

It Happened

by Barry R. Taylor

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The story of Bruce and Amelia begins fifty years before it began. It begins with a beetle. It happened one summer day that this beetle was flying through the old forest along the bank of the river, following the tingle in its antennae that told it where to go. It landed on the trunk of a century-old elm tree, whose roots thrust downward in a dense tangle right on the river bank, and whose high-arching branches hung far over the water. The beetle folded its wings beneath its elytra and used its serrated mouth parts to bore a hole in the bark of the tree. It burrowed a neat gallery in the sap wood, laid out like a subdivision: a long tunnel down the middle with a series of short side branches along its length. The beetle laid a few eggs at the end of each cul-de-sac because that is what this species of beetle always did. The beetle itself did no harm to the elm tree. The tree was no more troubled by the beetle than a man might be annoyed by a mosquito.

It happened that this particular beetle was carrying a fungus. The fungal spores came out with the eggs, sensed that this was a good place to be, and began growing into a mesh of fine filaments. Over the next twenty years the fungus extended up and down the phloem of the tree, clogging the passages and starving the leaves. The elm tree was strong, and well supplied with water from the floodplain soil, so it survived for a long time. Eventually the tree succumbed to a combination of disease and old age.

The dead tree stood on the river bank for many years after its death, collapsing in slow motion. Over time its leafless boughs surrendered to wind and storms and snow until nothing remained but a house-high stump with a spray of rotting branches like dead flowers in a vase.

On a pleasant Sunday afternoon in June, a young man named Bruce came down to the river to go fishing. Bruce was a slender, easy-going fellow who believed in taking life as it came. It happened that one of the fallen boughs from the dead elm tree was oriented so as to make a convenient seat. It was this wooden stool, along with the deep, fish-filled pool in the river nearby, that drew Bruce to this spot to go fishing. He fished here regularly.

It was indeed a fine day to be outside. The sky was nearly cloudless. The June sun was warm but lacked the oppressive heat of midsummer. The forest was painted in the vivid green of

spring leaves, speckled here and there with early wildflowers. The river was still running at its spring high; the water flowed clear and deep beside the roots of the old elm tree.

Bruce set his creel on the grassy bank and pulled his fishing rod off his shoulder. He hummed an old pop tune as he set up the line and slid bait onto the hook. He was generally unconcerned about fishing licences and seasons and all that. Bruce came down to the river when he needed food for dinner. A licence to go fishing struck him as an absurdity, like asking permission to pick berries or collect mushrooms.

Bruce lived an uncluttered life. He had a degree in computer science which he seldom used because the dreary routine of a work day did not appeal to him. He lived in a tidy mobile home along a gravel road not far from the river. He aspired to nothing better. The small house suited his simple and solitary life. It held his books and his computers and was easy to quit should he decide to take off and spend a year working his way around Scandinavia. Bruce was prone to decisions like that. He lived alone happily enough. A romantic entanglement might jeopardize his free and easy lifestyle.

When he was ready for his first cast Bruce stood up and stepped away from the elm stump. He flicked the rod back and then forward to draw out the line and drop the hook in the water. Bruce was an experienced angler, yet his first cast did not go well. On the back throw, the hook flew up too high. Perhaps the wind caught it. The hook struck one of the remnant branches protruding from the elm stump and buried itself in the rotting wood. When Bruce cast the line forward a second later, instead of throwing the line into the river, he began to pull on the branch.

It happened that this particular branch was almost ready to fall. It was holding on only by a thin strip of wood along the bottom. The next wind storm would surely bring it down. When Bruce tugged on the line, the last bit of decaying wood gave out. The branch became a log suspended in space, responded to gravity and plummeted into the river with a great splash. Bruce was drenched by a wave of cold river water. Before he could recover, the strong current of the river began carrying the fallen log downstream. Bruce was still holding on to the fishing rod. The line tightened again and Bruce found himself being yanked into the water with barely time to shout "Whoa!" Caught by surprise, he submerged completely. He thrashed about under water, found the log with one hand and pulled himself toward it. He got his head above water, but now he was entangled in the fishing line. He used both hands to try to pull himself up onto the log.

Now it happened that this particular log, being formed from the base of a main branch of the tree, was substantial in diameter and almost perfectly round. When Bruce tried to pull himself up on top of it, the centre of gravity changed and the log rolled over, plunging Bruce back into the water. A second try, and a third, produced the same shocking result. Worse, the turning of the log repeatedly wrapped the fishing line around Bruce and the log. In less than a minute Bruce found himself drifting downstream with the log, thoroughly lashed to it by his right leg and right arm, with the fishing rod dangling behind like a fish tail. He managed to pull himself up onto the log a little, so he wasn't entirely submerged, but any further effort induced the log to roll again. So he floated on down the river, half in and half out of the water, cold and wet and quite stuck.

A short way down the river, two young women were enjoying the June sunshine, oblivious to Bruce and his peril. Cheryl and her friend Amelia were strolling along a broad trail that wound through the old forest. It was one of a network of walking trails maintained by local volunteers. They walked here often. It happened that on this particular Sunday they encountered a deep puddle along their usual route. Since Cheryl was wearing sandals and Amelia was in running shoes, they decided to take the other path, down by the river.

Cheryl was explaining something as the pair walked along. "Mel, it's been six months. He's not coming back. It's time to move on." She was a strong woman in blue jeans and a T-shirt. Long brown hair waved in a pony tail beneath her ball cap.

"He said he'd come back," Amelia insisted. "After the cruise. He promised!"

"He lied. Or maybe he changed his mind. Either way, his boat would have returned weeks ago and he's not here. Mel, face it, he got scared and he ran away. Men do that. They do that to you, anyway. You scare men away."

"Do I really?" Amelia wondered. "Am I scary? Is that why Tom left?" She didn't look scary. Amelia had blonde hair that tended to run wild and enormous blue eyes. She was wearing an ankle-length summer dress that shifted in the breeze as she walked.

Cheryl sighed. "No, you're not scary, Mel. You're just – too much you sometimes is all. You're all poetry and wildflowers and starry nights and Victorian novels. And your gorgeous too, which doesn't help. I think that's why guys are always buzzing around you. But after a while they don't know how to deal with it. They want to talk about politics and you want to talk

about Jane Austin. You make your own jam. You sing to your rose garden. I think men get confused. So they leave. That's my theory anyway. Maybe Tom just got restless."

Amelia was about to respond when a new voice interrupted. "Help! Somebody help me! Help!" The women looked up to see a log drifting down the spring-swollen river, with a man clinging to one side. Bruce had managed to slither half on top of the log, at least partly above the water. He waved with his free hand at the two women by the bank, to get their attention. The action shifted his centre of gravity and the log rolled him into the water again. By now Bruce had been dunked more times than a clown at a county fair.

Cheryl and Amelia took in the sight. "He's in real trouble!" Amelia cried.

Cheryl was quick. "Take off your dress," she said.

"What!"

"No time to explain. Quick, take it off."

Amelia shucked off her dress, revealing her firm body in peach-coloured underwear. Cheryl grabbed the dress and waded into the river. She tied one sleeve to a low-hanging branch. "Come on," she said to her hesitating friend. "I'll hold you, you wade out. Quickly!"

Amelia dashed down the bank and into the cold water. Her sport shoes slipped on the rocky bottom. She took Cheryl's hand and kept walking out. The water came up past her waist. Almost at once the current was ready to lift her away. Cheryl extended Amelia's long dress like a rope, giving them a little more reach.

Bruce and his log were almost on top of them. "Take my hand!" Amelia shouted. Bruce reached out with his free hand and barely managed to grab hers as he passed by. The log swung around downstream, threatening to pull all three of them into the river. The women pulled back. They made their way, step by struggling step, toward the shore. The river fought them all the way. Amelia's dress threatened to tear apart. Only when the log was quite near shore did the current relent. When they were finally both in the shallows Cheryl let go of the dress and helped her friend hold the log.

"There's a knife in my belt," Bruce said. "I can't reach it. Use it to cut the line." Amelia fumbled around until she found the knife. It was sharp. She slashed the fishing line in three places. At once Bruce came free of the log and tumbled into the water yet again. A moment later he stood up, streaming water like a sea-creature from a cheap horror film. The log floated away down the river.

“Thank you!” he exclaimed, as he climbed up onto the mossy bank. He stepped onto the path to shake water out of his clothing. Amelia retrieved her dress and put it back on. All three of them were wet and muddy and out of breath.

“We’ll head back to the cottage and get cleaned up,” Cheryl suggested. “It’s not far. Oh, I’m Cheryl, this is Amelia.”

“Bruce,” Bruce said, sweeping wet hair out of his face. “I can’t thank you enough. I honestly thought I was going to drown out there.” He pulled off his boots to drain out the water.

“What happened?” Cheryl asked.

Bruce briefly explained how he came to be drifting down the river attached to a floating log. Cheryl was sympathetic. Unexpectedly, Amelia started laughing. Her laughter floated through the forest like a flock of singing birds. “I’m, I’m sorry,” she gasped, between fits of giggles. “It’s not funny, I know. It’s just that – you were floating down the river – tied to a log – with your own fishing line!” She erupted into another long quake of laughter. Cheryl grinned.

Bruce did his best to look dignified while sopping wet. “It happened,” he said. “It wasn’t funny to me.”

Then it happened. His gaze fully landed on Amelia, who was still giggling. Bruce found himself looking into those bottomless blue eyes. He saw the pain and the joy that lived there, the passion, the quirks and the poetry. He heard her laughter and knew in that moment she was laughing not at him but at the incongruity of life. He didn’t speak again for a long, long time. At last he whispered, “Oh, no.”

“What? What’s the matter?” Cheryl was concerned.

Bruce was still gazing at Amelia. “You,” he said. “You are the problem.” It was an accusation. “You’ve ruined everything, don’t you see? You are the end of my world; the apocalypse; the exploding sun. You are Armageddon and Ragnarok. There is no walking away from you now, no going back. My old life is over. This morning there was me and I was doing fine. Now it’s all you. Those eyes, that voice, that laughter. You have me.”

Amelia stared back at him, wide-eyed. “No one has ever spoken to me that way,” she whispered. “Why do you look so sad?”

He heaved a great sigh. “You are everything I have been avoiding my whole life. You are adulthood and responsibility, sobriety, regular habits, a steady job. You are a joint chequing account, mortgage payments, savings plans and fixing the plumbing. You are Christmas cards

and lawn mowers and gardening on weekends.” His spoke in a voice of abject resignation, as a man might explain his terminal diagnosis. “What did you say your name was?”

“Amelia.”

He nodded. “Even your name is pretty. Of course it is.” Now he sounded almost bitter.

“What?” Cheryl interjected. “What are you talking about? Did that log hit you on the head?”

“It doesn’t have to be like that!” Amelia blurted. “We can make our own way, can’t we? We can break all the rules. Or better yet, make our own. All I want is someone who won’t run away when I start quoting Byron. Someone who will help me make pickles, and take in a stray cat. I don’t care about all that other stuff.” She spoke with open honesty, standing on a forest trail in her ruined dress and muddy shoes. Bruce was dripping everywhere. He and Amelia were still looking at each other, Cheryl and the outside world seemingly forgotten.

“Would you spend three weeks cycling around The Netherlands?” Bruce demanded.

“We can leave tomorrow,” Amelia replied.

“Backpacking in the Rockies, or maybe the West Coast Trail?”

“Always wanted to do that.”

“Spend a summer visiting every jazz festival in eastern Canada.”

“Sounds like fun. I love jazz.”

“Bungie jumping off a very high bridge.”

“Only if we jump together.”

“Volunteering at some remote medical clinic in Peru.”

“I’m a registered nurse. I can help.”

A long pause. Finally, Bruce said, “Maybe it won’t be so bad after all.”

“It will be marvelous,” Amelia corrected. “Let’s go get cleaned up.”

“Is anybody going to tell me what’s going on?” Cheryl pleaded.

The trio headed up the trail toward the cottage. “My shoes squish when I walk,” Amelia said, giggling.

“I can hardly wait to get out of these wet jeans,” Cheryl complained.

“Cry me a river,” Bruce replied. This time everyone laughed.

That was the day Amelia saved Bruce from floating down the river. From then on they made their own way, together. In the following years they did everything they talked about on

that first meeting, or most of them anyway. It turned out that, rather than Peru, Amelia's nursing skills and Bruce's computer savvy were both eagerly welcomed at an under-staffed rural hospital on the eastern shore of Nova Scotia. They found the work so satisfying and the fishing so good they decided to stay for a year. Or twenty-five years, as it happened.

Did this happy adventure come about because an exact series of events happened in exactly the right order? Were it not for a particular beetle infecting the elm tree, it might not have died. Had the tree not died, the log would not have been hanging there, waiting for Bruce's hook to pull it down. Had the wood been a tiny bit stronger it would not have broken off, and Bruce would have left the river frustrated and fishless, but safe and dry. Had there not been a puddle on their favourite trail, Cheryl and Amelia would not have been walking by the river as Bruce floated by, imprisoned on a floating log. Had Amelia not chosen to wear her nice summer dress that day, she wouldn't have been able to wade far enough into the river to grab Bruce's hand. Without all those coincidences, Bruce might never have met Amelia and wouldn't have gazed into those life-changing eyes. Were Bruce and Amelia fated to meet that day, or one day, one way or another? How could we possibly know? Maybe it's enough to accept that it happened.

