

# **Crisis on the River Styx**

by

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The early August morning dawned bright and still, with my boat, Dragon's Lair, gently rocking in the wake of earlier boaters who traveled the Rideau Canal. This part of the canal was narrow, with large weeping willows and pines coming right down to the shoreline. It was still dark in the cabin as I sleepily crawled from the berth to look out the small port window. I could see the warm sunlight glistening on the dew soaked grass on the field beside the motel we had docked at. This was the second day of our vacation, a week long boat trip from Portland, Ontario to Kingston and back. Yesterday we had traveled from Portland to Jones Falls, about half way to Kingston. It had been bright and sunny, with only billowy white clouds in the sky. We'd excited as the trip had taken us to areas we had never seen before, and introduced us to many friendly people, and we were eager to continue.

Martina and I had a quiet breakfast at the motel restaurant, talking and joking with a few other boaters, leisurely enjoying the view of the river and watching the boats wait their turn at the locks. We were having fun imagining what the owners of the various types of boats were like. It felt like it would be another great day.

When we returned to the cabin cruiser, I switched on the VHF radio to get the latest weather report. Contrary to the clear sky we currently had, the forecast called for mid-afternoon thunderstorms. This didn't concern us too much as we knew the storms would quickly pass and there were many places we could dock to ride them out. I checked the charts to see where our route would take us. Most of the way to Kingston would be in narrow channels where we'd have to go slow, but there were two large lakes where we could make up for the slow cruising.

We made our way through the channel at Jones Falls, joining the boats heading south and passing boats heading north. Whitefish Lake opened in front of us and I increased our speed, the wind whipping through our hair, until we arrived at the end of the lake, at Murphy's Narrows.

It would be slow going for the next while as these narrows are not very wide and boats are required to go very slowly. In fact, in some areas, there is barely enough room for two boats to pass. That didn't matter though, as the scenery was exceptional, and we enjoyed being able to take the time to view it properly and point out funny sights to each other.

It took us about two hours to reach Cranberry Lake, where we could again move quickly. The skies were still clear and we decided to anchor about half way down the lake for lunch and a swim. The lake is not deep, so the summer sun had warmed it nicely. A leisurely swim and a quick lunch made for a wonderful break.

It was about one o'clock when we arrived at the entrance to the Cataraqui River. From here until we hit the River Styx it would be slow going as the river was constricted and we had to go through two sets of locks. While waiting at Upper Brewers Locks, we had a chance to talk to other boaters. Most of the discussion was about the weather, as clouds had started to move in and the wind had picked up. Many were concerned about the forecast storms and were going to wait until they passed, but I knew we could make it to the next locks easily. From there, I'd see what the weather was like.

At Lower Brewers, Martina and I looked at the charts. We were only about twelve miles from the Kingston Mills locks, the next place where we knew we could dock, and I was confident we could motor along fairly fast for most of the River Styx. Although we could feel the storm approaching, I decided to give it a run.

The sky was overcast and dark as we exited from the narrows of the Cataraqui River to the River Styx. This was my first time on the long, shallow lake and I was relying on the widely spaced channel markers to keep in the deep water. Drifting out of the channel would put us into an area of shallow water filled, with partly sunken logs, weeds, and mud. I increased speed, despite the narrow channel, and headed down the river, making careful note of where the channels markers were. We were over half way down this section of the river when I saw the thunderstorm approaching. As I watched, it raced towards us and I saw flashes of lightning in the distance. Before I could do anything, the rains hit, a torrential downpour, reducing my visibility to next to nothing. I quickly reduced speed to a slow crawl and carefully watched the compass, hoping I was still in the channel, but fearing I had already drifted into the shallows. I'd been out in storms before but this was the worst I'd ever experienced, and I was starting to get scared.

A lightning flash, and the immediate loud clap of thunder, startled me and reminded me of just how dangerous it was to be here. Martina's face showed me she was really scared, but was trying to remain calm for my sake. Suddenly, there was a thump at the bow and I knew I'd hit something, but because of the slow speed, I knew there was no damage. I put the engine into neutral, not knowing which way to go and fearing we'd have to ride out the storm at our current spot. I was just going to drop anchor when there was a break in the rain and I could see we'd drifted well outside the channel. Fortunately, Martina spotted a campground dock not far away, and we quickly made our way to it, knowing our break wouldn't last.

The torrential rains started again just as we came alongside the dock, and we jumped off the boat, grabbing at the ropes to tie the boat down. We got thoroughly soaked as we got two ropes tied, and then raced back to the shelter of the canvas covered boat bridge. I'd just zippered the canvas when a lightning bolt struck nearby, with the loud thunder temporarily deafening us. My heart was pounding and a quick glance at Martina confirmed that she was as scared as I was. With a quick nod, we rushed to get below into the cabin. We didn't speak as thunder reverberated about us for the next ten minutes.

Then silence. Not even the sound of rain. We waited cautiously for another five minutes before emerging to a rapidly clearing sky. We hugged tightly for a few moments and then unlashed the boat, thankful to be alive.

We quickly made our way to the Kingston Mills locks where we had to wait, as the Lockmaster wouldn't let anyone through until all the thunderstorm activity had stopped. That gave us time to get

into dry clothes and chat with the other boaters waiting. It was here we heard that a sailboat just outside of Kingston Harbour had been struck by lightning and was on fire. When we finally arrive at Kingston, about two hours later, we saw the boat. The middle half of the fifty-foot sailboat had burned down to the deck. There was nothing left of the cabin. Fortunately, no one had been hurt but the sailboat was a write-off. Looking at it reminded me of just how dangerous the situation could have been for us on the River Styx, and I felt immensely grateful that the only thing that had happened to us was that we got soaked.