

THE LONELY PADDLER OF THE MISSOURI

A Novel

By Jerry Lemonds

It was raining again. Would it ever stop? Perched behind the wheel of his midnight-blue Camry station wagon, Jim Clark shook his fist at the Rain Gods. “Leave me alone! You’ve been following me across the entire State of Montana!”

He laughed then – a deep and rumbling sound, like thunder trapped in a barrel. Clark was a big man, a former defensive end who’d never missed a game during three bruising seasons at the University of Missouri. He was tough guy, but with a sense of humor. Playful at times, and even a little bit silly . . .

Still chuckling, the brawny driver patted the empty passenger seat beside him . . . until his fingers located the cellophane bag of Hershey’s Kisses. *Gotcha!* The car radio played on – “It’s been a hard day’s night, and I been workin’ like a dog!” – and Clark began to whistle. The Beatles! So what if he couldn’t carry a tune in a Dipsty-Dumpster? Slapping the dash happily, he kept his keen eyes watching the road, while the windshield wipers clattered away and the rain-walloped tree branches danced frantically through the gale.

He was 22 miles west of Bozeman, when it happened.

Trouble.

Get serious, thought Clark. You’re kidding, right?

But this was no joke. Not at all. A huge mule deer – tawny, with jet-black hooves and a rack of 12-point antlers dripping in the rain – loomed directly in his path!

Instinct took over. Clark's right foot went to the brake, slammed down on it.

The car pitched drunkenly to one side, and the abused tires began to scream. A moment later Clark found himself looking directly into the terrified deer's enormous eyes. Time slowed way down...and they held a leisurely conversation in which the driver said, *Don't worry, I'm gonna miss you by several inches*, and the mule deer sighed deeply and then moaned back at him: *I sure hope you're right, pal.*

He was. By about the length of a thumbnail. Amazed, Clark watched the Camry jet-ski through a 360-degree spin, while barely grazing the ass-end of the terrified stag. *Candy Kisses*, thought Jim. *Candy Kisses on a hard day's night!* A moment later, the drenched car was rocking back and forth, its front tires slung halfway over the edge of a jagged limestone cliff.

Jim Clark had begun to shake. His hands danced along the wheel like the hands of some manic puppet. Gritting his teeth, he fought for self-control. After a while his breathing slowed and the world stopped spinning. Still holding his breath, he managed to ease the car back to the gravel shoulder of the road, and back to safety.

He just sat there for a while. Shaking. Feeling the cold sweat trickle from his armpits to his shuddering ribs. What was life? *A matter of inches*. He shivered with the knowledge. How close had he come to the edge of annihilation? Another foot, a single foot, and those front tires would have cleared the cliff. . . .

He knew he was superstitious, and easily spooked. And yet he couldn't stop asking himself: What if the near-collision had been meant as a warning? What if he wasn't supposed to *put that canoe into the water?*

But that was ridiculous. Absurd! Besides, he didn't really have a choice; he needed the dough. The contract he'd signed would put \$100,000 into his pocket, provided he accomplished one simple task:

Solo the 2,540 miles of the mighty Missouri River by canoe for Wild Rivers Magazine – and then write the story of his odyssey for 16 million readers.

Clark. The tough guy.

But not right now. Not after doing the Sudden Death Cha-Cha with a fear-crazed buck the size of a Winnebago. Not after coming so close to the cliff-edge that he could count the burrs in the Joe Pye weed growing along the shoulder of the highway. Like most people, Clark wasn't the least bit afraid of dying – provided the event wasn't scheduled for any time within the next 50 years or so. . . .

It took him nearly an hour to recover. He drank four cups of coffee and smoked half a pack of Marboros, while doing his best to forget his adrenaline-soaked staring match with 1,100 pounds of totally panicked venison.

Brutal? You bet.

But at last his hands stopped shaking and his vision cleared.

Screw it, he told himself as he turned the key in the ignition. *I'm not quitting. Not now, and not ever.*

He drove on – but at a placid 60 miles an hour, now – toward his next port of call: the Rocky Mountain Outfitters and Inn.

Gradually, his high spirits returned. After a few minutes back on the road, the big man even found himself whistling: “Raindrops keep fallin’ on my head...but cryin’s not for me, because I’m free.

“Nothin’s worryin’ me!”

All at once, he was laughing out loud again. Heck, life is *good!* Why not enjoy it? Why not take time to smell the windblown snow-drops, the yellow buttercups and the mountain laurel that everywhere bordered this winding, wandering road? Suddenly the Clark-man felt fully restored to himself, felt fully alive and interested in everything. Look at that mob of cud-chewing Hereford cows, pestered so relentlessly by that that rear-end-sniffing bull! Why, who could blame the horned intruder for wanting to ride every one of his “I’m-not-in-the-mood!” mates? Grazing contentedly, the animals stood silhouetted on a hillside, within easy ambling distance of their rust-streaked water tank.

As the car passed, Jim watched the attached windmill rattle in the mountain breeze. Smiling with delight, he eyeballed the gushing of the life-giving water pumped by the spinning blades, and the young calves frolicking through the burdock and the creeping thistle . . . while their nervous mommas pushed the laggards in a constant but doomed effort to maintain order among these youthful bovines.

Life swirled all around him. A squadron of vultures circled above, and he could hear the harsh cries of two crows squabbling on a branch. Glorious! *Look at that lucky bull*, Jim told himself. *He’s got 20 cows panting for him, and what have I got? A male Lab in the backseat and a woman named Veronica who’s 2,500 miles east*

in Baltimore! Why'd I leave that beauty behind? If brains were dynamite, Jim Clark couldn't blow his nose!

But then he laughed again. He couldn't help it. "Stop chewing yourself out," he roared with merriment, while the battered station wagon once again began to pick up speed. "Your time will come again!"

Whistling contentedly, he drove on through the drizzling afternoon. And from time to time, his mind drifted back to former scenes, former raptures. He imagined the blonde, blue-eyed Veronica sitting beside him in the car, caressing his thigh, and her sweet perfume filling his nostrils. He grunted as he felt his libido stir. That blond hair shining on the pillow, and her back arching so tautly as her body strained to meet his gentle, probing touch --

Twenty cows! Sonofagun! He laughed out loud and slapped his knee and then asked himself: "How are you gonna be able to stay away from the womenfolk for 120 straight days?"

Well -- he'd better, or Veronica would have his head!

Still laughing, he looked down at the onrushing road -- and felt a needle of fear go stabbing into the tender space behind his eyes. The damn steering wheel had just jerked to the right! *Easy, fella . . . you must've ripped up the power steering during that showdown with Bambi's poppa.*

He laughed. Still, it felt pretty scary, after the close call he'd just had. And what about the tie-down ropes on that Tripper canoe? Had he even bothered to check them after that thrill-a-minute episode with the deer? He grimaced. *Better get your stuff together, cowpoke.*

A moment later, he was piloting the car off the highway and into a breezy cottonwood grove. He'd check the ropes right after he took a whiz. He could tell that Jack wanted to water the cottonwoods, and they were overdue for a break, anyway.

He was relieved to find the canoe still lashed securely to the roof. But he didn't know enough mechanics to diagnose the health of the steering. Not good. He'd have to get it checked by a professional at the Inn, first chance he got.

He drove with extreme caution after that, but the rest of the trip passed uneventfully. Two hours after leaving the rest stop, he was slipping into Three Forks. And he was feeling terrific, if the truth be told. His payday at the magazine would be huge, after all – why not take advantage of the windfall to marry Veronica and settle on down with her? Why not help her raise Little Henry – while providing her cute-as-a-bear-cub-son with all the love and attention a frisky 12-year-old could ever require?

He frowned, then, as he asked himself a couple of very tough questions: “Why not become a real father – instead of merely a part-time ‘boyfriend?’”

And the second one, which was even more difficult: “What are you afraid of?”

Hey, lighten up, Big Man! You'll figure it all out, somehow, and Henry will be the better for it when you do. Relax for once in your life and enjoy something – because life is good!

The tires were crunching gravel by now, as the banged-up wagon eased along the circular driveway that flanked the rustic inn. Surrounded by a wide verandah

and lit up by a series of antique, gas-fed street lamps, the Outfitters was headquartered in an authentic Victorian-style mansion that looked as if it had been lifted from the pages of a Wild West shoot-'em-up. The only thing missing was a tin-star-wearing sheriff with a smoldering cheroot sticking out of his jaw.

“We’re here, Jack!” Clark told the barking dog. “But where is the marching band, old buddy?” Chuckling, he pushed open the car door and strode toward the lobby of the Mountain Outfitters Inn.

Thirty seconds later, the snuffling reception clerk – poor guy had a terrible cold – was sliding an overnight letter at his newest guest.

Ah, the lovely Veronica! Recognizing the home address, he lifted the missive to his nose and sniffed it, hoping for even a faint trace of her signature perfume. And sure enough, there it was . . . that fragrant scent of woodland lilac he knew so well. “Wonderful,” he told himself. “I’m missed already. She must be lonely as hell, without Big Jim sitting across from her at the dinner table!”

But then he frowned. And frowned again.

Jim, I feel like a coward, breaking the news this way---but you need to know that things have changed. I’ve gotten close to someone here in Baltimore. He’s a fine man---a steady companion and friend, and very stable. (Also pretty exciting at times!) I just know he’s going to make me and Henry so happy.

I’m sorry this is so abrupt, but you’ve always seemed to enjoy your time with that dog as much as your time with me, and I really don’t think

you'll miss me or Henry too much. We'll always be friends, and now you'll be free to wander the wilderness---here's wishing you well!

Sincerely, "V"

*

He sat there, paralyzed with shock, turning the letter over and over again in his useless hands. Surely he would find one of her funny notes on the back – a bright yellow “smiley face” and a hilarious one-liner telling him that the “Dear John” letter he’d just read was just another of her silly jokes?

No such luck. The letter was for real. Though he looked for it again and again, he could find no scribbled note on the back of a page – no scrawled message containing the two words he most needed to hear: “Just kidding!” It was over. Finished. *Kaput*. He and Veronica were no longer an item – and the hard-charging Jim Clark was entirely on his own again.

He felt like he’d just been slugged in the gut – and as a former light-heavyweight boxer (at least on the amateur level), he knew the feeling well. He recognized the green nausea that swirled in the pit of his stomach, the dizziness that swirled like shredded cotton candy through the stunned silence of his aching brain. Finished! On the strength of a single, two-paragraph letter!

For a moment he tasted murderous anger, somewhere deep in his throat – the taste of green, corroded pennies, like some bitter and metallic acid flaring into his acrid throat. *The Witch*, he told himself, though he knew it was a cheap shot: *I'd like to slap that fickle broad; I'd like to slap her so she stayed slapped!*

But rage is usually followed by fear in the human psyche, and Clark was no exception. No sooner had his anger surfaced than he felt a blast of chilling anxiety go howling through the pipes that fed his now-battered heart. How in the name of Sweet Suffering *Jesu* was he going to paddle a canoe for several hundred miles, he asked himself, while using a single, eight-inch paddle – and without the dream of Veronica to see him through?

How would he survive the roaring rapids and foaming snags of the Muddy Mo, without the promise of her soft, enfolding arms at the end of his long, cold ride?

Jim Clark had just received the ultimate “Dear John Letter” – a Bolt from the Blue so unexpected and merciless that it seemed likely to freeze his heart and totally paralyze his pecker, and both at the same instant. The note had been so unexpected that for a moment he had nearly burst into shocked laughter. But there was nothing funny about *this* news, nothing funny at all. His world had crashed; it was that simple. His illusions had been shattered by a few quick strokes of her black Flair pen.

What a fool Jim Clark had been! What an idiot – to have imagined her as fascinated, enraptured by his career as a pro journalist! How had he missed it . . . the now now-obvious fact that she’d been looking for an exit, even as he deluded himself about their bright romance and their glorious future? Was there a bigger bozo on Planet Earth than the man who whose destiny would be to test the roaring waters of the Muddy Mo?

The worst part, of course, was his growing realization that when things had gone well between them, life had been nothing less than *terrific*. They'd spent two wonderful, action-packed years together, after all, between his many journalistic assignments. They'd skied across the Adirondacks (and made love while buried deep in a snowdrift, so Henry couldn't spot them). They'd hiked the Blue Ridge Mountain passes that Clark had always loved, and they'd backpacked their way across Maryland's tranquil and bucolic Eastern Shore – pausing only to watch the wild ponies of Assateague Island flow smooth as molten silver back and forth across the windblown sand dunes.

They'd spent many a night at Center Stage in downtown Baltimore, and Veronica had wept her eyes out at *The Magic Flute* and *Madame Butterfly*, during enchanted evenings at the Maryland Opera Company's immense auditorium on Cathedral Street. And little Henry? Again and again, the two adults had tasted the thrill of holding the excited kid up in front of the Chinese pandas at the Baltimore Zoo, or leading him – amazed and overjoyed and even a little frightened, to tell the truth – past the boa constrictors and pythons and hissing rattlesnakes who dominated the always crowded Reptile House.

Remembering it, Clark just shook his head. How could Veronica have turned her back on their shared life together? How could she have found something better? Was there a man on the planet more dedicated to Little Henry than Jim Clark? And when it came to supporting this proud, headstrong woman emotionally – hadn't he always been right there, eager to do her bidding, eager to give her a shoulder to cry on, or to laugh on, whenever a shoulder was required?

Yes, he'd been faithful, and loyal, and truthful . . . and this was his reward! To be tossed aside like an old shoe, the first time she found some *other* guy with a hard-on for her, some endlessly attentive, exquisitely thoughtful guy who was probably faking it, anyway!

All at once, the bottom line seemed clear: Jim Clark had nothing to wait for. Nothing to plan for. If he survived the river, there would be no warm embrace waiting for him, no sweet perfume to savor. No triumphant kiss. He closed his eyes for a moment, and the pain went through him like an electrical shock. When he opened them again, a single word hung glimmering in his tormented mind.

Jack.

It was the only thing he had left.

"Listen," he told the staring clerk, "I...I think I left something outside. I'll be right back, okay?"

A moment later, he was staggering across the lobby, headed back toward the car and his one remaining friend on Planet Earth. Shivering in the crisp May breeze – the sky had cleared during the past hour or so, had gone cold and hard as porcelain – he limped back to the station wagon and slid into the backseat, right beside the loyal canine. A lone vulture circled overhead.

"We gotta talk, fella!"

Jack regarded him calmly. Expressionless, the dog's neutral gaze seemed to say: *Actually, Jim, I've been expecting this for some time now. I'm afraid you aren't very observant, my good man.*

Still groaning in his misery, Clark kept shaking his head. “How could I have been such a jerk, old buddy?”

A skilled diplomat, the black Lab did not choose to reply.

“I thought she was crazy about me, Jack. I really did. I thought she worshipped the ground I walked on! She told me I was the most exciting man – the most exciting human *being* – she’d ever met! She told me I got along with Little Henry better than she did! I tell ya, she acted like the sun rose and set on her man Jim Clark!”

Jack blinked, then frowned. Then he sighed heavily. *Live and learn, Jimbo. I can assure you that I saw this coming months ago . . . but for some reason, you refused to look.*

Listening to his best buddy think out loud, Jim realized that his understanding of Veronica and Little Henry might be incomplete – or even non-existent. Indeed, it was entirely possible, he now concluded, that Jim Clark might belong to that unhappy category of *homo sapiens* known as “total jerks without a single clue.” Had his whole life been a raging, ass-backwards mistake? Had Veronica ever loved him at all? Had Little Henry really considered him the greatest single human being since Superman? But there was no time for such painful speculations; the station wagon was getting colder by the minute. The sky was still overcast, and the brisk Montana wind – it was still May, after all – cut through his light jacket like the teeth of a starved barracuda.

“Look at me, Jack – I’m shivering!” But the dog eyed him without compassion, since the temperature was still well above zero degrees Fahrenheit. “Let’s get out of

here, Jack-o.” Rising stiffly, and while doing his best to ignore the painful lump in his throat, Jim scooped up the duffel bag from the back seat and began humping it back toward the lobby.

The dog followed at his heels, doing his best to ignore the questions that poured from his master in a steady stream. “What should I do, fella? How about renting a room at the top of the Inn, and then leaping from the nearest window?”

The dog cocked his head, as if intrigued by the possibility.

“How about if I wrapped the lamp cord around my neck, plugged it in, and then stuck both feet in the shower?”

The results would be shocking, all right.

“Do you drink Johnny Walker Red, Jack? I could buy us a bottle and we could sit on the floor of our room and get shit-faced. And if I start blubbering, which seems probable, at least I know you won’t be able to tell anybody that I cried like a heartbroken baby!”

Don’t be so sure, buster-boy. I have ways of getting my points across.

Bent almost double under the weight of the heavy bag, Jim twisted his neck so he could look down at his loyal companion. “I suppose you’re going to tell me that I’ve made my bed – and now I’m going to darn well have to sleep in it?”

Jack didn’t hesitate. *On target, Ranchero – and don’t expect to find me curled up beside you. You got yourself into this mess, and you’ll have to find the inner resources to get out of it.*

“You’re a tough hombre, Jack.”

I do my best, pal. And it’s “cano,” not “hombre.”

“Speaking of beds, did I ever tell you about the great times Veronica and I used to have in the sack?”

Puh-leeeeeze! You’re embarrassing me.

“It’s true, Jack-o. I can’t tell you how many times we spend the entire night laughing, cuddling, making love and caressing each other all night long.”

The dog gave him a huge, gaping yawn: *Much more of this romantic stuff and I’ll go comatose.*

But it was true. The two of them had been inseparable for days at a time. Clark knew he would never forget the moment of his farewell – standing there at the end of the driveway with the car’s engine muttering and Jack leaping about hysterically on the backseat. “Henry and I are going to miss you *terribly*,” Veronica had moaned in his ear. Clinging desperately to his shoulder, she’d wept as if her heart was about to break: “You won’t forget us, will you, Jim?”

“Of course not, Veronica. How could I do that? You two are my life’s blood. You’re the reason I still get out of bed in the morning.” He tilted his head back, so he could gaze deeply into her glistening eyes. “The time will go quickly, Vee; before you know it, I’ll be holding you in my arms again, just like this.”

Her lips trembled and twitched. “Do you promise?”

The liar! Why, she’d probably started working on the terms of separation before Clark’s jam-packed station wagon had even reached I-70, en route to Frederick, Breezewood and the mountains of Pennsylvania!

It was hopeless . . . and all at once, Jim then let out one of his big belly laughs. What was the point of worrying – he couldn’t *change* the situation by fretting about

it! “Jack,” he said with another rumble of laughter as they pushed through the swinging doors of the lobby, “I want you to know that just talking to you has helped me enormously. I’m out of the doldrums, and ready for action. What the hell! I’m glad you were willing to listen – a lot of people would have written me off as a nut case!”

The dog stared at him, poker-faced: *And with good cause, my man, with good cause. Listen . . . I don’t mean to be rude, but have you completely forgotten the concept known as “eating dinner?” If so, I’d like to bring a simple fact to your attention: I’m hungry as a wild hog running loose in a turnip patch!*

Jim was laughing out loud now, with his spirits completely restored. “What’s the matter with me, Jack? Why am I crying the blues nonstop? Don’t I have a wonderful job, and you for a friend? So what if I’ve lost Veronica – don’t you think I could provide a passing fancy for some lonesome babe out there, if I work at it?”

But Jack refused to be drawn in. *What is this, pal – Twenty Questions? Sorry, but I’m not the Answer Dog. Are we having pork chops for supper, or what?*

“If there’s anything I learned during my divorce, Big Dog, it’s that I need to take care of business! Just do the important things, one at a time – and the I’d-like-to’s will take care of themselves.”

With that, Jim snapped his fingers and led Jack in a crazy dance in the parking lot of the Inn. Barking gleefully, the clever Lab bounced along on his back legs . . . and drew goggle-eyed stares from two elderly women who watched them pass. “Look at that dog, Marge,” one cried to the other. “Do you think there’s a circus nearby?”

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They settled into their room without further problems, and within a matter of minutes, they felt like old roommates. While Jack wolfed down two cans of Premium Beef Riblets and slurped at his water bowl like a Slovakian cargo-hauler on a three-day bender, Jim sat down and banged out a quick e-mail to Spader: *Arrived here safe and sound.*

Within 60 seconds, the publisher's reply was flashing onto his screen: *Terrific! Looking forward to a great story--let us know if you need anything.*

When Jim looked up from his terminal, the over-fed Lab was already snoring hard enough to rattle the coffee cups in the kitchenette. The big man took one look at him and laughed out loud. "Go ahead, doze your head off, you no-count canine. Don't you know the cholesterol is piling up deeper in your arteries with every snore? Me, I'm going for a healthy walk, followed by a light supper."

A moment later, he was out the door and strolling along a pathway that led through a forest of red cedar and mountain pine. Night was coming on quickly now, and he could hear a barn owl hooting forlornly, way back on one of the ridges that flanked the Inn. The wailing sound filled him with melancholy. "Veronica," he told himself quietly as his solitary footsteps crunched across the pine needles, "I hate to admit it, but I really do miss your sorry --"

"Hello, stranger. How you gettin' by?"

Startled, Clark looked up from his shoe tops to find a slender, hawk-faced old man wearing a gray ponytail blocking the path ahead of him.

“I’ve been better,” said Clark. He stuck out his right hand. “Jim Clark, from Baltimore, Maryland. And if you’re wondering why I’m so far from home, I’ll just tell you flat-out: I’m going to canoe the river. The Muddy Mo. The whole thing. Or at least, I’m going to *try*.”

The elderly stroller gazed at him curiously. “Are you now? The whole thing? Interesting coincidence, Mr. Clark! You probably won’t believe this, but my name is Buffalo Snake Rider. I’m a Lakota Sioux, and I know a thing or two about canoes and rivers.”

Jim could hardly believe his good fortune. “Listen, I could use a good coach, my friend. I’m gonna need all the help I can get!”

Smiling, the Indian nodded at him in the gathering dusk. Was he mocking the white man from Baltimore? “I can tell you that I have canoed many miles of the River, and I have great respect for it and the people who try to conquer it. No one in my tribe would attempt to paddle the entire length to St. Louis, I can assure you of that.”

Clark squinted at him. “Why not?”

“It’s impossible. You will be exhausted within a few days; perhaps you will drown. But I like your courage, my friend. I will build our traditional smoke fire tonight and ask the Great Spirit to protect you from harm and becoming lost on your trip!”

Clark took a closer look at his new friend. Was this guy for real? Could he be trusted? But Buffalo Snake Rider had begun to chuckle by now; he could see that the white man in front of him was full of fear, full of disquiet. “Easy, my new

friend. Let me tell you something of my background; perhaps it will help you to know me better. My ancestors met Lewis and Clark on their expedition in the early 1800s. They were amazed that white men could be so resourceful, so full of courage. What Lewis and Clark did was beyond imagining at that time.”

He looked carefully at his companion, then chuckled again. “Forgive me, I could not help noticing your last name. You are perhaps related to the great explorer, yourself?”

Now it was Clark who laughed. “I only wish,” he said with a sigh. “But I come very a very different gene pool, Mr. Rider. Unlike my illustrious namesake, I have a tendency to stumble now and then. In other words: things don’t always work out the way I plan them.”

The Indian regarded him calmly. “You are afraid of failure? Is that what you are trying to tell me?”

“Yessir, it sure is. And for good reason. It’s like my brother J.D. always used to tell me, whenever I’d mess something up. He’d shake his head and groan: ‘Jimbo, when the good Lord gave out the brains, you thought he said *trains* – and you sure missed yours!’”

Buffalo Snake was gazing at the newcomer as if he’d just arrived from the dark side of the moon. “How’s that, again? You are missing some brains?”

“Sorry,” said Clark. “It’s a white man’s expression.”

“A train-wreck, you say?”

“A lifelong *mess-up*, Mr. Rider. Or at least, that’s what J.D. calls me. It seems that I’m always starting things – *big* things – and then I have trouble finishing

them.” Clark looked at his companion in the last of the fading daylight, and saw confusion boiling in his eye. “Look, I’m fine, okay? No problems! I guess I’m a little scattered, mentally. I’ve had a brutal day, lemme tell ya. First I nearly went *mano-a-mano* with a suicidal deer. That was out on the highway. I actually grazed his hindquarters at about 70 miles an hour. And then, within two hours of the near miss, the one woman in my life gave me the boot. I mean big time. I got a classic ‘Dear John’ letter – and it nearly burned the shellac off my canoe paddle.”

Buffalo Snake blinked calmly at him. “Your woman has turned away from you?”

“In a manner of speaking. She’s shacked up with another guy.”

The Indian sighed unhappily. “This is painful, I’m sure. Yet I have a good feeling about her. I am feeling that you will see her again.”

Clark laughed out loud. It was not a pretty sound. “Not very likely, Mr. Rider. She’s flipped for some sniveling *nerd-nick* who knows how to touch her deepest soul. The guy sounds like Mr. Total Sensitivity, if you know what I mean? He’s warm, he’s thoughtful, he’s insightful – in short, he’s all the things I’ll never be. Compared to the *nerd-nick*, I look like Jack the Ripper with a really bad case of five o’clock shadow.”

“*Nerd-nick?*” said the Indian. “Here I cannot help you, for I do not understand this term. Yet I sense that your heart is good. Mark my words – you will see this fine lady again, and when you least expect it to happen.”

Moaning in his travail, the Clark-man shook his head. “I want to believe you, Buffalo Snake, I really do. But the odds don’t look good. She thinks I don’t

care about her and her little boy, little Henry – but nothing could be further from the truth.’

It was fully dark now, but Clark could still read the Indian’s eyes. They were watching his face. “I wonder if she senses that you fear her,” he said after a bit.

“*Fear her?*” Clark felt a flash of anger zoom through the space between his eyes. Who did this Indian think he *was*? But before he could reply, the man in the ponytail was stepping away from him.

“My friend, I must depart now. But I wish you the greatest luck. I have looked at your boat and you should do very well. Believe me, our birch-bark canoes are certainly no safer nor faster than yours. You are also welcome to take pictures of me and my people who live nearby.

“We are proud of our heritage, and all we ask is that you do us proud. We are not wealthy, but we have pride in ourselves. May the Great Spirit go with you!”

Clark found himself nodding eagerly. He needed friends, at this point in his journey, and he needed them badly.

“Mr. Rider, I most certainly will do my best to show you and your people as representing the great heritage of our country. I, myself, am one-eighth Cherokee and I have great respect for the Sioux people. It’s obvious that you are a truly great representative of the Sioux Nation and the Native American Indians wherever they are.”

Jim followed the old man to his village, where he spent two hours with the Lakota Sioux and even smoked a peace pipe with them, while also sharing their

tasty and tender nutritious meal of beef and potatoes. The friends of Buffalo Snake Rider gathered around Jim and wished him well.

An hour later, he was sitting over a cup of *Dunkin' Donuts Mocha Java* and scratching his muddled head. Cluttered with maps, brochures and piles of scrap paper, the motel room looked as if it had weathered a hurricane. Jim Clark was very good with his hands—especially when they gripped a canoe paddle—but he would not be winning any awards for Planning and Organization. Not in this lifetime, anyway.

“Okay, Jack—here’s the lowdown.” He licked the business end of his pencil once and began scribbling on the yellow legal pad in his lap. “I think we can average five miles an hour, with the help of the currents.”

Jack lifted one eyebrow. *Are you sure about that?*

Jim stared him down. “Hey, fella—those currents run three or four miles an hour, day in and day out. Five miles is a conservative estimate! Anyway, five mph for seven hours each day... he was scribbling...we’re talking about 35 miles or so each day we’re out there on the water.”

Jack lifted one eyebrow and made a dry, coughing sound, after which his human pal could almost hear him thinking: *I assume that estimate doesn’t include any paddling on my part?*

“If you crunch the numbers, it looks like 12 weeks on the Mo, before we finally arrive in St. Louis. That’s pretty ambitious, maybe...but it still allows us one day a week to rest and recuperate. And we’re gonna need it—don’t forget that we gotta

portage the dams and locks ourself, and we're gonna have to hire somebody to haul us over a few of the portages."

He paused for a quick slug of his *Mocha Java*. "But those land-crossings will be the least of our problems, Jack-o. Look, I didn't tell you this before---didn't want to spook you---but we'll be going up against some monster barges and some high-speed powerboats after we leave North Dakota." Now he turned and looked the dog in the eye. "Jack, I want to make something very clear: This little voyage of ours will not be for the faint of heart!"

The canine blinked at him for a moment, then snorted with derision. *I'll be fine, tough guy---I come from a long line of river-explorers. But not sled dogs. As far as I'm concerned, the biggest question mark on that river will be a guy named Clark!*

The World According To Jack

Allow me to introduce myself, please.

I'm Jack. Make no mistake: I'm the beautiful part of the crazy duo that has decided to paddle the entire length of the River. Even though I don't paddle particularly well, I expect to contribute as much as anyone else to the success of the trip. And although I dearly love Jim Clark, I expect to win an Academy Award for pretending to be "interested" in his endless, incredibly boring monologues.

Before I begin setting the record straight about "Jim Clark's Marvelous Missouri River Adventure," however, I'd like to make a brief disclaimer.

I am not responsible for the factual content in that human bozo's narrative of Life Along The Mighty Mo!

With all due respect (he is my master, after all), I must tell you frankly: Jim Clark exaggerates. No, it's worse than that. Jim invents. I'm sorry, but there it is. When it comes to making up stories out of whole cloth, the Big Guy ranks right up there with the nation's major-league bullshit artists – and I'm talking about such top-of-the-line, legendary hornswogglers as P.T. Barnum, Ronald Reagan and the Rev. Billy Graham!

Look, I'm not denying that some of the best times in my six-year life took place while I was hanging out with Jim, Veronica and Little Henry in Baltimore. They took me for runs in the park, where I retrieved thousands of sticks, tennis balls and frisbees (but only when I was in the mood).

Let's face it: I am clearly a major-league leader among frisbee- and tennis ball-catching dogs. And I also happen to be one generous canine, lemme tell ya. Example: During our years together, I often allowed the humans to accompany me on duck and goose hunting excursions along the Chesapeake Bay. We also went pheasant and quail hunting once or twice on game preserves – after Jim shelled out to get me some fine-tuning as a retriever, that is. I wasn't too impressed with his shooting, but boy, did I look good with a pheasant hanging from my jaws!

I don't like to sing my own praises, but there's simply no denying that I was one heck of a hunting dog! Sure, some of my canine acquaintances may be better at pointing game and fetching downed birds than I am – but inevitably, they miss more than they point! They also tend to chew up their birds something fierce. But not this Lab. I find my share of downed fliers quickly, and I bring them home safely every time. And why not? I may get to eat some of those tasty rascals, myself – so why mangle them up before they even start making the rounds in Chef Veronica's kitchen?

Okay, where was I? Oh, yeah – remembering the wonderful times we all spent together. Did we have a blast during our time in the City by the Chesapeake? Ask yourself: Does the Pope eat angel-hair pasta at supper in the Vatican? Henry and I rough-housed often on the plush living room carpet – and I was always careful to let him think he'd had gotten the best of me. Hey, I'm so good at everything I do, it would give Jim an inferiority complex, if I won all the time!

I'm not bragging, you understand, just stating facts – but like all well-bred Labs, I possess incredible stamina in the field and in the water. It doesn't hurt, of course, that I've been blessed with a broad head and muzzle, along with a powerful neck and body. And my webbed feet certainly give me a boost when it comes to swimming. Oh, and have I told you about my IQ? The scientists at Harvard pleaded with me to let them run some tests on my psyche, for their ongoing study (“Genius Canines: Is Their Brilliance Learned, Or Inherited?”), but I put my foot down. I'm a Labrador Retriever, not a guinea pig!

Say, have I told you about my two years with the Baltimore City Police K-9 Crew? I won a dozen citations . . . although there's no denying that I over-reached a few times, especially on crime assignments. You see, locating missing children and Alzheimer's victims (to say nothing of week-old corpses) was a breeze for me – but the challenges I faced while working on undercover drug busts were actually dangerous.

Example: I remember one particularly dicey afternoon when I found myself involved in a shooting standoff with a dangerous thug. John, my squadron leader, had instructed me carefully: “Jack-o, you cover the back door.” That tipped me off to the guy's probable escape route – and when he burst out the door like a racehorse leaving

the starting gate, I leaped on his back and took him to the pavement, sending his gun flying. Bloodied his nose, too. He was squalling like a baby! I kept on top of him – with my perfect teeth bared – until John arrived with his AK47.

They gave me the Bronze Doggy Star, for that one. And it was only the beginning of my career; later, I was even shot at twice. But I never faltered, and I never flinched . . . not even when some dipstick drug addict tried to run me over with his hot car. I stood tall, and refused to budge – and at the last moment the driver hit the wheel and went head-on into a giant billboard advertising Burger King: HAVE IT YOUR WAY!

After my tour with Baltimore’s Finest, I was honorably discharged and given a “debriefing” that trained me to stop using force on human beings. After I demonstrated that I would never again go for anybody’s jugular, they pronounced me “fit for discharge” and advertised me as a potential “family pet.” And it wasn’t long before I was settled in happily with Veronica, Little Henry, and their somewhat slow-witted live-in companion, a gentleman named “Clark.”

The rest, as we like to say, is “canine history.”

All in all, I believe I’m prepared – mentally, spiritually and in terms of basic motor skills – for our upcoming 2,540-mile adventure on the Missouri.

It was time to sink or swim. Time to face the Moment of Truth!

Standing knee-deep in an icy current, the bold explorer and his canine lieutenant eyeballed the vast expanse of river that lay before them. It was a cool, perfectly blue-sky morning in the middle of spring, with a porcelain sky gleaming above and a few puffy white clouds drifting past the golden eye of the sun.

Observing all this, Jim Clark wagged his hardwood canoe paddle and laughed out loud.

“This is it, Lieutenant Jack: we’re off and running. Please note for the record that we launched at precisely 8:03 on the morning of May 15, --after a hearty breakfast of eggs, bacon, sausage, toast and coffee!”

The dog did not respond, however. Turning, Jim quickly read the disapproval in his fellow explorer’s eye: *Sausage and bacon, was it? I seem to recall some dry dog food poured from a dusty bag.*

But the human adventurer refused to be guilt-tripped on this august occasion. “Will you stop complaining all the time, you four-legged wimp? We’ve got some serious decisions to make, starting right now.” He gazed uneasily at the over-loaded canoe. “Jeez, I sure hope I packed this sucker right. And what about that waterproof video camera I mounted in the bow? Do you think it will hold—or am I going to wind up fishing it out of the drink?”

Jack withheld comment. Ignoring his master, the irked Retriever gathered himself carefully and then went airborne. A moment later, he was perched on his seat in the bow and frowning darkly at the boss. *Well? Are you going to stand on that riverbank all morning, or what?*

Moving cautiously, Jim nosed the slender craft into the edge of the river current, then eased aboard. A moment later, the two of them were gliding slowly toward the great American metropolis of St. Louis, some 2,500 miles distant. Jim felt a wave of euphoria sweep over him; they were finally en-route! “I wish I had a

bottle of champagne, Jack, so I could smash it against the stern! Really, I feel like giving a speech!”

I'm warning you, pal – you start making speeches and I'm overboard.

Already, they were gaining speed. The river – one of several snow-fed streams that combined to form the headwaters of the Mighty Mo – was famous for its rocks and its swirling, foam-crested whirlpools. And it didn't take Jim long to find out why. Not 200 yards distant, the first rapids were already racing toward them. Like wind-whipped ocean surf at the height of a storm, the angry waters rumbled and churned, boomed like a rapid-fire cannon against the rising sun. For a moment, Clark felt a blast of actual fear.

“Holy cow, Jack, hang onto your jockstrap. We're about to take a ride over Niagara!”

“Lean, Jack! Lean! Stay away from that big rock!”

Which rock? They're all over!

“You're getting me wet, Jack. Keep us straight and put the nose straight through the V's, helmsman.”

Jim could feel his heart thumping wildly. He heard a loud, slapping sound – he'd almost lost his hat to a hemlock branch. Ducking away from the blow, he struggled to maintain his balance in the slender craft. The almost-industry vessel pitched forward and side to side, as it struck one huge rock after another, then bottomed out in a series of deep-rapid waves.

Jim's paddle was moving at eye-blurring speed now, and the slender shaft spun like a human-powered propeller as he fought to maintain stability first on one

side and then the other. A kayak paddle might have worked better, he thought – but at last he was able to make some adjustments in direction, in order to keep the canoe running parallel with the water . . . a critical requirement, if he hoped to remain afloat. Suddenly exuberant, he hollered through the flying spray: “I love this!”

And then it happened.

Without warning, a huge, flat rock – invisible in the boiling foam – suddenly forced the canoe sideways, directly into another rock-strainer. A moment later they were airborne, en route to capsizing.

“Over we go, Jack! Ooooh, boy! Whee – who put the ice in the water?” He gasped as the gelid current pulled him under, then shot him like a human cork high into the bright sunlight. The rapids were frigid, brutally cold, even though he wore a skin-tight wet suit designed to keep a thin layer of water warmed by his body trapped next to his skin.

Clinging to his paddle, the big man clawed his way to the trailing painter rope . . . got it! But then a rock walloped his shoulder, and he was underwater again. Up and down he went in the icy water – just like the clown in the booth at the County Fair – *25 Cents, Dunk Bozo The Clown!* – and after half a minute or so, he realized that he was actually fighting for his life.

But at last the world righted itself. Blessedly, the line of rapids had played out . . . had dumped him in a shallow, sandy enclave beneath a line of budding cottonwood trees. He sat there for a few moments, numb with shock. He looked down – the back of his left hand was a ragged mess of torn skin, still oozing blood.

Then he remembered his companion.

“Where are you, Jack?” Panicked, he staggered to his shivering feet. “Jack, can you hear me? Where did you go?”

A moment later, he spotted a flash of black. Amazingly, the dog was already loafing along the riverbank, not ten yards distant. “Jack!” he roared, his voice breaking with anger and relief, “what do you think you’re doing?”

The dog regarded him thoughtfully. *I’m taking care of Number One, Bozo. You’re on your own, my man – after all, you wrecked the thing!*

Armed with his great strength and webbed feet, the powerful swimmer had paddled directly to the nearest shore. There he’d kept pace with Jim along the bank – whining, watching, and listening for commands.

“I can’t bbbbee-bee-lieve I let this happen,” Jim shouted to his loyal canine. “What was I thinking, Jack?”

Even from a distance of 20 yards, Jim could hear the brute thinking out loud: *That’s the entire problem here, Jimbo; apparently, no thinking took place at all.*

But Jim fell silent, after that; his instincts and training had taken over by now. Still floating on his back, he hovered just upstream of the tossing and spinning boat. “Whoa, here! We’re out of control!” He winced as the fluorescent-yellow painter rope sliced into one hand, and did his best to hang onto his paddle with the other. Meanwhile, he was eyeing the water-loaded canoe. A veteran paddler, he understood all too well that allowing himself to be caught between the boat and the rocks meant would mean serious injury – and maybe even death from crushing or drowning.

Still bobbing on the current, he gave himself stern instructions out loud. “Stay on your back, Clark. Keep your feet in front of you downstream. Let go if need be, but do not get downstream of the angry boat. Work hard, big man!”

Just when he was about to let go of the painter rope and seek safety on a rock or on the shore, the swamped canoe wedged between several taller rocks and stopped dead.

It did his heart good to see that Jack was still prancing along the shoreline, not ten yards removed from his human partner. “Good boy, Jack! Stay! I’ll be there as soon as I can empty the boat and drag my sorry butt over there.”

He went to work with the bailing can. A white-tail fawn, still young enough to be carrying his beautiful stripes, watched from the shoreline, as oblivious to Jack and Jim as he was to danger. After half of an hour of steady bailing, most of the canoe was dry again.

“Let’s see what the damage is to my home.” Jack watched and paced anxiously along the shoreline, as Jim tallied up the results of the mishap. “Okay . . . the largest dry bag with my tent, sleeping bag and pad, backpack stove, campstool and small semi-automatic rifle – it’s still strapped in and dry. Good deal. And my two smaller dry bags containing food and personal items, clothing, space-age blanket and clothing are still sealed and tied to the thwarts.”

Indeed, he had been very lucky. Everything looked dry as toast, and there seemed to be no damage. In addition, the spare single and the double-bladed paddle and aluminum canoe cart were still tied to the boat thwarts, and Jim’s favorite paddle was in his hand.

“Hang on, Jack. I’ll be there as soon as I can empty the water from the boat and load her up again!”

The dog said nothing – but his expression spoke volumes. *Man, you’re slower than a herd of overweight turtles. Get with it!*

At last the human explorer managed to walk the canoe in close enough for Jack to reach it. “Okay, Big Guy, we’re back in business. Hey, look up there – all those circling vultures have disappeared!”

Really? No more vultures hovering over us? Is that supposed to boost my morale, Jim? Somehow, I don’t feel encouraged.

“Yeah, we’ve really been lucky today. We didn’t lose a single piece of gear – and if things went as planned, the video camera took pictures throughout the entire episode. Wait until *National Geographic* gets a look at our footage – we’re sure to nail down a Pulitzer!”

But Jack chose to ignore these bright pronouncements. Moving warily – *how long before I’m subjected to take another dunking?* – he clambered back into the canoe and hunkered way down, until he was almost hugging the deck.

A moment later, Jim was also on board, no worse for wear, and the two bold

He estimated the speed of the current to be at least four miles an hour. With his adrenalin still blazing, the veteran canoeist paddled the 15 miles through breathtaking scenic mountains to his camping destination in less than three hours. In spite of the heavy paddle work, he couldn’t help noticing the stark beauty of the terrain. Framed by the indigo-blue of the distant crags, and punctuated here and there by breeze-tossed stands of white pine and paper birch, the landscape might have been

lifted directly from a nature canvas by Millet. And the title? How about *River Mist? The Lone Paddler?* Or maybe *Silent Boatman, With Dog?*

Was it any wonder that Meriwether Lewis of Lewis and Clark – as described in Steven Ambrose’s *Undaunted Courage* – had reported on the mountains, flowers and trees of this amazing region with such breathless admiration?

Only once during their hurried progress did Jim pull off and speak to a fine looking gentleman and his female companion. “I am Oglala Lakota of the Sioux Nation,” said the male half of the duo. “It is important to identify us as Running Deer, an Oglala Lakota. We are proud of our history. We helped Lewis and Clark in their expedition.” Jim snapped a dozen photos, then turned to thank his new friends.

“I’ll send you a couple of these pictures if you give me your name and address, Mr. Deer.”

Soon they were back on the water, and once again racing toward their campground. All at once, the captain of the tiny craft found himself to be ravenous. And why not? Jim had eaten only two power energy bars and given Jack one before pushing off, soon after recovering from the spill. But now his blood sugar was rising in revolt.

“Jack, I don’t know about you, but I’m getting some kind of hungry. I could eat the hindquarters off a thousand-pound rhino, and then line up for seconds!”

Really? Sounds delightful . . . but I think I’ll go with a rack of charcoal-broiled baby back ribs, en brochette.

As they covered the last mile of their journey toward dinner, Jim reflected on the day's events. He was extremely grateful for the *Tripper* – and also for Jack's nervy, level-headed performance. "This boat's entire capacity of 1,100 pounds must have been exceeded today," he told his boat-mate as they passed under a covered bridge and shot into a clear, wide stretch of gleaming water, "yet it has somehow managed to keep its shape!" He chuckled out loud, remembering the bright red brochure he and Jack had pored over at the dealer's big lot in Northeast Baltimore: "The *Tripper* – it's what wilderness canoeing is all about!"

For once, an advertising blurb had turned out to be accurate.

Calmer now, the captain of the Muddy Mo watercraft did his best to mend fences with the miffed canine.

"Jack, stop pointing your nose in the air like that. I told you I was sorry, didn't I? Okay, I'll admit there was no excuse for turning over in the rapids like that. Hey, it just *happened*, fella!"

The dog was still looking away. His affronted gaze reminded Jim of photos he'd seen in National Geographic: *The Bleak World of the Arctic Tundra*.

"Look at me, Jack. Hey, it's not like I wasn't *concentrating*, you heartless canine! I could understand your attitude, if I'd been messing around out there on the water. But I was giving it everything I had today – and your sanctimonious attitude is starting to tick me off."