

*(Taken from the middle of the chapter)*

One boat length at a time they advance, and then another, until... finally! Finally the tree line is passing just before them. The towering woods, pitch-black against the sky, could strike one through with ghostly fears. But these battle-weary mariners are occupied with no such thoughts, they only long for sanctuary there.

But between them and the bank is a deep accumulation of crushed ice pushed up by the force of the stream. Only a few feet in front of their boat large fragments of sheet ice gouge that frozen encroachment. Breaking from the moving ice and connecting with that embankment is dangerous.

“Grab anything that comes along!” Mother shouts to Mildred who crouches in the bow. A willow tree, leaning out over the water, looms in the darkness. As it brushes by Mildred, she grabs a branch and hangs on. With a hundred crunching sounds, the boat twists, the stern swings downstream and the little skiff comes to an abrupt halt against the stationary ice. Her grip held!

The seeming ceaseless drifting is done. Mother places a foot out on the crush of ice. She tests its strength with her weight, then, in a moment, she stands on the bank with rope in hand. She pulls hard and holds the boat steady for Mildred’s safe exit. Together they tug at the rope, and their faithful skiff rises and slides up on to solid ice. Here it will be safe from further abuse. Mother ties the rope around a tree root.

“Metzy, we have to go back up to where we started, and build a fire. So Dad will know we are OK,” she explains.

Their feeling of relief is profound. With their gladness comes renewed strength; they turn northward. They have drifted a long way and there are no trails through that stretch of woods.

“It was dark as black cats,” Mother wrote. Groping through the woods they go, wide-eyed and hands extended before them to shield their faces. Logs and vines threaten to entangle their feet. Caution slows their progress. The river on their left keeps them on course. Until at last, the dike, appearing as a bold black line out into the river, told them that they had arrived where they had begun the crossing..

Now, over the fierce and frozen waste, across the moaning of great forces in collision, they catch ear of Father’s beacon call ...faint, but certain, it is indeed his voice. Their hearts leap within them, Yes! Yes! We hear you! No words would be intelligible across the expanse, but Mother lifts her face and cuts loose with a trumpet-like “Yeeee hoooo!”

In frenzied haste they push together tinder of twigs and leaves; and with wooden matches, usually carried in case of an emergency like this, Mother sets the pile ablaze.

From the Missouri side Father could see two figures moving about in the light of the fire. What a relief he feels! Humbly thankful he turns homeward.

Mother and Mildred leave the piercing warmth of the short-lived blaze; darkness swallows them up again. Finding their way along the familiar trail, they pass over the little island, and walk again the ice on Bullock River. Exhausted they push their way up the mound and through the kitchen door.

*And the story continues...*