

THE EMPRESS

At the age of nine, Joey felt it was time he learned to chop wood like his older brother Dominic. After all, he was the second oldest son in a family of eight children. He had watched his brother chop wood many times, so he already knew what to do. But when he told this to his mother, she responded like she always did.

"You're—too—young," she said. "Maybe—next year—when you're ten." She held up ten fingers. "I—don't—want—you—get—hurt," she added. It was the way they communicated since Joey was born deaf, and no one but his teachers spoke to him in sign language.

Joey gave an exasperated look, and then quickly thought of something. He flipped the pages of the wall calendar, counting the months to show her he was more than halfway to his tenth birthday—by a couple weeks, he pointed out, the selling point of his argument.

His mother grinned, pondered the matter, and then finally agreed. She called to Dominic outside to clue him in.

"You—have—to—wear—shoes," Dominic told him, prepared to give him his first lesson. "Go put your shoes on."

Joey was used to walking barefoot. Their summers on the island along the St. Lawrence River whether swimming or playing at the river's edge, getting wet was a daily occurrence, but he went along with his brother's request, and was ready now.

"Tie—your—laces," Dominic motioned, "so you don't trip and fall."

Blowing air between his lips, shoulders slumped, Joey sighed before complying. Dominic placed an upright log on the flattened stump, centered it, and then motioned for Joey to watch.

“Keep—your—feet—apart,” Dominic demonstrated, and then how to grip the handle. “Hold—ax—tight—with—both—hands.” Dominic swung the ax hard, splitting the log in two.

Joey nodded. He got it. He'd watched him do it often enough, it was nothing new to him. Joey placed the next log upright, set his feet apart just so, swung the ax up and then back down again, halfway slicing the log when it stopped, the blade caught in the middle.

Dominic took over, lifted the caught log, before slamming it down to finish it off. Joey nodded. He just needed to give it a bit more strength. His second try, the log split just right.

“Good,” Dominic told him.

Joey split two more logs when the one after that was caught again. He lifted the ax, hammered it down, but couldn't work it loose.

“Let me have it,” Dominic said.

“Nooo,” Joey nudged him away. He lifted and slammed. Lifted and slammed again.

“Let me do it, Joey. You're tiring yourself out.”

Joey let go of the handle, his lips pinched tight, eyes narrowed and arms crossed firmly in front of his chest.

Dominic sliced the log with ease. “Not easy.”

Joey made a face. “I know . . .” He waved a wild gesture before stomping off. A few paces out, he halted, yanked off his shoes and sent them flying towards the porch before heading for the water's edge.

He made his way downstream to give him time to cool off and think about what just happened. Dominic tried to show him the right way. So what that he was older, did he have to make him feel like such a child? Joey had proven that he could swing the ax and chop wood, didn't he? He would have been able to get the blade out, had it not been for his know-it-all

brother to be in such a hurry to take over.

Joey strolled along the shore, leaving footprints in the sand. Where he found chunks of clay, he set them aside, to later carve into boats, and then harden under the sun. A ship liner, mostly flat in size carrying cargo, was headed upstream. He never saw such big boats back home in the States. It was one thing to see them, but to watch the river pull away from shore, like a vacuum, he could walk out farther and farther, until the waves came rushing back. It was the best time to find crabs and flopping minnows, but he needed to be quick about it so not to let the waves knock him down. Along the river's edge, Joey wandered through random empty beer cans and soda bottles, flip flops and odd pieces of clothing that washed up on shore. There was drift wood, a crab net, a broken fishing rod, and a smelly dead fish. This one looked to be a smallmouth bass and was covered with horse flies. With a stick, Joey shooed them away. The bass's shiny eye seemed to be staring right at him. He poked it with his stick, gently at first. The stink was bad, even worse than when he shoveled Tonto's poop, his father's hunting dog, so he dug a hole in the sand using his hands. With a broken shell, he dug the hole deeper, and then scooped the dead bass in before covering it up. He snapped a small twig in half, a couple inches in length, placed them just so to form a cross over the mound.

Satisfied with his efforts, he continued on his way, stopping only when he spotted stones flat enough to throw and watch them skip along the surface of the water. A yacht raced by, near enough, he could see the couple aboard waving at him. It was no one that he knew, but he threw up a hand just the same. It was how folks were out here, in Canada. They pretended to know you even when they didn't, just to be friendly. He liked that. The sharp looking cruiser, with its front end in the air made their boat look puny and dingy in comparison. He wondered what it would feel like to ride in a speedboat that size, and to fly along the river like a rocket.

His stomach growled. It must be lunchtime, he thought, so he turned to head back home when something long and white, floating in the water, caught his attention. He reached down to examine it, realizing it was a super-size deflated balloon, with an extra-large opening. There were no obvious holes or tears, so he shook it free of water and blew in it. It was thicker somehow and would not take in air, so instead, he filled it with water, knotted the end, and then pitched it out into the river. The balloon landed a good distance away; he watched it float, slowly, with the current.

He wished now that he'd not gone quite so far. His mother would be setting out the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, they were his favorite. He hoped she would save him one, and not run out of bread, or leave him with the crusty ends. By the time he reached the buried smallmouth, he noticed the waves of the yacht washed away the cross. There were no other pieces of twigs nearby, so he used his finger to draw one in its place.

Another ship liner worked its way downstream, with a much smaller tugboat not too far behind it. He was hot and could use a swim to cool off, but he wanted to eat first and then change into his swim trunks, so he set off running to get there quicker.

It was not until he finally reached the beach area facing their home that he noticed something not quite right. The shore looked emptier than usual. At first, he felt sure that everyone was inside having lunch. *Where else would they be?* Except, the canoe was gone, and so was the motorboat. They would not have floated off with the waves, not while anchored down, tied to a stake. He shaded his eyes, looked across the river as far as his eyesight would take him, upstream and down, with no sign of them anywhere. He ran up to the house to see who might have stayed behind, expecting to find Micheline or Dominic, but found the kitchen empty. Upstairs he ran, and then back down again, in each room there was no one. More confused than

ever, he ran back to shore.

Where did everyone go?

The only place he could think of was *Grandmaman's* house, a straight shot across the river, on the mainland. But why didn't they wait for him to get back? He was always being told he wasn't old enough for all sorts of things, to ski, chop wood, or steer the motor boat; how could they just leave him behind, like he was suddenly old enough?

He considered what to do, and then hiked over to the *caption rouge*, the shed where they kept the generator. Towards the back was an orange and black wooden rowboat, a spare, they never used. There were two oars lodged into metal holders, a plastic sand bucket on the floor board, and a spotted toad perched on top of it. Ignoring the toad, Joey pulled at the boat, but it was lodged in too tight against the planks of the wall. He scooted behind it, squatted down, and with his back against the rear of the boat, his feet pressed firmly against the wall of the *caption rouge*, he bared down, using the weight of his body and pushed hard until it broke free. He dragged it out onto the grassy area, not sure why they never used the boat, it looked fine to him. It was heavier than their canoe was, but not so much that he couldn't manage it on his own. He thought of an idea then, ran to the house and returned with two empty soda bottles, the ones worth two cents when returned to the store. He positioned them on their sides beneath the boat, one toward the front, the other centered in the middle. Like a conveyer belt, he rolled the boat over the bottles to gain a few yards, and then repositioned the one in back to the front, to keep it going. When he reached the river's edge a good ten minutes later, the armpits of his shirt were wet and his knee was scraped and bleeding. He ignored the little bit of blood for he was geared up like a Trojan warrior, ready to make his way to the other side.

With one foot in the boat, he pushed off with the other, hopped in, and sat himself on the

center bench, his back and the front end of the boat aimed toward the mainland. He dug the oars in, two at a time, the way he'd seen others do, and watched their area of the island drift further and further away. He was far enough out now. It was well over his head, no telling how deep, when he realized he didn't bring himself a lifejacket or floater of any kind. Not that he needed one, he was a good swimmer, but his mother always made him wear one when they crossed the river. *Just to be safe*, she would say. During windy days especially, the waves were rough enough to jerk the boat around. At the passing of ships, he watched his mother explain to the others not to take the waves head-on, but at an angle. It was never explained to him directly, but he caught on just the same.

He still could not believe they just left him. His mother must have forgotten to count heads, it was what she did whenever they traveled and stopped to use the restroom back in the States. Not that it was full-proof.

The previous year, after leaving the Gas-Mart headed for the interstate, his mother cried out: *Oh no! Someone's missing!* She proceeded to count the heads in the car for the second time. *Oh my God, it's Stefano.* His father turned the car around, went back to collect their four-year-old brother, who was out front, bawling his eyes, beside the store owner. But Joey was much older than Stefano. He was not about to get all weepy-eyed and would show them he was capable of crossing the river on his own. The island grew more distant with each stroke; he could barely make out their home for the sun in his eyes. Without any breeze, the air got blistering hot. His arms began to tire when he was reminded that he missed lunch and he was thirsty now, too. He could have made himself a sandwich, had he thought about it . . . or brought him a thermos of something to drink . . . and a hat to shield the brightness of the sun. He was far enough out now that when he looked over his shoulder toward the mainland he could almost see the speck of

what might be their motorboat and canoe at the inlet. The images wavered as though he were looking at them under water, the fluidity making him light-headed. He was sure of what he was seeing, though, it was just as he thought. He dug the oars deeper into the river, eager to get there, but his feet were covered now and the bucket was sloshing about. The boat was taking in water, but where?

He stopped his rowing, grabbed the bucket to quickly empty the water out. He couldn't tell where it was coming in from, but it couldn't be a very big opening, he'd gone quite a distance. Scanning the shoreline on both sides, he estimated he was about one-third of the way over, with two-thirds yet to go. He could turn around and head back, but he was not about to let a little bit of water stop him. He shoveled one cup at a time, over and over, until his feet were clear again. When he got back to his rowing, he noticed something was different. Their home on the island was now farther to the left, which meant he'd drifted downstream with the current. He would need to angle the boat and aim it upstream, so not to drift even further. The muscles in his arms were achy and sore, and the sun was beating down on his head, burning the back of his neck. It was good though that the river was calmer than usual. There were times when they crossed all nine of them together, six in the motorboat, and three in the canoe. The day could be sunny, warm and bright, but the river, with enough wind, would be choppy and tricky to manage. Even for the motorboat to stay on course, but especially for those in the canoe. Most often, it was the older ones doing the rowing with Dominic in front and Micheline in back, with him stuck sitting in the middle with nothing to do.

With a quick glance over his left shoulder, Joey saw the *Empress* coming directly toward him. It was the largest ship of its kind, their favorite, for the amount of waves it provided. The *Empress* was a special cruise liner that carried tourists for entertainment and sightseeing.

Compared to other vessels and cargo freights, it was both a beauty and a beast of a ship. The white *Empress* howled a warning. It was one that Joey could not hear, but understood when the smokestack at the rear of the ship blew out its dark smoke. His chest hammered, so he rowed harder and faster, causing the boat to slide and zigzag. He never considered that a ship might come, not as he was crossing. He knew how to take the waves, at an angle, but the *Empress* was coming directly at him. If he didn't clear it in time, his boat would surely capsize, and he refused to think what might happen after that. He pumped the oars over and over with a fearless endeavor, until water swilled about along the floorboard, covering his feet once again. The question of whether to empty it or keep rowing hammered in his head.

The *Empress* coasted nearer and nearer, there was no stopping it, and then the smokestack buffaloes a second warning.

Joey picked up his pace when he spotted over his shoulder his mother and the others approaching in the motorboat, from the other side—their arms thrashed about in a wild, wavelike frenzy. His mother pointed toward the *Empress*, her face shadowed by her cap. Their hand signals were telling him to turn around, to go back, as if he might not make it.

Joey leaned back on his bench, stomach knotted, headache brewing, as he pushed harder on the oars. He saw the *Empress* sure as they did. He was deaf, not blind, and there was no way he was turning back. Front and center now, he was lined up directly in the ship's path, but a good enough distance away, he thought, to clear it. His chances of making it were just as good to keep going as they were to turn back. He knew that he could make it, just as sure as he knew to keep the boat angled when the waves started. He'd come too far, worked too hard, was thirsty and hungry; he was going to *Grandmaman's* house, and that was all there was to it. This time, he was in the driver's seat. It was his choice to make.

With his back to his mother, he pulled and pushed against the oars, dug them deeper into the river, steady and in sync. While the boat took in a little more water, he knew this would cause him to work that much harder. He knew all of that, and still it didn't matter because he was strong, strong enough to chop wood and pull the boat up high on shore. And he was tough, tough enough not to give up, to keep rowing even when they thought that he couldn't make it. He could almost see his mother with the invisible eyes in the back of his head, telling him to *Go back . . . Go back . . . It's too dangerous. Where's your life jacket? You have to have a life jacket, just to be safe.* And he would have brought one had he thought about it, but they were all probably in their boat, anyhow.

The *Empress* was closer now. It fired off another smoke signal, a third and probably final warning. As the ship grew nearer, the size of it overwhelmed him. It was like the picture of a boy in the magazine, the one standing next to the Empire State Building that made him look no bigger than a pea. Joey hoped that the Captain would ease up on the gas. There was no veering around him, no stopping, but maybe he could ease up on the gas. With a quick glance up, he thought he saw someone looking over the edge of the ship with a pair of binoculars. He didn't know where his mother was, and there was no time to look and check. He pressed his heels firmly against the floorboards, tackled the oars in a push-and-pull symmetrical manner and a certainty that he knew what he was doing. He ignored the burning of his muscles, the ache in his belly and the blisters on his hands. None of it mattered as much as clearing the *Empress*, which was so close now he could read the inscription on the bow—*St. Lawrence Empress Cruise Lines*. Stroke after stroke, Joey powered on, his adrenalin peaking. Sweat dripped from his forehead, his hair damp and curling, splattered to his scalp. His nostrils flared and his chest pounded when a mist of spray showered him as he cleared the hull of the *Empress*. A dozen or more strokes later,

he watched the ship pass before him, making sure to aim his oars directly into the wake. His rowboat, a peanut in comparison, rocked over the waves like a child's rollercoaster. He slowed down his strokes to match the timing of the ripples, and still he did not look to see where the others were. Instead, he caught sight of the folks that were out on the upper-deck cheering him on. There were dozens of people. Some of them waved their hats, others held cameras and were taking his picture. He would have waved his own cap, if he had one. But he was safe now, so with a satisfied grin, a sigh of relief, he threw up his arm, and waved back.

As the *Empress* continued on down the river, the dangerous situation now behind him, his mother pulled up alongside his boat.

“You—scared—me—to—death! Are you crazy?”

Joey ignored her question, to shovel out water. All the while he was well aware of her reaction toward him.

“That—boat—no—good. Leaks. You—could—have—drowned.”

He made no move to reply or even acknowledge what his mother said. She should have been happy and relieved to see that he made it, rather than scold him like a five-year-old. He wanted to tell her that she should not have left him behind and that he proved he was capable. Had he known about the stupid boat taking in water beforehand, he would not have chanced it. His mother waved her hand to get his attention, but Joey kept his gaze down, putting distance between his boat and theirs. She threw him a cable then, in order to drag his boat behind the motorboat, but Joey wasn't having it. He'd made it this far on his own, and was not about to be towed like some broken down heap of junk. He managed just fine by himself and would finish what he started. So he choked back a cry, caught the cable with his right hand, and tossed it back into their boat. His brothers and sisters all stared at him like he *was* crazy. But he was about to

show them what crazy can do.

His mother followed alongside him, the motorboat putt-putting along. He kept at it, his back to his focal point, the oars flopping about unevenly. He was beyond tired now, really tired. It seemed that once he safely cleared the *Empress*, all of his fired up energy was drained right out of him. It would have been easy, so easy to give in, to be able to sit back and relax, while the motorboat did all the work pulling him to shore. But he was not about to give any of them the satisfaction of knowing just how tired he was, or that his idea to cross the river was not the brightest one. So he dug the oars in deeper again, his arms bent forward and then back again, as he fought and choked back the tears. With a glance over his shoulder, finally, he craned his neck toward the inlet, the knots and knuckles of land of where he was headed. He could feel their stares and his mother's impatience, the fight within him wearing thin, but he kept at what he was doing. A dozen or more minutes passed, he gave a second look, and then he saw her. *Grandmaman* was standing at the edge of her property, waiting for him. He could almost see her clearly now. She was wearing a striped, cotton dress that fell just below her knees with a pocketed apron tied around her waist. In one hand, she held a bright yellow beach towel, in the other, a jug of water. Joey was never so happy to see *Grandmaman*; she must have known how thirsty he would be.

There were times when he wondered what *Grandpapa* had been like. He died when Joey was four, long before they started spending their summers on the island. All that he knew about his *Grandpapa* were the pictures in the photo albums that told their own story, and what little his mother added when he asked her. "He was a policeman in the city," she said, "when I was a child growing up." The black and white snapshots were small, and not so clear.

Joey pointed to a colored, more recent photo. "When?"

"After my father retired, he didn't like to shave much. He was a tall man, about six-feet."

Joey noted his full head of white hair and thick, bushy eyebrows above the clearest of blue eyes that matched his own. But even more prominent was his scruffy beard jaw-line. He wondered if that was how he would look when he got old, or if his mother would look like her mother did now, when she reached her age.

"Hello!" *Grandmaman* called out. She set the jug of water down, in order to wave.

When his boat scraped bottom, Joey stepped out into the ankle-deep water, his legs wobbly and unsure, pulling the boat up on shore, enough so that he could tilt it over to let it drain. He avoided eye contact with his mother and the others, who were in the process of tying their boat down.

"Drink?" *Grandmaman* held the jug out to him, with the lid already off.

Joey nodded, eager to gulp it down straight from the half-gallon container. He drank and he drank as the water ran down his chin, onto his neck and chest. He could not remember ever being so thirsty, so starved for water. The cool liquid felt good against his lips and even better seeping down his throat, filling up his belly. When he finally came up for air, he gave her a happy grin.

"Thank you." His shirt was already saturated, so he flipped it over his head, balled it up and dried off his face.

"You thirsty, eh? Come," she urged him, "come have lunch." She placed the dry towel over his shoulders, the two of them headed back towards the house, with the others following behind.

It was not until later, once he'd eaten and rested up, that he decided to forgive his mother. He noticed her crying, while speaking in private to *Grandmaman*. Of what they spoke about, he

didn't know, but he guessed as much it was about him. He remembered the look on his mother's face when she reached his boat. *You—scared—me—to—death! Are you crazy?* He never meant to put his life in danger or to worry her like that. The idea of what might have happened didn't occur to him. So when she approached him later, and wrapped her arms around him in a bear hug, all of his anger melted away.

"Dominic and Micheline crossed the river by canoe," she began to explain, using hand gestures. "I thought . . . you went with them. When we got here," she pointed down, "I said, where's Joey? We looked around . . . we couldn't find you. When I saw you rowing over, in that old leaky boat and then the big ship was coming . . . I was so scared . . . I thought I was going to lose a son."

Joey motioned, frantic, that when he came back from his walk, everyone was gone. He checked the house, the yard, the barn, no one was there.

"I know. I'm sorry. We didn't know. It was my fault. I'm sorry."

He could see his mother was visibly shaken, even now, just talking about it. She never meant to leave him.

"Please don't scare me like that again, my heart is getting old. Okay?"

Joey nodded, grinned, and then noticed *Grandmaman* asleep in her rocker. Her eyes were closed, a slight tilt of her head, she smiled. He wondered what she might be dreaming or thinking about. Something good, for sure. He liked coming over to her house. Her grilled cheese sandwiches were the best, he had finished off two of them.

Just then, Dominic jumped up and ran to the window. Another ship was spotted. Everyone fled out the door, with Joey on their heels, one right after the other in a race to shore.