

(Taken from the middle of the chapter)

Being late to return this night, my parents may have been sharing their concern, wondering if we children at home were safe. Maybe they were talking of the contacts of the business day or the tradin' they had done in town ...matters still fresh on their minds. Just maybe they were emotionally disturbed with one another over a serious disagreement. When in combat with each other, birds do fall to earth sometimes, and relax their guard against predators. Could an argument between my parents have momentarily drawn their attention away from the imminent danger?

As though in quiet stealth, the barges in tow drew near, so unobtrusively that my parents remained unaware. They could have heard the low sound of rushing water in front of the lead barge, had that noise not been masked by other sounds. Down in the noisy engine room of the grand old steamer, her fires roared, and her boilers simmered with 200 pounds of steam. Great pistons labored with a rhythmic muffled ooosh, haaaah, oooosh, haaaah, oooosh, haaaah. Two 30-foot pitman arms, with a combined strength of a thousand horsepower, cranked the stern-wheel round and round. With a fury, her bucket boards slapped the water. The hiss of spent steam, the clatter and occasional shout of a busy crew.... A combination of sounds, a kind of white noise carried over the water in the heavy night air, and into their ears, along with sounds of their own making.

Where was the steamboat's powerful searchlight? First of all, the carbon arc beam was blindingly intense. Therefore, it was used sparingly, enabling the pilot's eyes to stay adjusted to the night. Secondly, having rounded the curve in the river north of La Grange, the large boat would have set a straight northerly course for more than two miles. Once it had scanned markers and vista ahead, it would have shut its light down, and used the distant lights of the Canton dam and the blinking light at our Missouri landing site, as reference points. My parents launched away after the large boat's last major directional adjustment. Therefore, our parents were neither sighted, nor were they aware of the ominous threat until a barge was upon them.

The towering barge, shrouded in the darkness, came so close that its grim outline loomed into their view like a black phantom against the night sky. Who saw it first? Who heard it? Who shouted what? I wish I had asked and taken notes. We do know there came an instant horrific knowing. An enormous tonnage of wood, steel and lading bore down upon them. In seconds ...not in minutes ...but in seconds the jaws of death would close on them. A young mother and father of five children at home were about to be pummeled into a watery grave.

The next morning Raymond would have crossed over to Missouri and searched for them. Through inquiry, he would have traced their movements. That would have brought him back down to the desolate landing place where they had launched away the night before. The absence of the boat would have confirmed his apprehension, and when he returned home to tell us, our fears would have deepened.

Dad knew, and was known by everyone up and down the river for miles. Word of their disappearance would have spread in a day. Some alert river man downstream would have, in a few days, spotted Mother and Father's bloated bodies lodged in some drift, or washed up onto a sandbar. Discovery of the mangled skiff would have explained how it happened. Except for the grace of God, it would have happened like that. Mother and Father deeply respected God, and God was not finished with them yet.

The realization was sudden and electric. The bow of the barge, silhouetted against the sky, was bearing down upon them. There was no time to deliberate ...no time to change course. There was no place for panic, hysteria or lost motion. A snapped oar pin may have sealed their doom. There was only time for instinct, and reflexes learned through years of laborious repetition. There were just seconds to deliver a few Herculean power strokes to those four thin wooden blades. Perhaps two sets of seven-foot ash oars were never flexed so precisely short of the snapping point.

The explosion of energy sent the small pointed bow shooting ahead. Then one swift skiff, with its rudder tucked under its transom, barely scooted out of the path of the monster as it swished by! The crushing collision had been avoided. "We gave one last hard pull," Mother exclaimed, "and the barge barely cleared the back of the boat!"

They were safe, but waves of fear hit them. The painful sensations rushed for release from their stomachs to their arms; then, from their stomachs to the bottoms of their feet.

And the story continues...