



Jagular at Swan Lake

by Tom Pamperin

“Let’s go,” I tell the boat, sliding it off the grassy bank and into the water.

“Are you crazy? It’s 4:30 a.m.”

“Best part of the day,” I say, climbing down into the cockpit and setting the oars in their sockets. The left oarlock is squeaking again so I pull it out and spit on the pin to lube it. Should work for a while.

Here on the Upper Fox River the silence is broken only by small marshy sounds: chirping frogs, singing birds, the gurgling of the water sliding past in the near darkness—a squeaking oarlock would be blasphemy. Long fingers of mist slide through the reeds and along the surface of the water, revealing little, promising everything. The world is ours, the river our road to whatever small adventure we can find before breakfast.

Back in the campground dozens of double-axle campers sit side by side in their campsites like fat hogs crammed into pens, each stuffed with all the oppressive conveniences of home. Bug zappers, rattling generators, bright lights. King-size beds, full kitchens, bathrooms, air conditioning, DVD players, big-screen TVs and video games. Camping has become a brutal war of one-upsmanship, and last night the serenade never ended. Buy more stuff! buzzed the night lights. You need it! rattled the generators. Consume and be happy! called the patio furniture beside each camper. An easier life is a better life! insisted the automatic coffee makers and the microwave ovens. Comfort is king! sang the reclining camp chairs around each fire ring.

“The hell with you,” I told them. “I’m leaving.”

“You can’t even see where we’re going,” the boat reminds me

as I’m bundling the sail, mast, and sprit into the cockpit in case we make it all the way downstream to Swan Lake. We should be able to do some sailing there if we find any wind.

“The sun will be up sooner than you think,” I say. “And besides, there’s plenty of light, you just have to let your eyes adjust. And remember to look at things out of the corner of your eye—that’s where all the cones are. Or the rods. Whatever. Just don’t look directly at things.” I start rowing down the narrow creek. A few moments later the boat scrapes across a sandbar and grinds to a gentle stop.

“Is that why we ran aground just then?” the boat asks. “Because you weren’t looking out of the corner of your eye?”

“When did you get to be such a smartass?” I poke at the sandy bottom with an oar. After an initial show of resistance *Jagular* pivots back into the current and slides slowly downstream into an overhanging tree. The branches scratch at my face and shoulders, doing their best to throw me overboard. I duck into the cockpit and the boat scrapes awkwardly past.

“Who even told you this section of the river was navigable?” asks the boat once we are floating freely again.

“Who told me? Who told me? Why does everyone have to be told everything these days?” I say. “Whatever happened to finding things out for yourself?”

“It’s just that the water seems to be only ankle-deep.”

“We’re floating, aren’t we?”

“And the river is so narrow you can barely fit both oars into the water,” the boat continues, ignoring me. “The channel’s pretty twisty, too, and filled with sunken logs and fallen

branches.” I ignore him back, pulling smoothly at the oars. We move silently downstream into the darkness and the sounds of the marsh.



A hint of light colors the sky now, and the winding channel of the river cuts like a shining ribbon through hummocks of tall grass and scattered stands of oak and hickory. Too swampy to build on and too muddy and inconvenient to walk through, the marsh is a sanctuary. No lights. No trucks. No generators. No people.

There are few signs of human influence here at all, no right angles or straight lines; the shortest distance between two points has become irrelevant. The grass bends in gentle curves. The trees lean comfortably this way and that, and the river itself has more twists than a corkscrew. Each hairpin carves a deep channel along the outside edge where the current runs swiftest; the inside edges form long sandbars jutting out into the river. North for twenty yards, then a sharp bend. South for thirty yards, another sharp bend. North for fifteen yards. South for twenty. And so it goes. The river is in no hurry to reach a destination. Better to wander freely here rather than to rush on to the series of dams and locks that control the Fox farther north, where the river has been tamed.

Actually, this section of the Fox River is an anomaly—a winding marshy stream that obscures the river’s history as a major transportation corridor. Just ten miles downstream, past Swan Lake, is the town of Portage. That’s where the first white men in Wisconsin—Jesuit explorers traveling upstream from Lake Michigan—dragged their boats overland from the Fox to the nearby Wisconsin River and on to the Mississippi, bringing God, smallpox, and French place names to the New World. I try to imagine what it must have been like here in the seventeenth century, when rivers ran through forests so extensive that a squirrel could travel from northern Wisconsin to the coast of Maine without ever touching the ground.

“We’ve ruined that, too,” I tell the boat. “Fly an airplane over this country and you’ll see. We’ve carved the entire continent into squares and rectangles: roads, housing developments, cities, towns, fields, malls, parking lots, factories, airports, highways. Whatever small pieces of the natural world that remain are wedged in between the golf courses and strip malls. The only escape is to stick to tiny swampy rivers like this one and pretend that the thread of unspoiled land along the banks is more than a pleasant illusion. If any other species dug their homes and burrows and trails all over the landscape the way we do, we’d call it a plague, an infestation! But when we do it, we call it Progress.”

“Why do you have to be so surly?” the boat asks.

“In a world where plagues are Progress, surliness is sanity,” I say, and go back to scanning the marsh around me. I know it’s only a pretend wilderness, a bit of undeveloped land squeezed into a crooked corner of the map, but the illusion is a good one. Two cranes, startled by our approach, lurch clumsily into the sky and fly away. Around another corner a whitetail deer stares at us as I row past. A barred owl calls, and I hoot back. Our conversation continues until I round the next bend and see him fly away.

The river is barely wide enough to allow both oars in the water, but the current helps. At each bend it pushes the stern

around while I row with the outside oar to keep *Jagular’s* nose pointed down the channel. Then we’re through and I can take half a dozen strokes with both oars before the next bend sweeps us around in the opposite direction.

Already this trip is reminding me how much I love rowing. It’s a perfect integration of man and machine, supreme efficiency on an unabashedly human scale. Meditation through motion. I pull, and the boat glides smoothly across the water. Press down on the handles to lift the oar blades a few inches, then push forward. The oars swing backward in a smooth arc, scattering droplets of water that splash a curving path of expanding rings across the surface of the river. I lean forward and let the weight of the oars push my hands ever so slightly upward until the blades settle gently into the water. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. There are intricate subtleties of grip and nuanced motion to play with, but the principle is brilliant in its simplicity. Smooth silent motion propelled by human muscle and leverage alone.

“Progress is a myth,” I tell the boat. “Every new technology introduced since the invention of rowing has been a step backward.”

“That’s blatant hypocrisy coming from someone sitting in a plywood boat glued together with high-tech two-part epoxy adhesives, rigged with a sail made from polyethylene tarp, and transported on a trailer pulled by a gasoline-powered automobile,” *Jagular* says.

“It’s not quite as hypocritical as you think,” I say. “I didn’t use epoxy—you’re a cheap boat. Besides, hypocritical or not, it’s true. Our lives are too easy for our own good. We flip a switch, twist a throttle, press down on a foot pedal and unleash the forces of infernal combustion for our convenience. Meanwhile we get fatter and weaker and less imaginative, less able to do anything for ourselves.”

“Are you finished yet?” the boat asks.

“Yes, I am.” I pull hard on the starboard oar and spin the boat around to a neat stop alongside a sandbar, plunge an oar into the sand, and clove-hitch the painter to it.

“You know, a real painter hooks onto a bow eye,” the boat says. “What you have there is just a ratty piece of quarter-inch line tied off to the cleat for the lateen rig you don’t use any more.”

“Are you finished yet?”

“Almost,” *Jagular* says. “Now where was I? Oh, yes—the lateen rig you don’t use any more because you kept capsizing us with it.” The boat stops to think for a moment. “Now I’m done.”

“Thank you.” I step off onto the sandbar and immediately sink to my knees in thick mud. “Hey! I thought you said the bottom was sandy.”

“There might be some mud,” the boat admits.



The day grows lighter, but the channel is getting more difficult to navigate. Fallen logs. Broad sandbars blocking all but a narrow stream of deeper water along the edge. A tiny ripple of rapids where the river squeezes between two fallen trees. Impossible, I think, and then find a way through. I feel a perverse satisfaction at getting *Jagular* past each unlikely stretch without

climbing out of the boat and wading.

At one point I stand up, pull an oar out and use it to pole our way between two logs jammed tightly together in the center of the channel, and then shove hard to build up enough momentum to get us halfway over the next log. From there I'm able to shift my weight back and forth until the boat works its way over the log and is floating again. "Just think of it," I tell the boat. "We must be the first ones ever to row this stretch of the river."

"That isn't necessarily something to brag about," *Jagular* says.

We continue downstream. Sunrise arrives unnoticed, lost in gray clouds. The channel is wider now, and straighter. Up ahead a lone fence post stands on the bank like a sentinel, a few strands of barbed wire clinging to the weathered wood. Just past the post a low railroad bridge crosses the river. I tether *Jagular* to an oar shoved into the mud and get out to have a look.

The bridge is in ruins. Only a few massive steel beams remain, resting on crumbling concrete piers. The ties and rails have been removed, and the skeletal bridge reaches only halfway

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across the river. I climb onto the rusting I-beams and walk out to the end to stare down at my reflection in the water below. A bridge to nowhere—except for the rickety foot bridge laid across the missing span, allowing access to the east bank.

"I suppose this is where you start bemoaning the spread of industrial civilization again," the boat calls. "Railroads and bridges and I-beams, oh my."

"On the contrary," I say. "I was just thinking that this dead-end bridge is a perfect metaphor for the inevitable decline of our dead-end civilization." I look out at the marsh, listening to the birds and frogs, the water flowing by, the wind slipping through the tall grass. "The Age of Oil is coming to an end. The rattle and clank of machinery, the rumble of engines, the choking fumes will fade. The natural world will take over. Our lives will improve as civilization returns to a more human scale."

"You're crazy."

"Nope. It's already happening. Someone built this foot bridge, didn't they? With no fuss and no machines, someone carried in these two-by-fours, a hammer and some nails, and built a bridge to a new world—one founded on a sensibly human scale, free from the greedy demands and complications of industrial technology. A new civilization built on the remnants of the old." I turn to look at the boat floating lazily by the riverbank. "A world where wooden boats will have to earn their keep."

"What keep? You haven't painted me or varnished my decks since you built me."

"I didn't varnish you then, either," I say, looking closely at the rusting bridge. Moss is already sprouting from the concrete, the heavy anchor bolts are crooked and corroding, the steel is rusting. In the gap between the I-beams, a spider web catches the sun, delicate threads glistening with dew. A sparrow flutters under the bridge and stops at a midstream rock for a drink.

"See?" I say. "Things fall apart. The center cannot hold. And nature steps in to erase our folly."

"Uh-huh," *Jagular* says. "A spider web and a bird on a rock. Nature triumphs."

"I can't help it," I tell him. "I honestly believe that our civilization is doomed. I'm an optimist."

"Murphy was an optimist, too. Look where it got him."



Not far past the bridge the river widens—Swan Lake must be just ahead. I row across the glassy water whistling the theme from Tchaikovsky's famous ballet.

"What are you doing?" *Jagular* says. "Don't you know it's bad luck to whistle aboard a sailing ship?"

"First of all, you're not a ship; you're a boat." I stop rowing. "And second, that's the theme from Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake. I thought it was fitting, considering that we've arrived." And we have. The lake opens up around us, its surface smooth and polished as black ice.

"And look," I point out. "Swans." There are two of them, gliding across the water with a regal dignity. Magnificent birds. Beautiful and majestic.

"Maybe you should get your eyes checked," the boat says. "Those are geese."

"Ok, they're geese," I say. "But they're still beautiful graceful birds, and your contrariness can't spoil my day. We've made it—we managed to row the Fox River all the way to Swan Lake. While everyone else was sleeping obliviously in their gadget-laden cocoons, we've already had an adventure. We've seen cranes, owls, deer, turtles, rowed several miles of the river that have probably never been rowed before, and still have the return journey to look forward to. With luck we'll get back to the campground just as everyone else is finishing the breakfast dishes."

"I thought we were going to go sailing," the boat says.

I look out at the water. Not a ripple, no hint of a breeze. "Sorry. Not this time, I guess."

Jagular chuckles. "That's probably for the best," he says.

"Why's that? I thought you liked sailing."

"I do." Another chuckle. "But it usually helps to have the rudder and leeboards."

I glance around the cockpit—no leeboards, no rudder hanging from the transom. "You mean you let me come all this way to go sailing when you knew all along I didn't have the stuff along? Why didn't you say anything?"

"Hey, you're the captain. I'm just a boat," *Jagular* says, and starts whistling the theme from Swan Lake. We spin slowly around in the current. The geese disappear around a corner and we're left alone in the middle of the lake, drifting aimlessly.

Back in the campground the early risers are beginning to think about getting up. The night lights are winking out, the bug zappers are falling silent. Somewhere a venetian blind flicks open, and a coffee maker churns to life with a whirl and a click. With a sigh I take the oars and start to row back.