

The First Two Pages: “Leah”

By Julie Tollefson

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With the opening lines of "Leah," I wanted to portray a woman frustrated both with her boyfriend and with the trip that was supposed to save their relationship.

I chose a setting—a weeklong canoe trip—that constrains the story and increases the stress on my protagonist with every stroke of her paddle. Leah’s world effectively shrinks to a sixteen-foot boat and a river that may not be as hospitable as it initially seems. The close quarters bring her relationship with boyfriend Joe into sharp focus, and she doesn’t like what she’s learning about him or about herself.

The first few paragraphs set up these elements and hint at a horror to come:

Four days.

This was her fourth day, perched on the hard cane seat in the bow of the canoe, every stroke of the paddle bringing her closer to the decision she should have made a month ago.

The river, wide and calm, flowed through acres of flat, monotonous farmland. On each side, thousands of plowed acres stretched away from the water's edge, as if giant hands cradled the stream with dusty, lifeless fingers. Brilliant sunshine danced atop the water, a sparkly layer of diamonds that hid the mud and silt and god knows what else the river carried just under its surface.

"This is the life, babe." Joe rested his paddle across the gunnels and dug another beer out of the ice chest at his feet. "No boss bitchin'

about deadlines. No bills. No neighbors. Nothing but sunshine and beer and you and me with the whole world to ourselves."

A shadow skittered across the water. Mother Nature laughed at him. She squinted at the sky to join the joke and saw not a cloud but a vulture. The huge, black bird glided far out over the field in a lazy circle, then swept low over their heads as it set a course straight down the river.

I wanted readers to feel the suffocating limitations of a canoe, the way it tethers two people, and then compound those feelings with the fraught emotions of a deteriorating relationship that had once been beautiful and full of promise but that now, at least for Leah, has burned out. As the story opens, Leah's simmering resentment of Joe and his oafish ways is totally understandable but leaves open the question of what had attracted her to him in the first place. I wove in enough backstory to give Joe a few redeeming qualities but laced descriptions of his beautiful artistry with a suggestion that his personality might be, well, a bit controlling.

She dipped her paddle in the water and pulled. The paddle—when she called it an oar on day one, Joe corrected her—was a work of art. Strips of alternating light and dark wood joined together and finished with a hard shine. Joe made it himself, every detail—from the length of the strong, straight shaft to the curve of the grip—custom made for her. He'd made the canoe, too, the product of months of piecing and molding and sanding. His patience and attention to detail enthralled her. A man that sensitive, who created works of such practical beauty, would be the perfect boyfriend.

She had never been so wrong.

As Leah learns too late, when two people canoe together, they have to work in tandem for the best outcome, and when the trip takes place on a river, the only

viable choice is to follow the course set by the water. Boat ramps and access points are limited. There are no convenient off ramps. For Leah, both in terms of the trip and her relationship with Joe, to turn back is not an option.

She plunged her paddle in the water again and pulled, harder than the last stroke. The boat listed toward the right bank, like a tipsy college girl walking home from the bar. She paddled on the other side to correct their course.

“You’re really getting the hang of this, babe.”

She heard aluminum crumple in his hand, then a thud as he dropped the can beside the ice chest and the whirring chck-chck sound of his camera. She gritted her teeth and stroked again. She’d come to understand this trip in a way he never would: as a metaphor for their relationship. She rode in front, alert for rocks and obstacles, powering forward, unable to see him without turning around. He drifted with the current, content, his view of the future blocked by her back.

Unfortunately for Leah, despite her epiphany, she and Joe still have miles to travel before she can call the trip and the relationship quits for good, and the increasingly dark and turbulent river won’t easily release them from its grip.

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Julie Tollefson grew up in the sand hills of Southwest Kansas and now makes her home in the northeast corner of the state. She landed her first paying writing gig just out of high school, investigating such hard-hitting stories as “Do blondes really have more fun?” and “Does father know best?” for her hometown newspaper. After stints as a copy editor for a daily newspaper and an editor in a corporate technical writing department, Julie joined the ranks of academia as communications director for an educational research unit. She is now editor of the Kansas Geological Survey. Julie has an amateur, but enthusiastic, interest in nature photography. Her short fiction has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, *Flash and Bang: A Short Mystery Fiction Society Anthology*, and *Fish Nets: The Second Guppy Anthology*.