
1

I waited with Sonia in the flat water above while the first group cleared the rapid. Derek, our guide, paddled vigorously as he hit and pierced the first small wave. A slight back paddle jerked the front of his boat to the left so he would hit the next wave at a right angle. The bow of the air-filled craft punched through the short standing wave, and with a swift stroke on each side, he accelerated through into the quiet water. Simon spun out just above the rapid, and while he recovered, the fast current carried Mike past him into the first wave. The curl hit his bow on the left side, peppered his face with spray, and started to roll the boat back to the right. Mike leaned into the wave, thrust his paddle into the dinky water wall, and jerked it toward him, leveling his boat as he burst through to the flat water. His paddle blade cut through the water's surface on the right side, and he accelerated toward the next target. Like Derek, he back paddled on the left, hitting the next wave at a perpendicular angle. Ripping through the wave, he raised his paddle, opened his mouth, and gave a "rebel yell" that echoed through the river canyon.

Regaining control above the rapid, Simon turned his boat downstream to hit the first swell, dead-on straight. The puny wave was no match for his 240 pounds, and it flattened like an insignificant ripple under his weight. Looking pleased and

confident, he steered his boat into the second wave, and the small water wall hit his left side. His broad shoulders and torso, which carried most of his weight, unsettled the boat's balance, and the top-heavy craft lurched to the right. Simon leaned with the boat's momentum, away from the wave, helping the boat roll over and gently lay him in the soft, wet trough that made up the hole.

The current swept Keith's boat into the rapids behind Simon. As he punched through the first wave, the soft rubber bow of his boat was thrust by the current into Simon's boat and over the top of his chest, lodging snugly into the center of the capsizing craft. The calm water of the trough kept Keith in his boat for a second or two as both boats moved into the pounding curl of the small wave. Like Simon, Keith was laid into the water as if a mother were placing her baby in a warm bath. But even the small wave had enough momentum under the surface to shove both men to the frigid river bottom. They cleared the swirling undertow and popped up like corks clad in crimson life jackets about six feet downstream.

Derek grabbed the shoulder panels of Simon's jacket as he surfaced into the swirling, churning currents and tugged the deadweight of Simon's drenched body over the front of his own boat with ease. Another river guide floated alongside with Simon's boat tethered to his line, helping Simon as he struggled to pull himself into his rescued craft and settle into the small seat.

"What the hell were you doing up there?" Keith shouted. "You almost killed me." He was back in his boat, the current propelling him toward Simon and Derek. He turned his head as he passed to maintain eye contact with Simon. "This is sup-

posed to be a vacation, not a funeral. Look, if you can't cut it, stay out of my way."

Simon was still gasping for air, savoring each precious breath. "Should I give him the finger or just paddle over and bash the little twerp's head in? It might put him out of his misery and do the world a big favor." Tumbling into the cold, choppy water had separated him from his up and down orientation as well as from his top and bottom. He was unnerved, but Simon, who usually paused before he spoke, was not the kind of man to be browbeaten. He was mostly bald, but a well-oiled comb-over covered the center of his head. The bones of his cranium formed small canyons and plateaus, and the back part of his head flattened in a diagonal plain to the ground. His coloring was dark, and his face was clean shaven.

"Let it go," called a voice from just upriver. "He wears his emotions on his sleeve. He's just a little jumpy, that's all." Mike floated into view from behind Simon.

"Emphasis on 'emotion,' I guess."

"Keith is a client of mine. He's okay," Mike said with cordial resolve.

"I can let it go, Mike, but that guy needs to mellow out or it will be a long week."

"He will," Mike replied. "Everybody mellows out on the river after a few days."

"I hope you're right." Simon paused and began to paddle slowly. "But anyway, these dinky little blowup kayaks aren't exactly my ticket. I mean, they feel top heavy and unstable."

"Well, they're not the best for pros, but they're probably the best for our level."

"Best for what? They're flimsy and cheap."

“But you don’t have to know how to roll in the rapids,” I said, “because you can’t get stuck, just thrown out.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Simon said. “You know, when Mike said river trip, I thought he meant this would be like my trip down the Grand Canyon. I mean, seven paddlers in a raft digging into those massive curls. I’ve seen the front guys take the brunt of two giant waves in close succession and get leveled onto the floor of the raft and lucky not to be thrown out and swimming. But everyone else is there to keep digging, so you take whatever the river can throw at you and learn to beat the old matron at her own game.”

I looked over to the side and saw a quiet, steady river streaming past a steep, muddy bank. Mostly young saplings gazed out on the constant motion of the river’s rush to the sea. The roots of one ancient oak punched through the dirty bank, penetrating the humid air and curving like a giant elbow back down into the rushing water. It looked like a wise old gentleman among a free-for-all of youth. But, of course, it wasn’t. It was just an old tree surviving in a rugged wilderness.

Why Simon was calling the river a “her” was beyond me. Was it for the same reason hurricanes were named after females for years? Maybe it was once thought of as a compliment? Or maybe it was a character trait reflected in the big storm, as in “there is no wrath like a woman’s scorn” type of allusion. But I remembered that old song about the Mississippi River, “Old Man River.” Where is the wrath on the Mississippi River? I guess the Mississippi is a big slow river that “just keeps rollin’ along,” but the Grand Canyon has the wrath of a woman, and likewise there would be some trouble on this stretch of the smaller Salmon River. Wrath we could take, I mused; mayhem is harder.

I paddled downriver and caught up with Sonia. She was a striking sandy blonde who looked athletic but possessed a girlish charm. As my boat pulled up from behind, I saw the even, steady stroke of her paddling, a straight back, and a poised demeanor. It looked like she practiced yoga. She was the kind of woman I wish I had met in my youth. But then I stopped; I knew better than to fool myself. Back then, I was looking for meaning, depth, and sensitivity. I dated girls who were artists and poets and, as it turns out, were mostly tortured by their emotions and those of various populations around the world that they never even met, just like a poet is supposed to be. Karen, the girl I married, was an artist, completely the opposite of Sonia. She was a good companion and did a good job with the kids, but her idea of recreation was having tea and chatting. She had a close circle of friends and was reluctant to expand her group. I liked a little broader reach and had friends but also a lot of acquaintances, people I would hang out with but didn't really know. All the same, I was happy with the few friends Karen had and the "good" friendships she kept up. But I was a different person back then, before Karen died.

Sonia seemed youthful and energetic, but I wondered what she was really like.

"Hi there," I said, trying to be low-key and easygoing. "Well, we're off. It should be exciting."

"You're Jonathan, right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah, it'll be fun if the boys don't kill each other," Sonia replied.

"So you heard the little altercation?"

“Not the whole thing, but I got the general picture. What is the old saying, ‘wherever you go, there you are?’”

“Yeah, give it a little time,” I said. “They’ll start playing nice. They’ve all been out on rivers before.”

Sonia looked ahead and quietly paddled her kayak, floating down with the slow-moving current. Her eyes stayed down-river until she turned her head and in a gentle, quiet voice, like the rhythm of the river, answered, “I have never been on a river trip where I thought everybody there should be there, or that everybody understood the level of extreme sport this is. It’s like a hurricane—the river can be unforgiving and indiscriminant, and good times can go bad quick.”

And like a woman, I thought, you want to enjoy its beauty but give it constant respect. I had heard of catastrophes and helicopter evacuations on these trips but had never seen one. We all expected some big waves and some very big “holes” that could suck you down before spitting you back out to the surface. Some people expected it more than others. But everybody would be fine, I thought.