

Are You Happy?

By Sherri Leiberling

Kneeling at the stern of the once yellow canoe, Mark shoved offshore with just two jabs of the short, wooden oar. He eased himself around to a sitting position, barely rocking the shifty little boat, and paddled routinely across the silence, across his father's private lake. Near the middle of the lake Mark flexed a final stroke into the water, then pulled the oar into the canoe. Little droplets raced down the oar's wooden grooves, hurdling the timeworn, knife-etched "Mark loves Ami" and finishing as minuscule puddles on the boat's floor. Mark looked up to the bow of the canoe at Ami's familiar, pretty face and labored over a smile. Ami smiled right back and tossed him the suntan oil.

Another spring had begun just last week; already they had the procedure flawless, monotone. Tanning at the lake alone together was a four-year-old hobby—pastime—habit that Mark and Ami had picked up the spring they'd been high school sophomores, the same spring they'd become sweethearts. Now sophomores at the community college and never once split up, there wasn't much left for them to get used to.

Mark rubbed the cocoa butter smell into his skin as Ami arranged towels and pulled her long hair into a high ponytail, fountain-like atop her head. With practiced balance and a distant concentration the two moved simultaneously, almost synchronized, to their usual tanning spots in the canoe. Laying down, the tops of their blonde heads touching atop a towel-covered cooler and their bottoms at opposite ends on the boat's floor, Mark and Ami stretched their legs out, dangling one on each side of the canoe, all toes tickling the water. The couple seemed to sacrifice themselves to the sun, eyes closed and creamy skin glistening as the boat drifted over the sparkling, little windblown waves. As Mark and Ami drifted, their thoughts did too, to two different consciences that felt a hesitant obligation to be shared.

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I'm hot. It sure is hot. It sure is quiet. We never used to be this quiet . . . The first time we were out here, maybe, but we were nervous then. After that, we talked constantly. About what? Everything. Out of the blue, Ami'd say something like 'I really don't care for tater tots', and we'd be off talking for hours. When did we get so quiet? It is too quiet. Shouldn't we—the perfect couple—be talking? It's hot. Ami, are you as hot as I am? What a question; scrap that one! Ami, do you want to go to the movies tomorrow. That'd be a strange question, we

go to the movies every Friday. Every Friday. And warm days we lay out here after class, weekend days we spend with our families—one family at a time, weeknights we study together at the library, Saturday it's church, pizza, t.v. We're in a rut. We are. Does Ami notice? Does she mind? I do. Should I say something about it? Ami, do you think we're in a rut? Ami, do you think we're missing out on something being together all the time? Ami, do you ever think about us thinking about taking a break?

"What are you thinking about, Ames?"

Oh, about how bored we always seem with each other anymore. About how much every day seems so much like the day before. About running away, hopping on a bus and just getting out—out of here, out of everything. About transferring to State University. About the way you look: bored; I've gotten used to your handsomeness. About the way Jeff Mendel looked in computer class this morning. About the way he looked at me. About noticing that I didn't really mind if you noticed. About how good it felt that someone else still notices me.

"Oh, nothing."

It took a while for that 'nothing'. Maybe she is thinking about us. Maybe she is thinking about all the time we spend together. Too much. Maybe she is thinking it's time we talked about taking a break. Maybe she's wishing I'd bring it up. Or maybe she's just about to fall asleep and is barely thinking at all.

"You sure?"

If I told Mark what I was really thinking, would he get mad? Would he understand? Would things with us be over? Would I mind that much if they were? I do want out, don't I? If things were over, wouldn't Mark be crushed? Would I really do something like that to him? I couldn't.

"I'm sure."

That was a little faster. She's awake, has to be thinking something. I wonder if she enjoys this anymore. It is nice here on the lake . . . hot, private, . . . but old. Old. Ami, are you ever tired of us? Ami, do you feel trapped? Does having me ever hold you back from doing other things you'd like to do? Are you ever disappointed when you know we have plans together every night of the week? When (when?) we aren't together, are you relieved? Is life how you always dreamed it would be? Are you doing what you really want to?

"Ami, are you happy?"

What did Mark just say? My mind just isn't in this today. Perhaps my heart isn't either. No, my heart is in—I love Mark. That's the problem. I'm too much in. How do I get out.

"What?"

Oh God, why did I ask that? We have nice times, don't we? Sure we do. No

real problems. She feels perfectly fine, dozing as usual. My feeling trapped is like her security. I'm probably worrying her, stirring up trouble.
 "Nothing."

He always says 'nothing'. I guess I do that too. 'Nothing usually means something'. It's something, isn't it? Maybe it really is ...
 "No really, Mark, what did you say?"

Ummm ... I could make something up. What though? I can't think of anything to even talk about. Anything else, that is. If I'm casual, though, she won't suspect anything from me; maybe she'll give me a lead in ...
 "Are you happy?"

Am I happy? Now that's a good question. I mean, things could be better, different. I could get to go out with Jeff and get to know him. Everything not with Mark would seem so new again. I could really transfer to State and meet people without worrying about talking Mark into going with me, without worrying about missing him. I could get out and get to know just me again. Yes, things could be better. Here's my chance—'am I happy'—to make a go for it. Would things be better? Do I need my spurt of freedom more than I need this security? Would Mark wait for me? Would he find someone else in the meantime? Would he want to take the chance to get away from each other for awhile? Would I? I would like to get out for awhile, and he is asking ... I could tell him. How do I even find the words to say all of this? It's just too much for me to deal with. I'm not really unhappy, and things could be worse.
 "Uh-huh, I'm happy."

She is? She is. I knew it. Well, that settles that. I love Ami too much to hurt her, to tell her that I don't feel 'in love' anymore—it's more like trapped in love. I just couldn't ever tell her that. What would she do? If only she felt a little of what I'm feeling ... if she'd just hint at it, I'd take it from there. Oh well, if she's happy, "Good."

I wonder what made Mark ask that in the first place. Do I seem happy, do I seem unhappy? Does he? Not really. Things with him seem to be the same as always. Almost always. Maybe if he were just a little unhappy ... If I could get him to say it, I wouldn't feel so bad. I'd tell him everything.
 "Are you?"

Am I what? What is Ami saying to break open this cage of quietness that is stifling me, a silent closed-in torture? I'm not defenseless. Why do I act that way? Why don't I just say something? Why can't I?
 "What?"

Maybe I should just come right out and say what I'm really thinking. Mark, I

just need out for a little while. Now that would really shake things up a little. A little? Why am I such a chicken? I'd confess if he'd just answer 'no.'

"Are you happy?"

See, I did worry her with my question—now she's asking me. She suspects that I'll say 'no', expects me to say 'yes', doesn't she? Ami, how do I tell you that along with the key to my heart, you're holding the key to my individuality also? Here is my chance, though—'am I happy'—to try and explain how jailed-in I feel. Yet I don't want to upset Ami. Hanging in there isn't anything that I couldn't put up with, is it? Is it? Not as bad as solitary confinement, huh? Besides, what choice do I have? Well . . .

"Yeah, I'm happy."

He is? I'll go ahead and say something anyway. I should, shouldn't I? Of course I should, I can't keep all this in too much longer. It has to get out sometime, and so do I.

"Are you sure?"

"Mmmm-hmmmm, 'course." Sure; hell, why not? Things could be a lot worse than this monotone. And Ami and I can always work on livening things up and unleashing ourselves later, a little at a time. Can't we?—With a little time, a little talking.

"Good . . ." Well, now what? I tried . . . sort of, and there's always tomorrow. Tomorrow, I might not be so scared. Maybe it will just casually slip into conversation.

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The spring sun shifted unnoticed in the sky, beginning its descent into late afternoon—unnoticed and unheard, its movement like secret thoughts. Mark cringed at the quiet that seemed to be ever louder and Ami neglected her urge to jump up and dare their habitual balance to waver, to capsize the old, yellow canoe. Mark started to tell Ami how strangled he was feeling by the unending strings of silence as she started to tell him how much she was craving an escape of this monotone; their words, jumbled together, were unintelligible. The couple wondered at what it all meant, what the other just said, if to venture to repeat themselves, what to do. Carefully sitting up and turning around in the little boat, Ami looked questioningly at Mark who had rolled onto his stomach, propped up on his elbows.

"What?"

"What?"

Their words overlapped as they continued to drift around the lake in the shifty canoe. Each silently decided that doing nothing was the easiest thing to do, easier than doing anything that they thought would throw the other off balance. Neither wanted to be the first to rock the boat. Mark sighed and stretched up to put a routine kiss on the end of Ami's nose, "I was just asking you what you were thinking . . ."

"Yeah," Ami said, gently combing his hair with her fingers, "me too."