circumstances says a lot about their compatibility, on and off the water.

We've all got stories about paddling partners that didn't work. Stephen, my first housemate, bristled at taking orders from me in the stern. He insisted we negotiate the rapids by some kind of silent Zen communication. I had no patience with him nor he with me. Our clanging, spinning trip down the Lost River in West Virginia was a perfect metaphor for our inability to share an apartment.

Gentle Mary was a vision of beauty and shared my love of nature. But her delicate strokes were barely enough to move the bow and forced me to do most of the steering. That same lack of conviction extended to her life off the water and eventually drove me crazy. We would never have made it as a couple.

From the first time Cathy stepped into the canoe, I was convinced she was the one. She was happy to take directions, feeling

no threat to her standing as an equal in our relationship. Her moves were strong and decisive. She was focused in the rapids, relaxed on the flatwater. Though we capsized coming out of an eddy, neither of us panicked. We quickly recovered, analyzed what we'd done wrong, and committed to do better.

Some years later, we wrapped our canoe in a flood-swollen river and endured a scary swim through a rocky rapid. It took us awhile to recover from that episode, me nursing my damaged ego and Cathy her bruised hip. But our love for each other and for canoeing prevailed. We learned to choose our rivers more wisely and communicate well in advance about looming dangers.

Given their freedom and maneuverability, solo kayaks and canoes are the obvious choice for paddling whitewater these days. But there is something beautiful about watching an experienced couple work their way downstream in a tandem canoe. Two people become one, bound together by a slender hull and a common destiny. Soon enough, Cathy and I will lose the strength to run the wild rivers. Until that time, I'm inviting her to the dance.

[ John Manuel is the author of *The Canoeist: A Memoir*. His first extended canoe trips took place at Temagami, Ontario's venerable Camp Keewaydin. ]