

## soul searching

# Judgement Day On Gabimichigami



□ by Brand Frentz

Pete stood just back from the edge and looked out across the surging waves, a stocky figure in a heavy red lumberjack shirt against a background of menacing gray clouds and frothing water. He pulled his ball cap down tighter against the wind. A gull down the beach hopped up in the air and was blown backwards, then stabilized itself and headed across.

The surface of Lake Gabimichigami was rough; big waves crashed straight in, running over his boots and up the sand beach all the way to the trees. The lake was a mile across. A line of dark pines marking the far shore was blurred in the fading light and wave-blown spray.

It was late May. He'd been in the BWCAW for five days and had seen only two other canoes. An hour earlier as he passed the last campsite, Pete had wondered what Gabimichigami would look like. He had stopped for a quick snack of cheese, crackers and apple and could have made camp, but he had pushed on. Gabimichigami was one of his favorite lakes, and he had expected the wind to quiet down as the day waned.

Just the opposite had happened. He glanced at his watch, 5 p.m., and the wind was howling out of the southeast. Studying the water surface, he saw no canoes, no people... nothing but whitecaps racing at him.

His solo canoe sat next to the water with the big pack under a tarp. Pete sat down on a log at the back of the beach, broke off a stalk of grass and began chewing it. He studied the

waves, shaking his head slowly. He had many years of canoeing experience and powerful muscles. But he did not like his options now: backtrack an hour (he always resisted that) or cross a big, dangerous lake.

He was tired. It had been a long day, 20 miles with six portages, including steep climbs up and down mean rocky trails. At the far south end of the lake lay a protected bay with a campsite that would be quiet even in this weather. That was where he wanted to be. Pete looked toward the bay, studying the map and setting his mind. Quartering against the east wind—the only way to handle these waves—would take him southeast.

He checked his clothing and gear. Everything was buttoned up, his ball cap snugged down. He spit out the stem of grass, took a long drink of water from his bottle, then got up and went back to the boat, the picture of an old voyageur. Shaking his head again, nervously laughing at himself, he patted the canoe and looked out at the broad expanse of froth.

*Molly wouldn't like this, he thought. She would be dead set against trying to cross in these waves. But she's always cautious. And I am too, when she's along. Never mind, I've seen worse. Here we go.*

Just getting underway was a challenge. He aimed the canoe straight out, pushed it halfway into the water as a fierce wave crashed by, then gave a hard

shove and jumped into his seat to beat the next incoming wave. He grabbed his paddle and pulled hard. The waves caused the boat to lurch, but his quick strong strokes moved him forward. He set the boat at an angle of about 30 degrees to the waves and picked out his marker: a barely noticeable dip in the treeline on the distant shore that probably indicated the bay he wanted.

Each wave, as it passed, first turned the canoe to the right and then pulled it back hard to the left. His body instinctively shifted with the movement. He paddled hard on the left, fighting the wind that seemed to be sucking the bow in. Pete watched each oncoming wave intently, fighting to keep the boat on line. The cold spray in the air was settling into his clothes. Water sloshed over the side and ran into the bottom. He moved ahead slowly.

A small object in the air above the water ahead caught his eye. It was the gull, fighting the wind too and making no headway. It was confusing; Pete was paddling hard and the waves were rushing by, but he and the gull appeared to be suspended in place. Suddenly the bird let out a series of scratchy calls, wheeled around and shot by downwind at a frightening speed. In an instant it was gone.

"Hey, buddy, maybe I should join you," Pete muttered. But he could not turn around and race back to shore. The waves were too big to turn safely. He had made his choice. He

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clenched his teeth and paddled ahead.

The water in the bottom of the canoe was an inch deep, beginning to slosh back and forth as the boat bounced. Bailing was out of the question; he had to keep paddling, holding course and pushing ahead. His eyes went back and forth from the oncoming waves to the distant shore.

*A third of the way there. There's too much water in the canoe, it's getting hard to control,* he thought. Watching the waves slap the gunwale he pictured himself going in—it would be hard to survive in those cold waves. He wondered if he had ever seen worse conditions. Nothing to do but paddle faster, get across and out of the wind! He leaned into the paddle and gave it all he had, trying to keep the windward side high as the waves broke. But water kept coming over the gunwale.

The wind wailed like a banshee. Shwoosh! His hat flew off and was gone. Spray slapped his face. Pete swore under his breath, *this was a mistake.* He looked down at his legs braced on the bottom, his thick thighs, his powerful hands clutching the paddle. *I've got to make it,* he thought.

The far shore was getting harder to see. He looked back and a wave struck the left gunwale hard, splashing up into his face and running down his neck. He felt the boat tipping up and up. Almost over, but he leaned and braced hard with his paddle. The canoe leveled out as the water came swirling in. It soaked his feet and pants and added to the pool on the bottom. He was shocked, scared and adrenaline pumped into his system.

There was too much water in the canoe, and looking to the far shore he could see he was no more than halfway across. His body began to shake, but he jerked and caught himself. He

rammed his paddle down in the water and pulled still harder. He paddled faster and deeper and let out a shout. "Here I come!" He could feel the boat moving ahead, even in the chaotic waves.

Mariners tell stories about the mysterious "ninth wave," which is larger than the others for no apparent reason. The ninth wave has claimed many boats. Just after Pete began to pick up speed his canoe was struck violently by a much larger wave. It raised him up, and despite his mad paddling, flipped the boat over. A gunwale cracked his forehead and blood spurted out. In two seconds Pete was in the water with the boat upside down next to him, bouncing and splashing in the tormented, icy waters of Gabimichigami.

His PFD held him up, and he instinctively grabbed for the canoe. After his grip slipped off the smooth hull several times, he was able to work his way to the bow and crawl up onto the boat a little. But when the waves tipped it, he slid off. There was nothing to hold on to. Twice more he tried and fell off. A wave hit him in the face. Pete came up choking, water in his windpipe, his gashed forehead stinging. He grabbed desperately and caught the bow rope in his left hand. He grabbed it tightly.

From the minute the canoe turned over, Pete had acted on instinct, without thought. Now, holding the rope and fighting for breath, he tried to take stock of his situation.

Righting the canoe was impossible in the waves. Swimming to shore was out of the question. He couldn't hold onto the canoe. All he could do was hold the rope tied to the boat. The wind and waves would push them back to the shore he had come from, but very slowly. The furious waves and cold temperature would sap his strength quickly.



*How long can I last?* he thought desperately, clinging to the rope as the waves crashed over him.

The friction of the wet rope on his skin quickly rubbed his hands raw. Trying to stop the pain, he wrapped the rope several times around his right wrist and clutched the end. The bobbing canoe kept jerking his right arm hard. It stung painfully, but there was nothing else he could do.

Pete was badly chilled and deeply tired, but he had seen the shore. An image of Molly's sweet face twisted in terror crossed his mind. Again and again the water splashed into his gasping throat and he choked and gagged frantically. He was being dragged like a fish on a stringer, pulled under every time the boat lurched forward with a cresting wave. Pete was fading but fighting.

The wind whistled, waves came crashing by and the canoe floated up and down in the maelstrom, pulling Pete along. He was moving slowly toward the shore where he had started, making painful and dangerously slow progress, towed by an empty canoe.

A couple happened onto the beach Pete had departed an hour earlier. Holding his hat down with both hands, the tall sandy-haired young man shook his head, "Wow, look at that! That's no place for us, Kay. We should've stopped at that last campsite on Agamok Lake. I've never seen waves like that on Gabimichigami."

"Yeah," the woman replied in a husky voice, looking out. They both stood facing the lake, studying the water and the shore beyond.

Bill spotted the canoe first. "Hey, look out there," he said, pointing. "What's that red thing? Jeez, I think it's a boat upside down."

Kay looked out, squinting and directing her gaze. "Oh,

my God, Bill!" she said in a frightened voice. "Is that somebody in the water behind it? Look. See what I mean?"

He reached into his jacket pocket and took out his small binoculars. After a minute he said, "Yeah, I think he's got hold of a line. He's getting bounced all over. That guy doesn't have a chance. Here, look."

She took the glasses and fixed them on the small object tossing behind the canoe. "What can we do?"

"There's nothing we can do," Bill said grimly. They stood silently, and the wind howled into the void. Their large green tandem canoe was upside down on the beach behind them, packs set alongside. Kay walked slowly over, still looking out at the capsized boat. Her stocking cap was pulled down over her ears, but dark hair came out underneath and flapped wildly in the wind. Bill stood by the water watching Pete's canoe.

"What time is it, Bill?" she yelled over the wind.

"Six-thirty. Dark in 45 minutes."

"We're all in this together. We should try it, try to go get him," Kay announced in a voice lacking confidence. "What do you think?"

"No! We'd all drown. We've never been in waves like that," he screamed. "I'm not throwing my life away and neither are you." They were silent again. The wind and waves continued to howl and rumble.

"Let me have those," Kay commanded, taking the glasses. "I want to see the guy." She centered the binoculars on the empty canoe. It was a quarter mile out, bobbing and bouncing with a tight line out the back where Pete was being dragged.

"Bill, we have to do it, we just have to," Kay spoke slowly. He gave a nervous look and didn't answer. She waited,



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then spoke again. "Let's go." Neither moved; both looked down. "We'll never feel right if we don't." She got up and went over to the boat. Bill continued standing by the water, slowly shaking his head.

"No way, Kay. There's no way. That guy should never have been out there in the first place. We don't owe him anything," he said, growing agitated. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shouted into her face, "I won't do it and neither will you. We're not going." They glared fiercely at each other, his angry brown eyes against her frightened blue eyes. Bill was not going to let this woman lead them into that bedlam.

"You listen," she said, pushing his hands away and stepping back. "That guy is drowning. You know he can't make it. I don't care how he got there. I won't stand by and watch. What kind of people are we? It's not right, and you know it."

She stared hard at him, hands planted firmly on her hips, waiting. Bill looked at her angrily, wanting to yell.

Kay moved slowly toward him, looking into his eyes. She reached out, took his hand and said quietly, "I need your help, Bill. There's no time to lose."

Bill looked away and then nodded. In a voice that did not conceal his fear he said, "You're right. Let's go." They grabbed their paddles and tightened their PFDs, quickly set the canoe into a breaking wave, and Kay hopped into the bow. As the wave passed, Bill gave a firm shove and jumped in. Paddling furiously, they began moving toward the empty canoe.

Again and again they bounced high and dropped low. The canoe slid sideways. It dipped to one side and then the other. Water splashed in. They were quickly soaked and cold. But they were strong, inspired paddlers. Bill put all

his strength into every stroke and they held their own, moving slowly and anxiously toward the capsized canoe. The taut line was still visible behind it, but Pete was not.

As they fought their way toward the empty canoe, both Bill and Kay mentally worked through rescue scenarios. It would be hard to get the guy into their boat in such heavy waves. A lot depended on what condition he was in. They would soon know.

Pete was scarcely aware of his situation, fighting to surface and gasping for air when he could. His eyes had been closed for some time; there was no feeling in his body. He was freezing and tired and wanted to sleep. He had no sense of where he was. His brain was shutting down.

Kay, in the bow of the rescue canoe, shouted over the wind. "Hold on, hold on, we're coming! We'll help you! Hold on!" they were close now, 30 feet, and could clearly see the body being dragged behind the canoe by an extended arm.

"How do we get him in the boat?" Bill yelled over the wind, slowing up and trying to hold position.

"I don't know," Kay shouted back. "Get close and see if he can talk. If he can help, maybe we can load him."

Working their paddles carefully, they drew closer, upwind from the floating body. The waves continued to slap at them, and they rocked heavily from side to side as they worked slowly forward until Kay was just a few feet from Pete. He was still gasping air sporadically as his head came up.

Kay gasped when she saw Pete's face—a death's head with the long jagged gash on his forehead, his closed eyes and lifeless expression. At the top of her voice she shouted,

"Can you hear me? Can you hear me?" No response except a faint moan, but she could see him gasp weakly for air.

"Can you reach him, Kay?" Bill called.

"I don't know," Kay muttered, concentrating. She rose slightly and reached down with both hands, taking hold of Pete's left arm. She began pulling and immediately realized that Pete, in his water soaked clothes, was heavier than she expected. Suddenly the drowning man's other arm rose out of the water, gripped her wrist hard and sank back. Kay was thrown off balance. Bill braced the canoe to avoid capsizing as Kay was pulled overboard with a scream.

Hitting the cold water, Kay thrashed her arms and legs and broke free from Pete's grip. He was now choking and sputtering. She yelled, "Get me out." Pete's body was floating face down away from Kay. She pulled toward the canoe. Teeth chattering, face stricken, she yelled, "Get that gunwale over here! Fast!"

"You have to get upwind," Bill shouted. "Get in on that side. Don't tip us." Kay swam to the other side and grabbed the gunwale by the bow seat. Raising herself in the water, she reached across and gripped the far side with both hands. Her wet clothes dragged on the gunwale as she slowly pulled herself in. Bill was desperately mixing paddle strokes and braces in the stern.

She was back in the canoe, soaked and chilled, but seated. "Are you okay?" Bill asked. Kay, shaking heavily, turned and gave him a faint wordless smile. Taking her paddle she looked for Pete. His body, still attached by the rope, was following the red canoe a short ways off. They were a couple of hundred yards from shore, where the trees and brush bent and waved in the wailing wind.





*Would you risk your own safety to rescue a fellow paddler? Learn how to handle capsized canoes. You'll never regret trying to help.*

"We can't load him, Kay. There's only one thing left. Get past his line, to where I can get hold of it. We'll tow him in." He gave a strong stroke as a wave hit them broadside. "Keep us straight. I'll get him. Hit it!"

Kay worked her paddle furiously to keep them straight and away from Pete's body. The green canoe pulled ahead until Bill could almost reach the line holding Pete. "Get me closer," he yelled and Kay did. Bill reached out to the other canoe and loosened the rope. It fell into the water, just beyond his hand. The canoes began to separate. With a desperate grab, Bill caught the rope and quickly reattached it to his stern.

"Okay, got him. Let's go! Hurry, I don't think he's breathing." Both stroked furiously toward the shore.

They quickly reached shallow water, a chaos of breaking waves. Kay jumped out, waist deep in the water and Bill followed. Letting the boat go, they took hold of Pete as gently as they could, untied him and pulled him to shore. Bill quickly trampled the brush flat and made a place where they set the heavy body down. He was still breathing!

They snuggled on either side and pressed Pete tight with their bodies and pulled their jackets over him. They wind whistled above them, and the gull perched on a rock nearby stretched its wings. Pete groaned softly, and shifted his weight—safe on shore.

"This is one tough customer," Bill said.

A few hours later, in the dark, they all sat around a warm fire in dry clothes. The

wind had finally calmed. Bill had heated some oatmeal and after eating, they all felt better.

He looked at Pete and asked softly, "What were you doing out there?"

Pete shook his head slowly. "I don't know. I thought I could make it. It seemed like a big wave hit me... I guess it was really just bad judgment. I took a chance and lost. What about you? Why did you go out in those waves?"

Bill sighed and admitted, "I was against it, but Kay made me do it."

"Well, I'm glad you did." He looked at Bill and Kay, "You saved my life."

"You can thank her," Bill smiled.

Kay said, "Don't thank me. We all made it through this together." □