

MEANDER

By

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Meander

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University.

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## ABSTRACT

### MEANDER

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This narrative nonfiction road-trip-on-a-river explores the extremes of outdoor living and death on a series of unguided whitewater wilderness trips through the Grand Canyon. As the narrator and her main characters descend the Colorado River on inflatable rafts themes of place, nature and the human spirit's relationship to those elements are explored as 16 people are forced to adjust to the social challenges of living together among culturally and spiritually divergent tastes. Secondary topics of geology, river safety, environmental protection and how to prepare for such a trip logistically, psychologically and physically are addressed throughout the text and in supplementary appendices.

**Meander:** A sharp bend, loop or turn in a stream's course.  
When abandoned, called a meander scar or an oxbow.

### ***Powell's Chair***

My family maintains a memory about my father's father's father's father.

Samuel Ichabod "Jake" Field operated a trading post in Green River, Wyoming Territory in the mid- to late 1800s, offering supplies, meals and lodging.

The family memory is faint, but enough to lead me to the historic truth: In the late 1860s, John Wesley Powell, a one-armed civil war veteran financed by the Smithsonian Institution, set out to explore a region of the West that would become known as the Grand Canyon. When I spotted Powell's book, the 1961 paperback edition, on an aunt's shelf, I pulled it out.

It was no accident this book was on my aunt's shelf. Although several accounts of the trip were published, this book was Powell's own story, an amalgamation of two trips, one launching in 1869, the other in 1871. The drawing on its cover stirred my grandfather's voice in my memory: Powell's "conveyance," a classic country kitchen chair affixed to the central crossbeams in a wooden boat, was familiar. I felt the leafy edge of a memory; that chair had something to do with the Field Family. Sam Field and 'The Green River Trading Post' a phrase as familiar as a song, a song about an ancestor, a mad woman, a stolen chair.

We're not much of a family for telling stories, but this one fragment survived five generations. My aunt nodded, yes, that was your great-great grandmother's chair, my aunt was fairly certain. She didn't know how many greats, maybe two or three.

Grampa Field, ran a trading post, she said. Somewhere. And Powell took a kitchen chair from Gramma Field—who was not happy about it. My aunt knew only that



Powell needed it for his Great Exploration. But she didn't know what he was exploring or when he explored. My aunt was certain, however, that Gramma Field was not happy about the loss of her chair.

Thanks to the Gutenberg project (which publishes old books online,) I soon found paydirt, proof this really happened.

Frederick Samuel Dellenbaugh, a vociferous defender of Powell-the-Great-Explorer and a member of Powell's expedition that launched in 1871, confirmed in his book "A Canyon Voyage," that a chair had been obtained from Sam Field. He also said Field's Outfitting Store had been the source of meals, unlimited whiskey and trip supplies. Dellenbaugh, 17 at the time, would chronicle the second Powell voyage, in several publications over several decades.

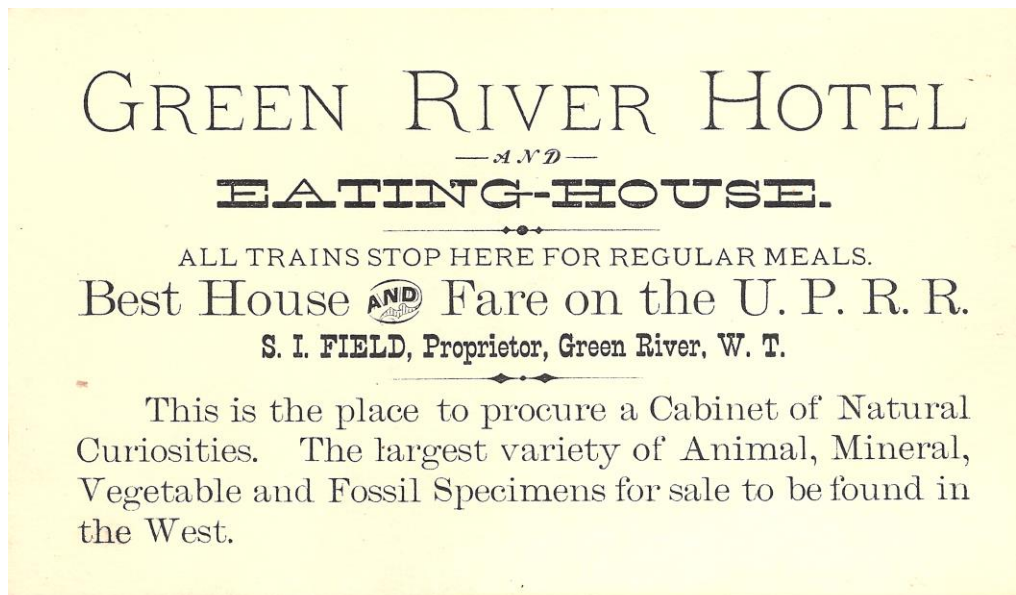
The first descent, in 1869, had likewise launched from Green River with great great grampa's help. Although Powell's own account combines the two trips, the first, an all-out blind adventure as the men aboard had no idea what lay around the next bend, differed from the second. For the second trip Powell prepared better, documenting everything he could, packing instruments to map, to establish latitude, longitude, elevation, time, distance. He hired a photographer, Elias Olcott Beaman as well as Dellenbaugh, an artist, to capture the landscapes and topography. Powell sought out other professionals to collect data about flora, fauna, weather. And he took great- great-grandma Field's chair, so he could sit up high and see.

In addition to the Dellenbaugh books, I found proof of my own family's history in an old shallow cigar box with a picture of Simon Bolivar on the cover. The physical

historic evidence is just a few printed labels, the kind that were glued on jars of preserves. I found a dozen thin, faded colored papers advertising Piccalilli, Mince, Horse Radish, Sweet Relish and Loquat Jelly in this cigar box defended by the image of *El Libertador* in my grandfather's desk. It was 1993. By then my grandfather, the grandson of Samuel Ichabod Field the trading-post outfitter, had moved into an elder-care facility, his mind receding quickly.

I had taken over management of our family's orchards and had kept my grandfather's desk, a heavy, old army-issue oak behemoth, including most its contents, a layered deposit of desk detritus. I would use my grandfather's envelopes, mailing labels, notebooks and pencils, wondering how these simple objects had survived him, feeling some injustice lurked in this fact of material survival over my grandfather's very mind.

Most the surface of the desk remains covered by a large piece of thick cowhide, which is perfect for absorbing the pressure of a pen. The cigar box of labels hid in the back of the top left drawer for years before I discovered it. Most are jar labels, but among them I also found a card from the Green River Hotel.



All other family stories have vanished and so have the “curiosities,” except for one, this barely an anecdote. Powell would descend the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon by wooden boat, launching on the tributary Green River in Wyoming, near the town of the same name. This simple link to the past confirmed for me the family story that Powell *commandeered* my great-great-grandmother’s kitchen chair for his journey. Powell effectively stole the sturdy piece of furniture—to the woman’s fury—and lashed it to his boat.

That chair would carry Powell through the Grand Canyon, before men dreamed of building a railroad through the ‘seventh wonder of the world;’ before miners crawled in and through and around it; before it became the stage for debates about damming western rivers and creating amusement parks in sacred native areas. Before it became a National Park. And 132 years before I would make the same trip.



*Great-great  
Grandmother's  
chair*

A lot has changed in the Grand Canyon in 132 years. The Colorado River has been dammed, an attempt at preservation has been made, access controlled by the National Park Service. But human character has remained the same. I imagine that if I'd had a crack at joining Powell's adventures, I would have slipped aboard. I wonder that my great- great- grandmother didn't somehow stow away. But maybe I would have remembered the ten mostly civil war veteran crew from 1869, mostly drunk, and decided, 'heck, take the chair. Just get out of my kitchen.'

Powell's group and others who have taken trips through the canyon more recently—in rafts, dories and kayaks—mention the tensions of living among people who have a forced interdependency but are often just acquainted. As I contemplated the 'big

water’ of the Colorado River, faced down the terrifying rapids, I focused, as Powell must have, on the physical challenges before me.

Now that I’ve run the section of the Colorado that flows tumultuously through the Grand Canyon five times, I know what I wished I’d known as I faced that first trip. I hope to share just enough that you may know what you need to know, but not lose the sense of discovery when you see for the first time the *je ne sais quoi* that draws me in.

Although I did not at first appreciate Powell’s amalgamation of both his trips, I now understand that the canyon is so complex, so deep as it were, the combining of trips that happens naturally in my mind is the best way to present any sense of it. Over the course of the decade during which I had the privilege of boating through the canyon I aged and in some way wisened. But each trip I began again innocent and open to discovery; it will always be new to me.

### ***The Planning***

Lars’ permit request was on the waitlist at the National Park Service (NPS) for 13 years, since I had been 23 years old. He first filed in 1989, before I met him. By the time we launched in 2003, I had married Lars, given birth to two boys, and both the boys had read all the Harry Potter books twice.

We had paid a nominal fee each year along with a “Continued Interest” form. If at the conclusion of that trip, my age then 36, I had put in another request, the waitlist was

so long my estimated launch date would have been 23 years later, my age, 59<sup>1</sup>.

I recognized my good fortune to be holding a golden ticket and lined up caretakers for our six- and eight-year-old boys. More difficult was winnowing the coffee-ringed list of about 100 friends who wanted to go, down to a full roster of 16, the most NPS allowed.

We would spend almost three pristine weeks on the Colorado River with access to nothing. Only by hiking more than a mile up and ten miles out could we reach the nearest store, cell phone signal or road. And trails up through the cliffs are few.

It sounded divine to me.

But who else would share that perception? And who would be in over his or her head? As I faced the list, sharpened my pencil and started imagining camping with the likes of my geeky brother, I found all kinds of things to do. Laundry, dishes, I got caught up on the sewing, cleaned out the fireplace and split some wood. I even organized my Tupperware collection. Wrapping my head around the trip daunted me.

I ordered books, I subscribed to the Grand Canyon Private Boaters Association list-serve and I read each post. Most these posts seemed to be experienced river rats arguing about pins and clips. I looked it up. There are two different kinds of oarlocks. It seemed obvious to me that pins would be better. But what did I know?

I found a few books written by experienced commercial guides, books that emphasized bravado and thrill, written in National Enquirer style. I studied maps. Maps

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<sup>1</sup> In 2006 the National Park Service implemented a lottery system for allocating private permits, eliminating the waitlist. The lottery, which gives preference to individuals who have not run the river recently, is now held in the month of February for trips the following calendar year.

and a nonfiction book called “Up Shit Creek,” about what happens when ammo boxes loaded with human waste meet untimely ends.

But nothing prepared me.

My husband, working all daylight hours as a vineyard manager, was not much help. He’d kayaked the river years before, attaching to a commercial trip so he wouldn’t have to carry all his gear in his tiny boat. An inactive Army Special Forces Ranger, he would prefer to pack his bag the night before and not worry about it until then. Maybe it was my journalism training, but I wanted the basic truths to become evident. I wanted to read up. I sought some grist I could chew on to understand what I was up against.

In retrospect, knowing all there is to know would not have made the trip more enjoyable. But a way of thinking—an attitude—and simply thinking ahead could have allowed me to appreciate life in the canyon better. The first trip I was busy learning how to make the best of the experience, no matter what happens; learning how to stare down a rapid; learning how to refrain from fussing with stuff; learning to stop thinking and just take the first step up a side canyon. This cannot be learned but by doing. The second, third and fourth trips I began to see, mostly by watching others, that being on a private Colorado River trip frames a lifestyle. My fifth and most recent trip I felt I’d become part of the canyon and it had become part of me.

The most important decision on any Colorado River trip is not which side of Lava Falls to run, (go right) or which side of Bedrock (don’t go left) it’s who to include on the roster. The ideal boatperson is one who has run the river—any river—enough to know the level of respect it demands. A person who gets along with others; puts safety before

pride; and intuitively knows when someone else is in trouble.

The ideal passenger, by slight contrast, is someone who knows how to hold on tight, to high-side when told, one who bails without complaining. The ideal passenger is not trying to quit smoking, is not on the lam, is not allergic to, well, to anything, does not make others suffer for his or her own peculiar dietary needs; is not fussy. About anything. All river runners, passengers and boat drivers alike, should be the kind of person willing to give his or her last sip of water to the slowest person on the hike. Everyone should be able to smile and wave when caught with pants down on the groover as another trip floats by. Everyone should know to share the last beer is the best way to enjoy it.

Although views from hikes and scouting points above rapids dominated my photographs of that, my first trip, my thoughts, regrettably, focused on who would be cooking what that night, and who would complain. I respected and enjoyed the company of everyone on our trip. What didn't occur to me was that they might not like each other and I felt responsible to make it all work out. There is no way to know, no way to select participants, to choose among friends. Yet this is the most important element of planning.

Many people had said they wanted to go, but few could extricate themselves from their day-to-day routines to commit to arrive at the put-in and remain absent from their lives for almost three weeks. People said they wanted to go, but did they really?

The challenges of assembling the 16-person roster was so daunting that my husband, the trip leader, quit.

But his kayaking buddy, Brad, who had a business installing gutters on homes,



was so eager to go that he volunteered to handle it. Then Brad's top employee fell off a ladder and Brad was swamped with work. So I ended up piecing the crew together with Brad—as a team. Brad and I both wanted a medical doctor aboard and we both thought we should have a couple kayakers to pick up swimmers (people who fell into the freezing water.) He wanted to take his teenaged kids; we wanted to have at least a couple of our truest friends—besides Brad and his family. I felt inviting my brother could strengthen our sibling bond, which had always been weak.

By the time launch date arrived, that first roster would include two doctors; two lawyers; two kayakers; four boatman and one boatwoman; an Olympic gold-medalist swimmer; two pharmacists; an uncompromising vegan; a nudist; two teenagers; and three people who had run the river many times before. Yes, the swimmer is also the lawyer, the pharmacists kayaked. I learned things about my brother I wish I didn't know. Our family of 16 didn't get along always, but we all survived.

The Grand Canyon makes its own heat, creates its own dizzying drama, casts its own shadows. My best decision was to listen to the place. I would fall deeply in love with the canyon and its personality; I would not be able to resist returning again and again. In three succeeding trips in the next five years that corralled culturally radical personalities, selected by no formula other than the common ground of adventure-lust, the canyon taught me how to live. Much as the river itself ran down hill exposing ancient, troubled sediments and drove eddies back upstream, personalities among boaters seem to run in crazy eddying hydraulics, threatening to suck everything into a whirlpool if you didn't have your PFD strapped on tight. But the canyon always won. No strife, no dispute, no

amount of water flowing downhill, could overpower the sheer force of the beauty of the Grand Canyon.

Besides the roster, planning covered three main categories: transportation (getting to and from the river) gear and food.<sup>2</sup> But planning is just part of preparing. Incumbent in any river trip is grinding challenge and dazzling discovery. The only way to prepare is attitudinally. Coping skills. Be prepared for the worst, but also be prepared to be left breathless by the grandeur.

“Is there somewhere else you’d rather be right now?” I heard Paul, a tall thin rower who drives a short, 14-foot boat, ask in a soft voice one day. The answer, when you are on the river, need not be stated. There is no place better to be than in the heart of the earth, the most stupendously beautiful place on the planet. Nothing else matters. Ask yourself this question and all other issues fall away. There simply is no better thing to be doing, no better place to be, than on a private self-guided boat trip on the Colorado River.

### ***Mile 0***

Most Grand Canyon raft trips begin here, at mile zero, fifteen miles below the Glen Canyon Dam. The source of all life downstream, this water has rested, dropped sediment and cooled in Lake Powell to 47 degrees Fahrenheit. Torrents of frigid liquid crash through the turbines of the dam just upstream, turning on lights, air conditioners and slot machines from Salt Lake City to Las Vegas. Then the water winds quietly to Lee’s Ferry where it arrives at our launch site with deceptive calmness.

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<sup>2</sup> See appendices for detailed resources.

On my first trip, we travel from Flagstaff to get to our launch site, heading north through mile upon mile of desert, livened only by crude roadside stands, many vacant, but some marked by large hand-lettered signs hawking turquoise jewelry. We stop for lunch at Simpsons' Country Store and watch Navajo children playing in the dirt while the adults buy Cheetos. We want beer but this is the rez. It's still illegal to sell alcohol to Indians.

After hours of desert driving we descend to the put-in, the road curving dramatically as it drops to the river, winding among chunks of reddened rock that seem to teeter atop thin pillars of softer, eroded sandstone. The air is dry here, the landscapes delicate. To access the river, we drive past steep skirts of stones falling from brilliant crimson cliffs that contrast against the blue, blue sky. We pass a windy campground, identified by picnic tables, fire pits, and weird, curved windscreens. There are no trees.

At Lee's Ferry rafts are being inflated as independent river rafters like us, known as 'privates,' prepare for what many consider the trip of a lifetime, a real wilderness adventure—despite its venue in a popular national park. Privates strap oar frames to boats, record inventories of food and supplies on clipboards, pack burlap sacks of onions, potatoes and melons in drop-bags between inflated tubes, load milk crates of canned food and cases of beer below aluminum decks. Coolers that have been carefully frozen almost full of ice, layer by layer over a period of weeks, can be expected to last 14 days if opened only when needed. Just the top few inches contain food: dairy products, meats, leafy greens.

Commercial boats also put in here. They arrive inflated, stacked on mammoth

semi-trucks. While private boaters tug on cam-straps and wrap whiskey bottles in duct tape, a short distance upstream outfitters prepare for the paying customers they will guide through the same canyon. The two different types of adventure have many elements in common, but the privates are firm in their belief that the cost of a commercial trip is freedom itself. For commercial passengers, the security of a large virtually unflippable boat, a motor, a private shower tent and prepared meals is worth the compromise.

Besides, who can wait 23 years for a permit?

At the river's edge, planted willows barely achieve tree status so boats are tied to rocks or to stakes that impale the shore. Our private, oar-powered boats are rigged and loaded from mounds of gear piled on the rocky beach. Pickup trucks parked on a gravel boat ramp are left at awkward angles, doors ajar, alarms beeping. We pause to discuss things, laugh and pass around dripping cans of beer that have been cooling in the river. The beer is really cold.

Just upstream, hired twenty-somethings are working to prepare commercial boats, watching machinery slide the enormous pontoon boats into the water. Hydraulic cylinders mounted below the beds of the semis parked on a concrete boat ramp lift the truckbeds so the boats glide right into the calm water. A slightly sunburned young man wearing Aloha shorts, water sandals and a new company t-shirt, ties the boats in a neat row as the trucks pull away. Motors are heaved up and secured, bales of lifejackets, tied together like so many fish, are flopped onto the hot pavement.

We have planned a 21-day, 226-mile trip with our oar boats, but the commercial motorboats can do the distance in five days. The 16 members of our expedition have each

paid only for food, some equipment rental and permit fees. Commercial trips employ guides, provide private bathroom facilities and offer prepared meals. Prices vary, but start at about four to ten times the price of a private trip, for a trip a quarter the duration. The privates camp in the sandy brush downstream the night before launch, their first night on the river. In the morning, buses will arrive with commercial passengers, picked up at their hotels.

Our 14-to-18-foot rafts carry just one to three people and are rowed by one person, sitting atop a cooler, facing downstream. The ‘baloney boats’ of the commercial outfitters, powered by a motor, seat 15-20 each.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the National Park Service is the control of the number of trips that launch every day. We will see other trips daily, but not constantly. For most the time, our party will be private. Alone. Sixteen people will become our tribe, our O’hana, our family. Love them or not.

The modern self-bailing inflatable raft used by most privates is an oval of connecting tubes, each inflated separately. These support aluminum framing set crosswise with cargo decks that double as kitchen tables, to be unstrapped and hauled ashore every night. Everything is held together with nylon ‘cam straps.’ Each boat has an inflated floor that is connected to the tubes that form the boat by a length of rope woven through grommets, which allows water to flow out, hence the name “self-bailer.”

Before the morning departure, the private groups will submit to a lecture by a park ranger: a slideshow, a training to confirm the basic rules each member should already know: All urine and other liquid waste goes into the river, all solid waste must be

hailed out. At the river's edge, the ranger checks to make sure each individual has an approved PFD (Personal Flotation Device) in good condition and that each boat has an extra. Orange signal flags, mirrors (to signal an airplane in an emergency,) sieves for separating solids from liquids, tarps, watertight containers for human waste, all must be shown to the ranger. Someone must know how to guide a helicopter to a safe landing; all must know to stay on trails; wash their hands between groover (bathroom) and kitchen; the lecture goes on and on. We are warned of heat stroke, hypothermia, and Norwalk virus symptoms and prevention.

But the rangers are people too, eager to chat about river news. Yes, the ranger confirms, an unruly commercial customer was flown out in a straitjacket recently for inappropriate behavior, no details given. In a private group, the rangers remind us, we must all stay together.

During the lecture on my fifth trip, the lecture emphasis is on partying ... and bats. Two deaths on the river last year, we are reminded, occurred because of excess alcohol consumption. Bats in the canyon are rabid, the ranger goes on, and will bite. He tells a story about the sleeping man who was bitten on the face and had to be flown out for rabies treatment.

A man in the other private group launching today raises his hand. "I was on that trip," he says. "And that guy was sleeping next to me." He testifies that the bats are attracted to sound. "The only reason he got bit and I didn't was he snores and I don't."

We all laugh.

Finally, late in the morning, we launch. Each of our five boats on my first trip is

rowed into the main channel to drift toward our first riffle of white water. Suddenly, magically, we are free, floating the only direction we will know for the next three weeks: downstream.

### ***The Repeaters***

By 1964, almost 100 years after Powell's first descent and the same year Glen Canyon dam began to generate electricity, some 900 individual boaters had run the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. Then, after the dam's floodgates were closed, a different kind of floodgate seemed to open. In 1970 alone, 10,000 people did the trip. By the time our number comes up 33 years later, nearly 27,000 people are launching every year. Demand for access remains so great that if everyone who applied for a permit in 2014 received one, some 80,000 private boaters would be allowed to run the canyon. Instead, in 2014, just 10,000 were allowed to go. On the commercial side, those who could afford to go numbered 18,000. But on the commercial side, no luck is involved, just money.

A number of Grand Canyon boaters called "repeaters" through the 1970s, '80s and '90s, made a life of running the Colorado at least once every year. Although the waiting list prevented people from getting permits more often than once in a lifetime, the demand for trips enabled the repeaters to attach themselves to private trips, not as guides, but simply as useful people to have along. Although the National Park prohibits hiring guides for private permits, it also prohibits launch of private trips without someone who has run the river—or one like it—before.

But there is no river like the Colorado. Our trip fell into what was likely a pattern. I felt our trip needed someone who had run the river before—enough times to remember which rapids to scout, where to camp. I would learn that these repeaters also know valuable things like which camps have quiet eddies and interesting hikes, where unmapped artifacts can be found, why to make sure the propane valve is closed every night even though the stove is off —because if we lose our propane, we lose our ability to prepare food. Beyond just whitewater skill, we needed someone who knows the ropes of life in the canyon.

My husband, Lars, had kayaked the canyon before, accompanied by a commercially-operated support raft that carried his gear and fed him. Lars and Brad and I had rafted and kayaked rivers throughout the Sierra Nevada. But neither Brad nor I had known big water. Lars was confident we could scout the difficult rapids and figure out where to camp. But Brad and I agreed, it would be better to have a repeater along.

The repeater is a species whose habitat comprises the Grand Canyon. A victim of unmitigatable passion for the place, he or she craves only to be on the water, on a trip, in The Canyon. Because permits are so difficult to obtain, they eek out a life as a sort of symbiotic creature, attaching to private rafting groups, trading knowledge for access to the substance that provides them life: the Colorado. Repeaters join private trips as ‘friends’ although they often have not met the permit holders until the day before launch, shaking hands at Lee’s Ferry, at mile zero.

Our first trip has three repeaters, Ricardo, Doc and Julia.<sup>3</sup> Brad met Julia at a

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<sup>3</sup> See page 161 for a who’s who of our crews.



river-rescue training. She is the girlfriend of Doc Thomas. Doc and Ricardo are a pair, close friends but with different styles, known to the boating community, which is as full of characters as any Hollywood set.

Doc, a small perpetually tan man, clean-shaven and lean with brilliant white teeth who claims Blackfoot Indian among his heritage, says he has run the river 164 times. Ricardo doesn't keep count. Julia doesn't say. We don't know this at mile zero, but it doesn't matter. Julia, a slight, perfectly proportioned woman, presents herself as Doc's wife, but I notice her ring is too large. Doc also says he is 52 years old. None of these things, even if they had been true, mattered.

No money would change hands, but the name on the permit is that of my husband, Lars, so in the eyes of the National Park Service, he is accountable for anyone who might need to be med-evacked (flown out by helicopter for emergency medical reasons.) The repeaters provide, from experience, the easy solution: we require everyone to buy a \$25 insurance policy to cover their own air ambulance costs.

Total cost of the trip is divided equally among participants with those who brought significant equipment, like boats, allowed a deduction<sup>4</sup>. Contributions such as river knowledge or cooking skill or singing voice are not accounted for, though these priceless commodities made the trip not only survivable, but exquisite.

#### ***Mile 4***

Navajo Bridge is the last sign of civilization we see as we enter the wilderness of

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<sup>4</sup> More thoughts about gear planning can be found in Appendix 2

the Grand Canyon. Nearly 500 feet above, tourists can be seen snapping pictures. We crossed this bridge just yesterday. Every one of the four trips I would take in the next five years, as we approached the launch site in our van, bus, truck, we would pull over at the bridge to look down. It's like getting a sneak preview of your life.

Built in 1929, the original bridge was replaced in 1995 but the old bridge remains open for pedestrians. I hadn't been able to resist pulling over for a first look at the river. I had walked out on the bridge and stared down at the water, the one-way path down which I would travel for the next two and a half weeks. Never had I seen boats from up there. Only green, shiny water, painted onto the red landscape with some strange, bottomless paint.

When I drift under the bridge with Ricardo, he tells me a Big Secret. I search the cliffs for the great California Condor he says resides there, but only see canyon wrens, flitting about like bats. I know that a few such almost-extinct condors have been released in classified locations in the western United States. How did he know this?

But Ricardo is on to the next subject. Here the Coconino sandstone, pure quartz that just a few years ago (255 million) drifted, settled and drifted in dunes before becoming part of the Toroweap formation which is topped by the Kaibab limestone, the cliffs that form the rim of the Grand Canyon. When I stepped off the bridge into Kaibab's dust I was stepping onto ancient life forms, once a seabed, now a desert. By the time the trip is over, we will have travelled back almost two billion years in geologic time. We are descending into history.

Soon I would learn that Ricardo knows everything.

But first I would learn that Ricardo likes to wear nothing.

As soon as the bridge is out of sight, Ricardo asks if it's okay to strip down to his normal attire: "butt nekked."

"Fine with me," I answer. But I'm keeping my long sleeved shirt on, I don't want to get sunburned.

### ***Ricardo***

Ricardo, besides having no clothing, has no sense of smell, which by his own assertion, makes him the best candidate for setting up and taking down the groover every day. He gets no argument. The groover is so named because of the marks it left in the buttocks before someone designed a toilet seat to fit atop what is universally known as an ammo can or rocket box. Originally designed to store and transport 20 mm ammunition, this narrow metal box measuring 17" x 14" by 7.5" with rubber gasket and clamp-down latches at each end, has become the standard feces storage device for river trips. It is called a 'groover' only when used for one specific purpose, and that purpose smells foul.

Ricardo heroically volunteered to manage the groovers. He also carried all the groovers in his boat, and he knew that we'd need five for an 18-day trip with 16 passengers.<sup>5</sup> Despite having the only old-style boat that was not a self-bailer (had to be bailed by bucket or hand-pump after every rapid.) If a groover should leak, he'd be stuck with the leakage. Because Ricardo was the self-named "Groover Dude," he also felt responsible for explaining to the newbies that one must not pee in the groover. He

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<sup>5</sup> Unless we had vegetarians aboard, he said, then we'd need an extra.

provided a detailed lesson on why and how to accomplish this surprisingly difficult separation of liquid and solid at its source. Ricardo could also be depended on to share, from experiences on prior trips, how he could tell what was going on in the lives of each trip participant by glancing into the groover. These unsavory details were delivered with humor and I grew to love Ricardo.

In his tool kit, Ricardo carried a number of brightly red, blue or green instruments shaped to fit under the nose and direct airflow from it across the opening made by the mouth. By blowing through this piece of plastic, what he called a ‘nose flute,’ Ricardo could reproduce any melody. Different notes were achieved by changing the shape of his mouth. In the absence of larger and more traditional instruments, Ricardo’s nose flute became a mainstay of most camp improv. Buckets or pots served as percussion and many voices contributed to the ever-changing lyrics of popular songs. Ricardo’s magic flute could sound like silver in a slot canyon or like an oboe in Redwall cavern.

Ricardo would only put on shorts and shoes at the approach of a rapid, knowing, in the likelihood of swimming and being separated from his boat, he would need to be ‘legal’ in the presence of others, possibly commercial trips, who could help reunite him with our group. Shoes are requisite in any Grand Canyon swim.

His refusal to wear sunscreen, instead coating himself with tanning oil, (spf 4,) resulted in a permanent dark reddish brown skin color that, oddly, matched the canyon walls. His full beard and wise features elicited the comment from Dave, an artist on my first trip, who saw a resemblance to the figure creating Adam in the Sistine Chapel. “Michelangelo got it wrong,” Dave observed, “he forgot the sunglasses.”

Ricardo could be depended on to take a safe line through all rapids. He claimed that his boat, a “tub” or “bucket boat” because it collected water, (was not a ‘self-bailer,’) was virtually unflippable. He named it *Orange Sunshine* and loved it the way some men love cars. After every rapid his passengers would shovel water out using the 5-gallon buckets.

### ***Mile 5***

The first few days of my second trip I watch a sorting occur, something that had happened on the first trip as well, but was too subtle for me to notice. As people reunite with old friends, get to know new friends and newbies learn the lifestyle of the river, the boatmen are likewise sorting themselves out, learning whom to follow, making adjustments to rigging.

My first trip Doc makes it clear to both my husband, Lars, and the newbie, Brad, that they won’t get in trouble if they just follow his lead. Lars is the permit holder and official trip leader, but Doc is really in charge. In the five-boat lineup, Doc almost always goes first. Ricardo almost always goes last or ‘sweep.’ I didn’t know it at the time, but Doc has reasons for the order. I find, once I get used to his lack of clothing, that I prefer to go with Ricardo because he sings.

But the first day of my second trip I ride with Iowa, a stocky, experienced outdoorsman armed with vulgar jokes and grotesque hunting and fishing stories. I’d met him on our first trip when his group camped next to ours at mile 53. From the Midwest, Iowa doesn’t have a lot of experience with big water, but faces every rapid without fear.

His boat is large, at 20 feet, a strategy he hopes will help prevent a flip.

Oar boats on the Colorado river tend to go one of two speeds. Either they drift or they row perpetually. In both cases, only constant attention keeps the boat out of eddies.

This first day Iowa is having trouble keeping up. Partly, I think, because his boat is so large, we keep getting caught in eddies. I look at his white hair and beard, his short stout build; he is working hard. We aren't yet at mile five. I offer to take a turn at the oars.

"Nah, I got this," he says, as we swirl around, grabbed again from underneath by a powerful whirlpool.

We stay in the eddy for another round. I look downriver where I see Julia, a delicate woman in her late 20s, rowing her own 16-foot boat, about to disappear around the bend ahead of us, Ricardo's boat close behind her.

"I'll bet you a bottle of tequila that I can get us out of this eddy and ahead of Ricardo in two minutes flat," I offer.

"What kind of tequila?" Iowa asks, after two pressured breaths.

"One hundred percent agave," I state, not wanting to admit it is just Jose Cuervo, hoping he has something better.

He pushes a button on his watch and relinquishes the oars.

I have just one bottle of tequila for the duration of the trip so I have no choice but to row like hell. I was on a crew team in college so my arms knew how to spin the boat and dig, feather and dig again. The water feels thick because the boat was designed for flotation not for movement through water, the difference between pedaling a bicycle and

pedaling a bus, I think.

I pull, lean, pull as Iowa opens a beer, exaggerating his enjoyment of it with a loud “Ahhh.” He warns me of my time at 30-second intervals.

As I pull even with Ricardo, the watch beeps. Iowa gives me the benefit of the doubt with a smile -- and does not seem eager to take the oars back.

He starts unstrapping an ammo box to pay me, but I tell him to wait until camp. One hard fast rule is no partying until the day’s rapids are upstream. The only big rapid of the day would be Badger at mile eight, and I am not anywhere near ready to see anyone drinking tequila.

### ***The Water***

Rapids form where side streams flow into the main river, carrying boulders at flood stage into the main channel. These obstructions shift constantly so rafters have ample motivation to communicate with each other. Each boatman or woman is eager to share, discuss, interpret both strategies and experiences after every rapid. Like gearheads, some boatmen like to just talk about the rapids.

In most navigable rivers on earth, rapids are measured on a six-point scale from one, which is a flat, easily canoeable stream, to six, which is considered unrunnable. The Colorado River in the Grand Canyon has its own rating system, from one to ten, because it is more than a river. It is Big Water.

River flows are universally measured in cubic feet per second (cfs). The Colorado River in the Grand Canyon has fluctuated historically between 1,000 and 125,000 cfs the

latter figure a pre-dam flood that occurred on average every eight years. Since 1966, the administrators of Glen Canyon dam have controlled river flows. During the summer, when electricity demands are high, the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Reclamation authorizes the release of between 5,000 and 25,000 cfs, an amount exponentially greater than most rivers that drain the Sierras, the Cascades or the Appalachians, where privates practice their skills. My experience is limited to a handful of lesser rivers from California's popular South Fork of the American (700-1,200 cfs) to the Rogue in southern Oregon (1,200-4,000 cfs.) I have never been on Big Water, the unfathomably large amount of icy liquid that flows through the Grand Canyon.

In my Blue Guide<sup>6</sup>, each rapid is rated at different flow rates. Most, but not all, increase in difficulty in the ratings as flows increase. Badger, because its greatest threat is a pour-over (large rock over which the water pours) the danger decreases as the volume of water increases. So Badger rates an 8 at very low flows (1000-3000 cfs.); a 7 at low flows (3,000-9,000 cfs); a 6 at medium flows (9,000-16,000 cfs); and a 5 at high flows (16,000-35,000). The map states simply "Badger Creek Rapid (8,7,6,5). We estimate today's flow to be about 15,000 cfs, so it's a 6.

Several rapids achieve the ten rating at all levels. Where the river washes over the lengthy field of debris deposited at mile 98 by Crystal Creek, the guide states merely "Crystal Rapid (10+)."

Lava Falls, at mile 179, "(10)" has a character, a spirit its own. Lava is a

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<sup>6</sup> Stevens, Larry, ed. *The Colorado River in Grand Canyon: A Comprehensive Guide to Its Natural and Human History*. 5th edition. Flagstaff, Ariz.: Red Lake Books, 1998.



washing-machine-like hole where an 18-foot raft loaded with a ton of gear can be flipped, tossed back upstream, flipped and tossed back up repeatedly until it is stripped.

My first trip down the Colorado I make an effort to memorize the scariest rapids, to remember which are rated nine or above. I try to remember which side to scout from, in case I lose my waterproof guide. By the second night on the river, after listening to Doc and Ricardo, the names have already created an emotional registry in my mind. Crystal is dangerous; Hance, technical; safe passage through Lava is to be celebrated.

As we face the rapids of the Colorado, the kind of sour-smelling sweat only fear can produce keeps my arms slammed at my sides. I wonder about the fears of those first recorded runners of this river, Powell's group of ten civil war vets with its three wooden boats, no waterproof anything, no self-bailing rafts, no satellite-phones. Only Powell had a lifejacket. They had no guidebooks, no experienced boatmen or women aboard who had done it before. Rather than weeks, they spent months portaging and lining their delicate wooden boats through the rapids, never knowing what lay ahead. This process entailed tying long ropes to either end of a boat and letting it go through the rapid alone as crews on shore held on tight to the long lines, clambering past the obstruction as they did so.

Powell's group didn't even have rudimentary communication skills and misinterpreted each others' gestures over the roar of rapids. Today, every boater knows that to signal the best route from downstream to a boater upstream, he or she points not to rocks or obstacles, but to the best route to take: "Always Point the Way to Go."

"Stop" is signaled by crossed arms. A rotation of arms signals that someone has gone overboard, what is called a 'swimmer.' A swimmer in the water signals that he or

she is okay with a demonstrative pat on the head.

But in the Colorado River today, no swimmer is “okay.” The temperature of the Colorado River, having cooled at the bottom of the artificial Lake Powell, is one significant danger Powell and his crew did not face. The human body, submerged in this unnaturally chilled water, gradually stops functioning as its blood vessels shrink away from the body’s surface, the transport of oxygen slows, muscles paralyze and the brain loses the reason required to propel it to shore. When commercial boats park in eddies below the Colorado’s major rapids so paying passengers may watch the smaller private boats run through, a symbiosis is achieved. Tourists are entertained and a rescue squad is on hand with throw ropes to fish out private swimmers.

### ***Mile 8***

At Badger rapid, considered a ‘serious riffle’ by the repeaters, a gust of wind blows Brad’s boat against the pour-over rock as he’s entering the whitewater, pitching his daughter, aged 13, out of the boat. The girl, caught in the twirling water, passes right under the boat. Peggie resists the strong urge to jump in after her daughter and instead waits for it and grabs the lapels of the lifejacket when it pops up and pulls her in quickly. None of us in other boats even know about it until camp.

Holding on tight to the lifeline, the rope strung between D-rings all around the inside of the boat, is something that has to be taught. You have to hold on really tight. Imagine holding onto a branch of a tree while the entire weight of your body hangs below. Then a strong wind comes up, tossing the branch around. That’s how tight you

have to hold on. You have to absolutely clamp your fingers around a line as tightly as you can. It has to be an instinct. And in calm sections of river you keep your hands around something always. A boat can bump or an unseen rock can toss someone overboard unless a hand is already around something. I make a habit of it; even at night I find my fist wrapped around something, even just my own hair.

At camp that first night, Ricardo gives a quick review of how to pull someone on board, how to toss a throw rope, how to coil a throw rope back into the bag. We all know this, but he doesn't know us yet. He reminds us how fast a body moves away from a boat in the water: as fast as the water. The boat, he reminds us, is sitting on top of the water and cannot move fast. You have to get to the swimmer *immediately*.

On a subsequent trip, Badger Rapid also flips the boat of a new boatman, Robert. He is rescued immediately, but becomes insane with panic as he watches his wife glide down the river, looking for a throw rope to catch. Robert calls and calls, like a bird that has lost its chick, "Mary, Mary, Mary." I am riding with Doc that day and have the throw rope out and ready if Doc would just row closer. He doesn't seem to want to move, though we are possibly the closest boat. He points downstream to Paul saying calmly that Paul can pick her up.

Paul seems far away and he too is not moving, just watching. I panic, not knowing whether to throw the rope or not. I don't know Doc well enough to allow him to make the decision for me.

I see Mary, farther from us now, drifting quickly out of our range. I know that a body in the water travels downstream faster than anything floating on the surface, but I

don't think about it. I react to what I see, and throw the rope, but in the time it takes me to dip my hand and raise it in a cast, Mary has been swept out of range. Doc tells me not to be a moron and to sit down.

I pull the throw rope in and pack it back into its bag. I remember pulling our son in after he flipped his kayak in just about every riffle on the Rogue River in southern Oregon. I still don't know Doc well enough to know whether he is right or not. And I'm not used to being called a moron. But I know how to pack a throw rope. He watches me do it but doesn't comment further.

Soon I see that Doc had figured it all out immediately, had probably communicated with Paul in a gesture unseen to me. I would learn that their mutual understanding of how the water moves makes communication unnecessary. They could both see that Mary, though located close to Doc, was being carried by a swift current directly to a point near the eddy in which Paul's boat lagged. Both could see where the river would take her.

These boats are like water-skippers, floating at the mercy of the river. By leaning hard on our minuscule oars, we could only guide the awkward boats, not really steer them. So the boatmen have learned precisely how much control they have; and they have learned to read the water.

But it is Elliot in his hand-made dory who rows quickly across the current and his passenger, Missy, pulls Mary aboard, having already picked up Robert. All boats gather at a steep intersection of land and water where the overturned raft has been hauled to shore by two other boatmen.

Once they are both ashore, Robert and Mary are stripped of PFDs and most clothing, placed on the laps of warm dry people then covered with sleeping bags and blankets. As the others not on the hypothermia team climb a hill to play tug of war with the upside-down raft, Doc drags his block and tackle out from deep in a gear box, cursing at the hassle. Ten people pulling uphill are unable to lift what Doc estimates weighs about two tons. As voices repeatedly suggested we unstrap all the gear from the upside down boat, Doc rigs his pulley system so that lines are tied to the far side of the boat, Doc tells two people to block the other side from slipping up the shore, and the pulley is attached to a fixed object upslope that I can not see. Under the impatient commands of Doc, everyone else, about ten of us, pull the line down the slope toward the water, so that both movements converge. Soon the boat flops back over, having lost only one small dry bag and some personal day gear.

The experience has the effect of solidifying the fears of some and oddly, the confidence of others. I am among the latter group. This motley group of people with different skills functioned together in a potentially bad situation. I could see that Doc, although often impatient, knows what he is doing. He immediately moves on, eager to get to Soap Creek to camp, aware of the likelihood of another group claiming the site if we don't get there first—and the need to dry everything out before dark.

### ***Mary and Robert***

I first meet Mary and Robert at their home, the staging area for my second trip. Someone had picked me up at the train station and I enter the basement awkwardly,

having been told to just go in. I hesitate, thinking I should knock, but instead, I sense by the gear strewn about, that would be inconveniencing someone and be overly polite. So I push open the door and drop my dry bag with a thud to announce I'm here. Sleeping bags spread out on pads and mattresses throughout a basement rec room tell me I am not the first arrival.

I stake out a sleeping space behind a couch upstairs and go, instinctively, to help with the food. Mary's kitchen reveals a family lifestyle of from-scratch cooking, voluminous traffic and frequent outdoor excursion. Family photos feature Grand Canyon vistas. In the dish drainer are the plastic tubes my family also used for peanut butter while backpacking. Ziploc bags, I conjecture, are used more than silverware for delivering the goods.

When I meet Mary, who has been outside smoking, I feel that I already know her. As she spins to close the sliding glass door, I wonder if I do know her. Was she in my father's class or something? She takes me in quickly and puts her hand on my forearm to hold my attention, or perhaps to hold her own, to ask how to pronounce my name. I explain that it is Hawaiian. She explains her name is Maryphyl and would I like to go to the store with her to see if they've gotten in any more boxes of pasteurized milk? They're the only thing, she says. They don't have to be kept cold.

We clear the shelf of the stuff when we find it.

My immediate impression is that Mary is the person I want to be. Mary's German ancestors, the Babbitt family, a name I recognized not because Bruce Babbitt had been governor of Arizona, but because he had been Secretary of the Interior. Early last century

the Babbits had grazing rights from Iowa to Nebraska to Arizona. But the Great Depression left the family with just the holdings around Flagstaff.

Mary's marriage to Robert Simpson, a natural progression from childhood friendship, seems idyllic. Mary and Robert both grew up in Arizona and first hiked the canyon in the mid 70s. Since that inauguration, Mary has never been at home at home. Mary and Robert figured out that about 95 percent of the hiking in the Grand Canyon occurs in about three percent of the park. Surely someone knew of some other trails. Mary soon found Harvey Butchart's trail notes and started exploring—sometimes with their three children, sometimes alone.

Robert went to law school but became discouraged working as an intern at a public defender's office and returned to his father's business, the Simpson Store in Cameron, the one I'd happened into on my way to the put-in on my first trip. Mary took on the bookkeeping and ran the financial side of the business, descending into the canyon with any or all of their three kids, Ken, Ruth or Lily whenever she could. I get the impression her main activity is hiking, bookkeeping a secondary activity.

In the morning we caravan to Lee's Ferry. En route, we stop at the Simpsons' store, the same place my first trip had stopped. But this time Robert comes out with huge bags of sandwiches he's ordered ahead of time. This is also where Robert has prepared our freezers, adding a little water each day to each nearly coffin-sized cooler in his walk-in. After we eat lunch, we strap the coolers onto Doc's trailer and pile in to speed through the Navajo Indian reservation to the put-in.

On the launch ramp Mary speaks in the determined voice of a mother, a woman

who is accustomed to things being done properly for a reason. Now, strapped in under each boatman's seat, the coolers are  $\frac{3}{4}$ -full of solid ice, no bubbles. Only the top  $\frac{1}{4}$  contains food—Mary has designated one cooler for produce, one for meats, one for dairy, one for lunch. She's thrilled to see me writing it all down in my notebook, which cooler is on which boat.

I can think of only one person who does not thrive in Mary's presence. And it's a two-way street. Doc Thomas, in his own words, did not have time for people like Mary.

Doc calls Mary 'simple.'

Mary calls Doc 'a sociopath.'

That Mary's husband, Robert, lives under what Mary refers to as the 'curse of Doc's friendship' is not irrelevant. Mary and Doc compete for Robert's attention.

Her long gray braid indicates Mary's mood. When she is angry it twitches, when she is happy it dances; when she is entirely relaxed, beer in hand, it comes unraveled and spreads around her shoulders, reaching almost to her elbows. Mary's motto, printed on coffee mugs available very cheap at the Simpson store: "Walk in Beauty."

Mary and Doc rarely confront each other; it's as if they know someone will get hurt if they do.

### ***Mile 11***

Concerned that an early spill can be so discouraging as to cause a boatman to quit, or worse, freeze up, Doc spends hours talking Robert through the event in camp. Robert, shivering, looks down at the sand and nods and nods, his eyes glancing up every few



seconds to check on Mary, who is leaping around the kitchen unphased.

This camp at Soap Creek is just above the rapid of the same name. The roar of the rapid tempts me to wander among the boulders until I have a good view of the froth of white. None of the repeaters seems phased by it and my blue guide shows it to be a five at current flows. Honestly, it looks like a safe string of steep waves; it looks like fun.

I return to the kitchen all fears allayed. Mary is the source of any and all ‘let’s not reinvent the wheel’ knowledge about preparing a meal for 16 people on a sandy beach. The work charts in which I had scheduled meal teams so everyone circulated and no one got stuck doing any one chore, are not needed. All anyone needs is Mary’s brain.

Although we refer to cooler maps and inventories, most trips, organized and packed in Robert and Mary’s basement in Flag, run efficiently. A menu in a looseleaf binder stored in the Kitchen box guides the ‘shopping’ which is conducted by a person armed with a bucket, hopping from boat to boat or box to box collecting the ingredients of the evening meal and for convenience, often breakfast and lunch the next day.

Kitchen crew usually means three people working together. When Mary is around the kitchen, which she usually is, everyone knows dinner will be on time, whenever that is. Although a loose set of groupings is worked out that first night, circulating passengers in groups of three are always augmented by Mary, Maddy and Anna, who often just walk into the kitchen, look at the menu, wash their hands, and start slicing vegetables.

The set up on my first trip turns out to be standard operating procedure for every trip. Dave, an artist but also a strongly built retired orthopedist with a big smile and a carefree gait, takes it upon himself to set up the kitchen every night, recruiting anyone

passing through to help spread out ground tarps, unstrapping aluminum tables that double as decks on someone's boat, and tying the mesh dish-drying bag to the back of a table and most critically, setting up the burners and propane tanks for the stove in a solid location. Ricardo likewise sets up the groover and, between the kitchen and groover, a hand-wash station I suspect Ricardo built himself. It includes a foot-operated water pump so that clean hands need not touch anything. I marvel at the sophistication.

On subsequent trips, Mary makes sure everything is set up to standards and if not, she quietly enlists the help of Robert. She calls him "boyfriend."

### ***The Land***

The Colorado River drains one-twelfth the land area of the United States plus 2,000 square miles of Mexico. The water upstream from the Grand Canyon enables Glen Canyon dam's turbines to generate electricity enough to serve 1.5 million people annually in a five-state region. From Glen Canyon the water runs through Marble Canyon before pouring through the uplifted wonder that is the Grand Canyon.

Unlike the voluminous Mississippi, Missouri, Columbia, Brazos, Rio Grande, Potomac, Hudson or Ohio Rivers, the Colorado hurtles through a one-mile deep textbook of geologic history, giving it a reputation worldwide as the ultimate recreational whitewater in America, set in a geology classroom.

The river erodes a path for itself creating a geo-history that can be read in the strata it exposes, the reader always aware that the river even now continues cutting

deeper, even as we stare, blink and stare some more. Until recently, the past few decades, geologists described the process as one of a layer cake being pushed up as someone is holding a knife, the river the knife. But the cake isn't exactly straight, so as a person rides the river downstream through the canyon, the layers are revealed at a slight angle, sometimes jumbled. The scenery ages hundreds of millions of years as the boat progresses fewer than 300 miles downstream. Now geologists are suggesting maybe the river didn't take as long as previously thought to cut through all these amazingly beautiful, but soft, layers of rock. Theories are swirling again.

Maybe there was a lake, created by a volcanic flow that blocked the drainage at about Lava Falls. Maybe the river flowed upstream for a while? Maybe then it broke through the lava and the entrenched meander re-entrenched in a slightly different place—maybe the Colorado river started in the middle and flowed two directions?

Things are never as simple as they seem. The millennia washed layers away, then replaced with new sediment, placing and removing then replacing layers here and there to confuse the geologic cannon. The nearly two dozen layers we see are not as simple as they appear and do not catalogue geology with chronologic precision.

My understanding of geology derives from the trilogy of words my middle-school kids brought home. All rock is either 1) igneous (think “ignite” as in fire or volcanic in origin); 2) sedimentary (sediment, it was laid down like the dust on the kids' soccer trophies); or 3) metamorphic, it got changed under pressure (think larvae into butterflies, metamorphosis.) All three classifications of rock are present here.

At the beginning of my fifth trip through the Grand Canyon I thought I had a

basic understanding of how the place came to be. But after spending 16 days there with two U.S.G.S geologists among the crew, I felt I had learned an enormous amount, but now just had a beginning of a glimpse of an understanding.

### ***Mile 17***

Passengers shuffle from one boat to another daily. Riding on a boat allows a small amount of daily baggage, usually a water bottle, a camera, maybe snacks, a windbreaker, etc. and in my case a notebook. Water bottles and other beverages are usually stored in a mesh “drag bag” that on calm sections of river is clipped with a carabiner or “beaner” to a lifeline to cool in the frigid water. This means that passengers figure out early in the morning which boat they will ride all day, clip their personal items aboard and stock the drag bag. The habit of not switching boats during the day also decreases the odds of leaving someone behind.

The boatmen and woman on our 2003 trip are Julia, Doc, Ricardo, Brad and Lars<sup>7</sup>. Later trips would include Paul, Mark, Elliot and Robert. As passengers and oarsmen figure out who is to ride where, safety is first on everyone’s mind, an instinct really. A rower facing a particularly bad rapid wants a passenger on board competent to pull him or her in—for the oarsman is the person most likely to go swimming, with hands on oars instead of a death-grip on a lifeline.

Although we have run several rapids before mile 17, the scouting point above House Rock rapid marks the place I first feel cold in the canyon’s 115-degree heat. At

this medium flow, the rating on the rapid is seven, but compared to Badger and Soap Creek, House Rock looks exponentially worse. The repeaters confirm this is the first real rapid. We hike, lifejackets still buckled, to a point on river right where we look down on the broiling white water. I hold my arms tight to my sides. The hydraulic forces below me rage beyond my ability to fathom. I can see that if a human body took the trip through that rapid it could be pounded against the solid vertical wall unsurvivably. Would a human being even be visible? We all wore PFDs, but still, would we float? The sheer power of 15,000 cubic feet of water passing by per second is inestimable, like trying to imagine what lies beyond the stars ... but a lot less peaceful to contemplate.

Our boatmen stand looking over the rapid below, Paul smoking calmly, scrawling routes in the air, his cigarette a pencil. We all watch, gauging the hole and what would happen if a boat slid into it sideways. But Paul, Doc, Ricardo all stand firmly on the other side of the line between fear and excitement from where I stand. I am scared. They are thrilled.

Most rapids soak all of us. Although some stretches of river are more violent than others, traveling an average of 15-20 miles per day means getting soaked 5-10 times a day, maybe every hour. In Ricardo's boat, that's a lot of bailing. I do not mind bailing and I enjoy Ricardo's personality. Perhaps more importantly, I am not offended by Ricardo's disdain for clothing, so I ride with him frequently and our conversation soon develops a rhythm. Ricardo, who oddly, I thought, stood facing downstream pushing on the oars, first one side then the other, recounts stories. He seems to assume I know more than I do. I punctuate his phrases with simple questions. He tells of flash floods he has

witnessed, groover mishaps, flips of improperly rigged boats (aka yard sales), and he sings. On key. Song after song after song. He knows all the lyrics.

Peggie, who is married to Brad, asks me as she faces this first big rapid of the trip, House Rock Rapid, who I think is the safest rower for her and for her daughter. Following her daughter's swim, Peggie is scared, but she's not letting fear control her. I consider carefully. Ricardo's boat is the most stable but he wouldn't want to wear pants all day and this mom wouldn't want her teenage daughter to have to witness that ... or Ricardo would have to keep his shorts on. Doc is the most experienced of the remaining boatmen, Julia has the most control of her craft and can read the water best. Brad is a newbie but smart and careful. Lars tends toward the cowboy runs. I advise they ride with Brad, because he cares the most about his wife and daughter – and Peggie would haul him in if he went over.

But Peggie chooses Ricardo, even though it means laborious bailing. Ricardo has to put his shorts on, but doesn't complain.

The look on Brad's face shows hurt, but tolerance.

I ride in Doc's bright yellow 18-foot boat he calls *Circling the Drain*, at his request. I know he chose me, as he often would, because I am tall and strong and can pull him in if he goes swimming. Also, I row in the wind. And I don't flinch anymore when he calls me a moron. Doc calls everyone a moron, especially, it seems, Mary. Doc, I decide, is like my mother-in-law: an interesting character. If he is not telling me I'm a moron, he is telling me I am a Nordic goddess or a classic American Beauty. At some point I cease to be creeped out by Doc. I realize he is about three-fourths my height and

in no way a physical threat. If I can laugh at myself, I can handle him.

The river forms a V at the top of every rapid, whether a riffle or roaring hole like the one in the center of House Rock Rapid. This transition zone is called the “tongue” and forms where the water slips from smooth quiet peaceful stream into frothing chaos. Following that smooth triangular tongue to its tip generally places the boat in the middle of the watercourse, the roughest point but also the point most likely to be free from rocks.

House Rock Rapid is named for a large house-sized boulder located many miles away from the rapid in Rider Canyon. Here in the main canyon, the curve of broiling water wraps around a spit of boulders clockwise so that in this case, following the V would place the boat in the worst possible place, just above the deep hole, which is located about two-thirds the way through the roughest water. The hole is the dip before an enormous standing wave big enough to hide a large passenger van. An 18-foot raft has little chance to remain upright, regardless of weight distribution or oarsman’s skill, should it smack into this wave sideways.

Riding with Doc means a safer run, but a greater risk and a harder fall. Because our boat is first, we are at highest risk, no one downstream from us to throw us rescue lines, should something happen. Doc takes a conservative line on the inside of the curve from the hole.

My disappointment sets in as we sail past the big trench, the flushing dent of water that could flip a boat then spit it out in any direction, either against the cruel red wall or downstream. It could flip it back upstream for another spin in the giant washing machine.

But as we fly past, it looks like fun.

When we are next to the big hole, Doc begins pulling on the oars, drawing us into the eddy to watch the other boats go through. Most of them follow Doc's line at the entry but instead of pulling right, they go through the wave train, soaking everyone on board, but dropping no one in the water. I watch our friends go sailing past, shrieking through the standing waves, clinging with both hands to safety lines, hats flying back or drenched, white water blinding their view and our view of them.

Then Doc maneuvers the heavy end of his boat out into the stream and the eddy spits us back into the river. We ride the row of gravy train, the roller coaster below the rapid, and we are on to the next stretch of river, the next rapid.

By the fourth time I take the trip, House Rock rapid is the beginning of the fun for me. But I still shiver and Paul still smokes.

I realize the trip is different for each person, the fear:thrill ratio unique though the risk:danger probably remains the same.

## ***Mile 20***

I choose a sandy spot close to the water to erect my tent at the upper North Canyon camp, abundant dry flotsam tangled in bushes and trees convinces me I will not be awakened by rising water in the night. Releases from the dam increase during times of maximum power demand. The surge of water released during the afternoon raises the level of the river downstream, travelling at a rate that I am always failing to calculate correctly, but the repeaters seem to have memorized. Certain camps will have water rise



at night, and others will have the water will drop, leaving boats stranded on the sand. Boatmen take turns adjusting the lines every night. Occasionally, the boatman on line duty drinks too much or sleeps too hard and the entire crew has to work together in the morning to heave and drag the boats out into the water.

Once ashore, we all set up our individual campsites and our lawnchairs. Some people rush to stake a claim on a sleeping spot with a lifejacket or hat hung in a tree. Others work to unload kitchen equipment first, wandering off to find a tentsite only when the work is done. I find that by waiting until everyone is settled not only do I feel better about helping out, but I know where the groover is and avoid its path. Also, I learn who snores and what their gear looks like so when I find a sleeping spot, I am able to choose my neighbors.

Setting up camp is laborious. If everyone goes hiking and just a few people are burdened with the tasks, it can take hours. But on all my trips I find this is almost never the case. To a person, everyone pitches in to help. And its not simple. Setting up the kitchen is a many-hands:light work operation.

The elevated demand for access to this particular ‘wilderness,’ has made camping in the canyon a heavily regulated affair. The National Park Service requires tarps be placed down before cooking tables and stoves are erected and all spills, all waste must be carried out if solid, and washed away by the river if liquid. Still, ants mark the kitchen locations chosen by the preponderance of campers. Ravens comb the sand as the boats are loaded each morning, their beaks raking the beach for treats.

It's my third trip: as we eat dinner a crow harasses Doc. When he yells at the bird, I realize that Doc is not wearing anything except a shirt. When he bends over to pick up a rock to throw at the crow, all is revealed. All.

I wonder how the permit holder, Mr. Johansen, a religious chiropractor, will react when he notices. Or worse, when his wife notices. Doc, I suspect, is fully cognizant and ready to discuss the issue. Or fight about it. But if anyone notices, nothing is said.

In the morning several of us head up North Canyon. The trail climbs the left side of North Canyon, which is on our right as we head out. I dawdle to take a picture of the river and my companions' voices disappear ahead. My new sandals tighten as I slip on a small rock. I'm high enough now for a fall to end my trip, hell, my life. Just as the elevation is becoming dizzying, a boulder juts out into the trail and I cannot see a way around it except to hug it, fannypack over the sheer drop into the canyon floor that seems a mile below me. The others ahead have made it without pause, I reason, and so I follow. A few years later when I hear of the death of a twelve-year-old boy on a hike in North Canyon, I think I know where he died. There's no room here for learning.

I'm rewarded with scalloped curves of eroded rock that form tiny steps, each layer eroded to some measurable breaking point. I see where other river runners' footsteps have dirtied a path across the now-dry creekbed and I follow them to a staircase that leads sideways across a dry waterfall. At the top my companions are lounging in the natural recliners that surround a perfect mirror of a stagnant pool. Sunshine on rocks a mile up bounces off the water onto canyon walls, so still I cannot tell if it really is light or if it is

actually a different color of rock.

I cannot believe this is the same water that excavated the rock so gracefully, leaving curved lines that arch upward ever steeper. We discuss the nature of beauty and the beauty of nature; we wonder why natural lines and shapes make us happy. No one has an answer.

### ***The Roaring 20s***

On the next section of river, the twenties, we will be soaked, soaked and then soaked again. Ricardo asks me politely in a soft voice to go in his boat. He needs a dependable bailer. And someone big enough to pull him in if he falls out.

On a spring trip, I squeeze into a wetsuit for this wettest day. Everyone wears splash jackets and those without wetsuits wear dry-suits. Any feet not encased in neoprene or wool or as mine are, both, will get cold.

The day begins with 21-mile Rapid, with a 12-foot drop. The cold water in morning shade chills me into a bad mood. Ricardo is not phased. He pushes on one oar then the other, slowly, matching his sentences to his strokes. “Indian Dick,” he soon announces, pointing out the tall narrow chunk of rock that has separated from its cliff and appears ready to smash down into the canyon at a breath. Indian Dick rapid seems easy but Ricardo warns that there’s a bitch of a wave on the right that can flip us. I can’t believe it until I see it. Just a five-foot drop but it’s enough to power up a pile of water. We splash through slightly left of center and I barely get wet.

But in half a mile we’re getting soaked, again, at you guessed it: 23-and-a-half-

mile Rapid. Georgie Rapid at mile 24, named after a legendary boatwoman who invented the 'j-rig,' a standard baloney boat used by commercial outfitters. Before we get to Silver Grotto at mile 29.5, we will get soaked by 24.5-mile Rapid, Hansbrough-Richards Rapid, Cave Springs Rapid and 27-mile Rapid and we'll have dropped almost three stories in elevation.

The boat fills with water again and again. My idea of just leaving the water in the boat until it is all over makes Ricardo nervous. Although *Orange Sunshine* rides lower in the water and therefor travels faster, it is also harder to control. Ricardo needs me to bail in order to set up each run. I learn to handle the clumsy five-gallon bucket so that it doesn't clunk against my knees. Soon we develop a rhythm for bailing, to the beat of whatever Beatles song Ricardo is singing. He sings a lot of them.

By the end of the day I am exhausted and my arms ache. Ricardo and Doc talk up my bailing skills, as a reward I guess. Doc calls me a Nordic goddess again and my husband laughs. We all sit around the living room of Doc's boat, leaning on things, or each other.

Doc hands me a can of Kern's guava juice. "Take a sip outta that, willya?" I oblige and hand it back. He pulls an enormous bottle of tequila out of his footwell and pours some carefully into the can, then hands it back. I take a sip and pass it. When the can gets back to Doc, he pours more tequila in.

"None of you guys is on kitchen duty tonight, are ya?" he inquires.

### ***Mile 30***

South Canyon seems to come too soon after North Canyon but I do not question the nomenclature. On my third trip, Mark and I clamber up the rocks to find a ruin that Doc has described. Lacy is already half way there and waits for us when she sees us coming. Now high above the river, we explore beyond the ruin where a ledge leads invitingly around a corner, and, we wonder, just how far up the side canyon we can follow the ledge. I am in front and suddenly get a sense of the depth of the fall to the canyon floor far, far below and backtrack quickly, scaring Lacy, who is following closer than I had been aware. We take turns then, peering around the corner, agreeing to go no farther. But Mark and I get a good look up the canyon and our eyes meet. "We have time," he says, so we scramble down to the river to walk up the canyon. At the base, leaning against a rock, we find Elliot, strumming on an instrument I do not know, his cowboy hat hiding his face. He looks up but does not interrupt his song. He is looking to where we are headed and making a calculation. He gestures to the imposing sky. It is a warning. Flash floods.

Nevertheless, we begin a casual walk, for simply walking over flat rocks and through the dry sand cannot be called a hike. Less than a quarter mile up the narrow canyon I feel a raindrop. Mark's hand flies out, simultaneously, palm up. He felt one too. Wordlessly we turn and hasten back to the river.

South Camp seems lovely but I hear Mary arguing with Doc about something. Just downstream is a better campsite, she is stating, here there are not enough tent spaces. The last one to stake my tentsite claim, I have placed my sleeping bag carefully on a narrow ledge about 12 feet above the kitchen. There is no room for a tent. I sense she is

right, but I have not complaint. If it starts raining, I figure I can move my sleeping bag into the kitchen, which has been covered with a rain shelter that Robert thought to bring.

Doc, who sleeps on his boat, claims there's a surf at the lower site that keeps the boats moving all night. He won't be able to sleep. Boatmen need their rest.

I settle down to witness the argument but look up to see a pale blue raft approaching, unusual because it is alone. Mary is faster than me and is giving orders. I had not noticed that the boat had no one on it, which suggests we may see other things, or should have already seen other things. Like bodies floating by.

Mary is already yelling to Missy.

Missy is in the bow of Elliot's boat, hurriedly putting her lifejacket on as Elliot pushes his dory into the current. Soon they are midstream where Missy leaps aboard the orphaned raft and grabs the oars. Elliot has already rowed back to our camp, having lost no distance. I watch Missy but Mary tells me to get ready with a throw-rope. I get to the end of another boat to watch for swimmers but see nothing coming.

Meanwhile, Missy is floating downstream alone. Mary turns to Doc, someone has to go after Missy.

"Nonsense," Doc says, unless she's a total moron, she can't help but be drawn into the eddy downstream. The previous argument continues as though the new crisis is just a natural part of his ongoing debate.

Soon Missy appears, walking along the edge of the shore. "I tied it up in the big bay down there," she reports. "Should we call it in?"

Doc, who has set up his SAT phone, now as if on cue, addresses someone at the

NPS dispatch office. He asks Missy if there was any sign of distress. She reports that the oars had been shipped. Was there a PFD on board?

No.

Doc reports the incident, calmly advising that it appears to have floated away from someone's camp. Missy has found a pencil but is looking for paper to leave a note. I find an extra postcard and suggest that whoever comes to get the boat is likely going to be needing a beer.

Hours later when a boat appears with a person standing in the bow addressing us, hands forming a megaphone over his mouth, we all point downstream.

Soon, the two visitors are in camp, having found their boat, the note, the beer. Their gratitude is exuberant. They are employees of National River Supply, on a private trip, and their leader is Clyde, a charming man just passing middle age. They are planning to put this in their blog. Missy is the hero of the day.

Doc suggests the men let the park know, but does not offer the use of his SAT phone. It's a dollar and a half a minute, he says, in a quiet high-pitched voice. I'm not going to let those morons start yacking. I only have one spare battery.

When the others have gone, Mary and I look at each other. "What IS a blog?" she asks me.

What I want to know is how they are getting internet service to post it. They are NRS, Paul points out, if anyone can figure the equipment to do that, it would be them.

The drama of the missing boat has upstaged Mary and Doc's argument.

Mr. Johansen, the tall amiable man who secured our permit is a chiropractor; his wife quiet and kind, is trying, visibly, not to be miserable. After dinner, with scattered showers apparently appeased for the night, we are glad to be well-fed, dry and finished with the roaring twenties. Lacy and Esther have dug up some nail polish and are offering free pedicures. I'm in.

The color selection is limited and it's getting dark but I don't care. We giggle through the process, trying to keep sand off the drying paint. Then Mark is standing next to me, asking to be next.

Soon it's clear that everyone, everyone, must get their nails done.

Doc outright refuses but Mr. Johansen blushes and walks back and forth a few times. Finally he consents. Lacy offers him a choice of romantic raspberry or hot pink. He goes for "the purply one" and settles into a folding chair in the sand, Lacy kneeling at his feet comments that this color is going to 'turn Joan on.' His wife, nearby, blushes. It's the first smile I've seen on her.

I notice that Doc is asleep in a chair so I borrow a deep maroon and finish both feet without him noticing. By the time he wakes up we have moved on and no one notices, least of all him.

Paul is the last victim, hiding on his boat with his cigarettes. Lacy climbs aboard and we see Paul shake his head, "no thank you."

Then Lacy's head turns sideways and soon Paul is rearranging his seat so Lacy can have his foot in her lap.



### ***Mile 33***

I am always excited to see Redwall Cavern, one of the least likely natural features of a GC river trip. This enormous cave slopes gently to meet the sand, with room enough, by one early estimate, for 50,000 people to enjoy a concert. I'm pretty sure that's an exaggeration, but it is big enough for a good three-way game of Frisbee. It seems the natural curve of the ceiling is what every concert hall tries to emulate.

Only when a baloney boat arrives, do we consider leaving. I watch as entire families, with teenage children, old, young and barely ambulatory, seem to impossibly spread out from the raft like some kind of chemistry experiment that produces more foam than could possibly have fit in the bottle.

The commercial boatmen inform their clients they have no more than ten minutes. In an impossibly short time, the boatman by some invisible signal gathers them all back onto the floating stadiums. I count 34 passengers. The boatman is counting too. "They are on a tight schedule," Doc comments.

### ***Mile 35***

Nautaloid Canyon is missed on my first three trips so I've asked the boatman to stop here on my fourth. We all hike up into this side canyon at river left, scrambling different routes, and compete to find the canyon's eponymous sea creatures. Soon I see Robert tipping his water bottle onto the floor of the drainage, a smooth bluish green rock. The shape of a large, chambered seashell emerges. I don't know what I was expecting but it wasn't this, a remarkably distinct shape as clear and concise as though it had been

dropped here this morning rather than 340 million years ago.

On my last trip, we camp here. This ten-boat trip is populated by experienced Wyoming boaters who take turns preparing meals of their own design. No equipment has been rented, no group food purchase made. Elliot and I work together to grill lambchops and salmon. I use the coffeepot to cook asparagus, which works well, cooking the stems more than the delicate tips. I boil five pounds of potatoes with a handful of garlic cloves, mashing the whole mess with a large fork then adding half and half. Someone asks if the mashed potatoes are real. I'm stumped. Someone else answers, 'yes, you can tell because of the peels.' I'm not sure what fake mashed potatoes would be.

### *Time*

As fast as the water courses through the Grand Canyon at certain points, so does a slowness take over most of the time we are on the river. "What day is it anyway?" is a common enough refrain that someone had it printed on a t-shirt with artwork of the inner gorge.

A human lifetime, on the spectrum of Grand Canyon geology, is irrelevant. Nearly a billion years after the precambrian vishnu shist at the depths of the canyon drifted past our boats the Kaibab marine limestone began to form. This top layer, that dusted my sandals as I stepped off Navajo bridge the day before launch was once the bottom of a sea that is now desert.

It is day three and I feel a strong urge to get back to my desk, shouldn't I be doing something? Isn't there something that needs to be mailed?

But all I can get worked up about is whether tonight is my turn for kitchen duty; my responsibilities include setting up my tent, sleeping, eating, brushing my teeth, bathing in a remarkably cold river, making it through a gorgeous day in the gorge, then doing it all over again. My job is to love this place, that is all.

The Colorado descends some 2,200 feet, crashing through rapids that are able to soak a person so thoroughly she has to feel around to make sure not only her glasses, her clothes, her shoes, but also her hair, teeth and vital organs have not washed away. A cycle of wet, dry, wet, wet, wet cracks my feet. The cracks in my feet appear similar to the canyon itself. This becomes my primary concern: taking care of a body's simple needs.

Every boater has his or her 'best remedy' for foot care. Mine is a generous application of bag balm, a substance the consistency of bearing grease made from lanolin and sulfur that comes in a green metal box. Its distinct smell can be found in every horse barn in the west. As I apply it to my feet every night before putting on a dedicated pair of socks and climbing into my sleeping bag, I am taken to the back wall of our garage in Montana where the tack was stored in my childhood.

All things horse fitted into or onto that wall and it smelled of bag balm and Neatsfoot oil. It was a kind of western tradition. My feet feel better within a day or two of this treatment, but still, cracks remain, threatening to bleed with every side hike.

Doc insists the only cure for this foot problem, known as "Tolio," is superglue. Now I am certain he is a quack.

### *Mile 47*

Saddle Canyon meanders west from river right through a relatively lush valley that reminds me of hiking in Hawaii. The trail departs the river with a rapid ascent among rocks and scant desert shrubs. Julia and Doc, carrying their large water bottles, seem committed to what lies ahead.

Soon we are on a dry north-facing slope that drops precipitously into a lush valley below. Looking back, the red wall of the main canyon seems another world. I try to wrap my head around the size of it. By maintaining a more or less level course, the path leads us to the valley floor, which has ascended to meet us. We pick our way along a creek bed made surrealistically green by a jungle of vegetation.

Then suddenly we are in Grand Canyon architecture again. Julia wades through a small pool but I cannot see how she will climb the steep rocks through which the stream trickles. She hands me her water bottle and places a sandal waste-high on the rock. Jimmying herself up, she achieves the ledge about 10 feet up and lies down on the floor above to lend me a hand.

Betsy and Peggie likewise help each other. As we continue upstream the canyon becomes narrower and we have to help each other again at the 'bath tub' Julia keeps referring to. The final approach means swimming through a pool then climbing up one last time to an opening in the canyon wide enough to provide a lounging area. Disney couldn't have invented a lovelier resort, at the upper end a waterfall shower. Although we are not allowed to use soaps or shampoos—or to urinate—within a quarter mile of these sidestreams, we all take turns standing under the falling water. On my fourth trip, the trip

leader strips down here and when I climb up over the lip of the rock and see him, I am suddenly embarrassed to be inescapably walking in on him. But he is not shy, and shows me a white frog he has found on his shower wall, the frog almost as white as his own naked skin.

We trickle back down to the main canyon and the boats.

At camp, my brother informs me that he is unwilling to ride in Ricardo's boat because he finds his nudity offensive. My jaw drops in disbelief. This is the guy who preaches tolerance and has a 'coexist' sticker on his Subaru. "Are you kidding me?"

Then, as I watch him sidle into the kitchen to ask that night as he asks whoever is in the kitchen every night, to alter their cooking routines so that some of the food being prepared can be done so without meat, I suffer my first real regret about this trip. Why did I invite my brother? What was I thinking? One of my requests was that everyone give up their non-medically necessary diets for this trip. Did he just ignore this? Why didn't he discuss it with me? Betsy and Steve, who have given up their Atkinson diet and Julia who has given up her vegetarian diet for this trip do not say anything. But I sense a discomfort.

Brad, who figures out how I'm feeling just by watching, advises I let it go. So I try. He's your brother, Brad comments, you knew he was like this. Try to focus on why you did invite him, what he has to offer, rather than what he is taking away from the trip. I remember that my brother had been the photographer at our wedding, providing beautiful photographs of the event. I take a big breath. Brad is right. "Rise above," Brad says.

### *Mile 53*

The river eddy is a hydraulic form, an upstream river, caused by the friction of the river's force against rocks, against the banks, as it descends. It is a rebounding of water that occurs downstream of obstructions in the river flow. In an eddy, the water flows upstream, downstream of rock islands and especially along the irregular shore. Without eddies, landing a boat becomes very difficult.

Eddies slow the water so that sand drops out of it, building up below rocks or other promontories in the river path. Thus, the sandy deposits where we want to camp are also usually served by an eddy that makes escape from the main force of the river easy. I am usually game for slow-water rowing and offer to Paul to put in some time with the oars. At mile 53 the flush of rocks and dirt from Nankoweap Creek is so enormous it created a piece of land big enough for Anasazi to farm, which they did for about a century, a thousand years ago.

While riding with Paul, I agree to catch the huge eddy and land the boat so that he can finish his cigarette. Catching the big eddy is easy, but it is so big, it has its own sub-eddy going downstream again, which is the one I needed to catch in order to reach shore.

I wait until the moment feels right, but before I finish the first oar-stroke I know I've missed the eddy-out. Paul, balanced comfortably on the stern tube of his gray raft, lights another cigarette and smiles. "That's alright, the sooner we get to the beach, the sooner we have to start unpacking all this shit," he says. Our eddy is enormous even as Grand Canyon eddies go. The eddy I am attempting to catch pushes out from this eddy:

an eddy of an eddy. I had pulled too late so I now spin the boat by pulling on the left oar and pushing on the right, to re-enter the larger eddy. The heavy end of the boat, the stern, piled high with gear, is caught by the giant swirl and so we ride around the sandy bay once more, my error obvious to all on shore. Aware of the risk of eddying out at the wrong time and ending up in the main stream of the Colorado river, missing camp altogether, I watch the water carefully. Paul does not. He examines the back of his hand where he's knocked a knuckle and a red gash shows. "I cannot think of any place I would rather be at this moment in time," he says, "than on a boat riding around Nankoweap eddy with a pretty woman pulling on my oars. Do you want a beer?"

He is trying to make me feel better. Landing the second sentence, I respond with "please." We spin lazily around again but this time Paul advises me when to pull out toward the beach. It seems too soon to me, but I obey. Thrilled to land between the boats of Robert and Doc, the two boatmen with whom Paul loves best to gab, I carefully stow the oars. Paul sits looking at me, not leaping out to tie the bowline to a Tamarisk tree. He takes a drag on his cigarette before speaking.

"That's all well and good but hell if I'm gonna unload this boat with the bow on the beach." I have landed the boat backward so that to unload it, Paul will have to carry or throw all the gear the length of the boat to get it to shore. He smiles largely at me.

I am contemplating how to push back out, when Mary comes to our rescue. Seeing the problem, she pushes us straight out. When the water is deep enough that her pants are soaked to the knee, she leans over the bow tube and slides aboard.

When she has gathered herself to a sitting position, bummed a beer from Paul and

taken the first sip, I am a quarter way round the eddy again and Paul has welcomed her aboard with an open pack of cigarettes. She takes one with a nod and a thank you.

“You two looked like you were having fun out here so I thought I’d join you,” she says. “Besides, everyone else is hiking up to the granaries so we’d just get stuck with kitchen setup.”

The Nankoweap granaries, Anasazi structures thought by archeologists to be winter food storage cupboards, lure boaters to hike up a steep slope. Once they arrive at the mini-bedroom sized chambers with perfectly camouflaged except for their square doors, high above the rapids, a glance downstream provides a view of the most-photographed section of Colorado river. It meanders between two vertical walls that remain straight for about three miles. A three-mile view such as the one offered from the base of the granaries at Nankoweap is rare.

As we circle the eddy, drinking beer and discussing dinner preparation, Mary and Paul and I watched the rest of our group, too far away to be identifiable individually, crawling over rocks, posing for pictures in front of the granaries.

We are in full view of them as well, but still reconciling my shame, I try to relax as we drift around and around the large bay.

When we become aware the hikers are headed down, I follow Paul’s instructions and Mary leaps ashore with the bowline. As I start tossing gear on the beach from Paul’s boat, I feel raindrops. The hikers are skittering down as we scramble to put things in tents. Just as it occurs to me to pull towels off drying-lines I see that Mary has completed that courtesy, tossing drying towels and packs into tents, flopping the tops of dry bags



over so the rain does not get in.

For dinner that night Missy, Lacy and I layer enchiladas in a Dutch oven, placing corn tortillas flat instead of rolling each one, as we kneel under an umbrella in heavy rain. The fire, per NPS regs, is built in a firepan that is suspended about eight inches above the sand. The minority of the group not huddled in tents sings rain songs, clustered intimately under a second umbrella. I rank the enchiladas among the best meals of the trip. We sing under the umbrella until the coals are no longer glowing.

Doc explains to me that if it hadn't been for the time lost with Robert's flip, we could have had a layover here and dried out. On subsequent trips we do this, planning a full day of hiking, drying out gear, patching leaks, an indulgence unknown to commercial trips. We neither have to pack up in the morning or unpack in the evening. Bliss.

### ***Petroglyphs***

On my third trip, Doc mentions that above the redwall, above the inner canyon is a stone-aged bulletin board known as Newspaper Rock. He says it can be reached by hiking up a little-travelled side creek, a branch I had not realized splits off the main creek near the river.

I am raring to go. But the rule is no hiking alone. Nearby I spot Peter, a quiet, relentlessly helpful boatman with a gray ponytail. He has been listening and nods ever so slightly. We both grab water bottles. I am eager to get out of camp before the others hear of our plan because I have a rare energy. I do not want to be slow. I want to get there. It

is as though my body is needing some land, needing to get out. What could be more appealing than a stone-aged newspaper?

We follow Doc's sketchy instructions to "follow the north branch of the creek until you get to the trail." We try animal trails that disperse just a few hundred feet above the creek several times before we give up and head back, disappointed. As we descend the creek bed, I scan the walls of the narrow canyon for any indications of human traffic. I spot a ledge that looks passable, a ledge that has dust on the side of it as though frequented by large feet. I point to it. Peter's eyes follow it upstream, I track it downstream. Soon I hear him call out. Mine seems to be ascending so I'm thrilled, sure he is right. He has followed it to a spot about ten feet above the creekbed. We have to climb up bare rock to get to it, but once we have done this, we are certain we are on the right path.

It winds up and up, endlessly up. It seems that each little lip we are about to go over is the actual north rim of the canyon. Peter points out that the north rim (river right, where we are) is 1000 feet higher than the south. I try to figure out how that could be.

Suddenly, we really are on top. And the feeling is crazy. I sense an actual change in spirit as though the canyon had held me in some state of control. Soon we find the rock, worked on every surface by early graffiti artists. Sheep, or are they goats? A turtle, a coil. I notice that no one wrote on top of anyone else. Polite graffiti artists.

As we descend, my knees begin to complain. We stop frequently. I run out of water and after slipping once on gravel, slow my pace. Peter remains uphill of me, although older than me, he is more graceful. He is quiet. We rest when we find shade,

once we get below the talus and among boulders. He offers me a drink from one of his two water bottles, neither of which is empty. I unscrew the lid slowly, noticing the water is not quite clean.

When I gulp it down anyway, I realize it is not only still quite cold, but it is not water. It is gin and tonic with lime squeezed in. I look at him. He is grinning.

I am surprised to learn on my next trip, seven years later, that not one person has heard of newspaper rock. They all search the indices of our hiking guides and topo maps. Nope.

“You mean the one in Utah?” Raoul asks.

Someone says ‘that’s hundreds of miles away,’ as though I were just another blonde joke.

I can tell Raoul doesn’t believe me, but at least he’s game for a ‘wild goose chase’ (his words.) As we leave camp I notice he isn’t carrying any water. We both wear river sandals, knowing we’ll be crisscrossing a stream as we hike away from the Colorado River.

I tell him it has been seven years since I’ve done the hike and that I’ve only done it once. “I don’t remember exactly where the trail is,” I confess, “but I think we can find it.” I also admit I had not been able to find ‘newspaper rock’ on any map, in any guidebook or in any of the National Park Service literature. Googling it had only turned up some other archeological site, the one in Utah. I tell him what I remember. It’s a boulder all by itself, it’s below the layer of red, maybe in the Hermit Shale because it was

on a plateau.

I tell Raoul the rock is covered in petroglyphs. And that what I found amazing was that the graffiti artists of the past never drew on top of others; they were polite. Doc had told me the name “newspaper rock” arose because natives had used it to convey news to other passersby. I had worked as a news reporter and editor. It had a certain appeal to me, I said. I don’t know if Raoul is really interested or he just wants to get out of camp.

The hike is grueling, steep and scary, I remember, but doable. Hermit shale forms one of the uppermost layers; I am predicting the worst in terms of vertical climb. Still, Raoul is willing to try it.

I carry two full water bottles in my backpack, along with my camera, notebook and the junkdrawer of stuff that lives in my pack always: ibuprofen, a hair brush wrapped with dirtied elastics, a fat Swiss Army knife, feminine hygiene pads, and my waterproof wallet that could be hung around my neck containing my id, credit card and some cash, useless here. I also have a faded blue handkerchief, sunscreen, cough drops and a long-sleeved cotton shirt in which I’ve wrapped my camera. At the bottom of my pack also perpetually lives a deposit of sand. A caribiner looped in a strap enables me to easily attach the pack to a boat.

We skirt the debris fan from the creek that formed the rapid here in order to get to the streambed itself, just upriver. As we negotiate our way among prickly pear and mesquite, keeping our eyes on the trail, we chat about our lives above the rim. I have just met Raoul at the put-in a few days ago and know only that he is a geologist employed by the United States Geological Survey. That is cool, I thought; I could learn a lot from him.

He tells me the way to remember the names of the layers of the canyon.

“Kaibab is on top,” he begins.

I know Coconino is next, or is it Toroweap? Then comes the Hermit shale, followed by Supai, Redwall, Muav, Bright Angel and Tapeats. From there, the list, some two dozen layers long, is lost on me. Raoul repeats his acronym key for the top section, the Paleozoic: *Kissing Takes Concentration (Kaibab, Toroweap, Coconino ... ) However Sex Requires Movement, Breath and Tongue (Hermit, Supai, Redwall, Muav, Bright Angel Shale, Tapeats.)*

I look across the canyon where he points. The Bright Angel Shale is just beginning to appear here, he says, as we descend into the layer cake of the Grand Canyon. As we float downstream tomorrow or the next day, we’ll get into the Tapeats. Then we’ll be beyond Paleozoic, into rocks more than 540 million years old.

We begin wandering up the bouldered creek bed and into a side canyon that narrows quickly, causing our voices to pick up an echo. Our conversation becomes more personal as we seek routes around huge boulders and steep cliffs in a process that becomes necessarily intimate as we help each other up or around obstacles. We talk about the diversity of our group, 15 people mostly from Wyoming and Colorado, mostly experienced boaters who have been vacationing together on major western rivers for 25-30 years.

Herb was ‘born-again,’ and Elliot is an alternative medical practitioner; Nate an electrician at a coal mine; Steve a methodical scientist and sidekick to Raoul has had a career at USGS; Paul is in real estate and the woman with him—they are both married to

other people—is a flight attendant. They seemed like an old married couple; they have been boating together for decades. We all get along well, everyone works together to prepare meals and conduct daily camp chores. And all are excellent boaters. Raoul has known them for years. I am the newbie.

Our conversation dawdles on and on as we work our way up the creek bed along the clear stream.

I spot a worn ledge that feels like the trail to me and point it out, predicting our canyon will end at a dry waterfall, that we will have to hike this side slope to get to the next level. Raoul, faithful to the goose chase if not to the likelihood of finding newspaper rock, follows me. We climb up then down. As the trail descends again to a now higher level of creek bed, I scan the opposite slope for the trail I remember ascending the north side of the canyon. I do not see it, but Raoul finds a cairn and we do not hesitate to follow its suggestion over a boulder up a steep winding zigzag. We often separate, calling out success or failure at finding the trail.

We talk about science and belief systems among the group as we climb over boulders, up and up. Raoul explains the geology according to normal Christians versus geology according to devout creationists. I laugh but become stumped when he states that he does ‘not believe in cairns.’

“Do you mean you do not believe they exist?” I ask, or merely that they do not adequately reveal the trail?”

He won’t answer.

Raoul is in the lead when the trail leads across a six-inch ledge. I am fine with it

until I look down. The streambed is now at least 30 feet straight down. I hug the rock and sidestep across the ledge then pause, looking straight ahead at the path to regain my balance. The path, having returned to solid dirt, seems entirely possible again. We climb another 20 minutes before we face another steep ascent. But the look down has set my nerves awry and I need to rest before contemplating the short climb that will require both hand- and footholds. We lean against a boulder and I drink a quarter of a bottle of water then offer Raoul some.

He refuses.

He is eager to continue so I put my first foot up, gripping two protrusions of rock with my hands, either one of which could rattle loose at any moment. I place another foot up and freeze.

“I’ll wait here for you,” I defer, returning my foot to the solid path. I move aside so Raoul can climb ahead. As he climbs up, I tell him to look for a lone boulder among the red layer... a boulder that has fallen from above. I point vaguely to my left, “it’s over that way somewhere.”

“I think it is just up on that layer,” I am pretty sure, pointing to the plateau just another 30 feet up. “I think.”

Raoul goes on ahead and I carefully backtrack to a rock that provides a small amount of shade. I settle into the crevasse it forms and pull out my notebook.

Had I really met my limits? I remember doing this climb just seven years ago. Seven years and twenty pounds ago. As I write, my nerves settle and in about a half hour, I feel ready to try the chimney-like ascent again.

Again, I place my right foot on the first place I can and reach for two rocky grips. But when I pick up my left foot the image of my teenaged son comes to me.

“Don’t die,” he had said over the phone the night before the trip had launched at mile zero, several days upstream. A high school senior, he now waited in that interminable time when colleges pore through their stacks of applications and students awkwardly tap their feet. We had driven or flown to five colleges so he could audition at music conservatories. Losing his mom right now would put a damper on things.

I return to my shady crevasse and wait another 20 minutes until I hear Raoul’s exuberant voice from above.

“That was so cool,” he calls down. When he alights on my level, he looks me straight in the eye for the first time. Eager to show me pictures, he’d forgotten – or never believed – I’d actually been there before.

“I have a folder of photos of my own on my hard drive,” I remind him. Still, I want to see that he’s found the same rock; he showed me, his hand cupping the screen for shade, but I couldn’t make out much. The sun was in a different place than in my pictures.

Then he describes the petroglyphs and where he had found them.

Unable to remain silent I remind him that I’d thought the rectangular drawings represented the granaries at Nankoweap nearby. The sheep drawings, I ask, could they have been goats?

As we clamber down the rocks Raoul asks me about my life in more depth. How long had I worked as a writer? What projects was I working on? The return to camp



quickly passes in geologic lore as he explains the layers to me, the limestone, the tracks of ancient creatures found in the solid mud, the shale, the great unconformity and his own theory that part of the Colorado River had flown the other direction at some point in the past. He shows me red rock with white streaks, explaining the chemical process called 'reduction' that dissolved the iron that made the rusty red.

Every question I ask returns a fascinating answer.

In turn I tell him about my father and his field trips to Mexico. He seems interested now. Genuinely.

When we return to camp, Herb, another seasoned boater, pulls out his topo map so Raoul can show him precisely where newspaper rock can be found. Their heads together murmuring in interest, I realize Herb hadn't believed me either. Now he regrets missing the hike. But he doesn't ask me about it. He asks Raoul.

### ***Mile 61***

The Little Colorado River meanders through tribal lands before joining the main Colorado River here. We had crossed this major side stream near Simpson's store in Cameron as we drove to the launch at mile zero. Before I met Robert and Mary Simpson, who own and operate the store, I had stopped here for gas and snacks. It's a humble family place without the feel of a national chain, the kind with bored underpaid employees. I was glad to hear when I met them they owned this place and not the kitsch Cameron Trading Post a mile down the road.

The Little Colorado drains 27,000 square miles of Arizona and New Mexico

including the Navajo Reservation that encompasses most of northeast Arizona. In fact, 48 percent of the Little Colorado watershed is indian reservation. When the stream arrives at the Colorado River here, almost every time I've seen it, it has been a milky Caribbean blue hue. The native people here include Navajo, Hopi and Zuni peoples.

As newbies hike up the upstream side of this dreamy tributary to ride through the warm gentle rapids, lifejackets strapped upside down to their butts, Doc props up a small mirror on his boat and shaves.

But the water doesn't always run clear. After a rain it can be thick with mud.

On or about August 10, 1869, Major Powell's starving crew pulled into what they described variously in their journals as "a lothesome little stream so filthy and muddy that it fairly stinks . . ." and "as disgusting a stream as there is on the continent." Michael Ghiglieri, in his "First Through Grand Canyon," a painfully thorough and just as painstakingly opinionated tome, describes it as a "cesspool of a stream" that "frothed with mud from the Painted Desert."

Clearly, a monsoon had filled the river with eroded sediment, not atypical of midsummer weather. On my only early spring trip, it has rained somewhere in those 27,000 square miles and the river runs chocolate.

But for my first four visits, the stream is lovely.

We languish on the ledges of the upstream side of the river while others hike, take a swim or cross to inspect the cabin of Ben Beamer, a guy who used blocks from an ancient Puebloan ruin to build a shelter in 1880. He tried to subsist on mining and farming in the area, living in the cabin for two years only exiting once during that time.

Beamer is best remembered for the hiking trails he created.

As we pass the muddy Little Colorado we cannot help but imagine how the place will be transformed if a proposed development is approved. A gondola that would increase access for millions of people who will be able to dine at a riverside restaurants, is the idea that gives nightmares to river runners and is separating the tribe that owns the land into two factions: those who love the land and those who love money.

We talk about the second round of pillaging of tribal culture that is occurring throughout the West as tribes sell their 'independent nation' rights to developers who promise jobs and financial rewards for use of the native lands for casinos, tobacco sales and anything else federally prohibited everywhere else. And how has that turned out? Just another round of unfulfilled expectations and grueling poverty.

The proposed project here, known as the 'Escalade' project likewise promises to provide lots of low-wage jobs, perpetuating the poverty native groups have experienced since the European invasion began in 1492.

Access to the inner canyon, currently controlled by NPS, still favors those who have the financial means to buy a trip. But it doesn't have to be that way. If access is the issue, the droves of people who want access to the canyon, if they exist, should convince NPS to allow more private permits. Allowing a gondola into the canyon would constitute an intolerable Disneyfication. Paul remembers David Brower saying that defense of parks and environmental resources is never over, but a battle we need to teach our children to continue fighting.

We leave the Little Colorado because of the crowd, pulling our boats out as we

see members of the commercial trip we are blocking beginning to return to the gargantuan boats. Ricardo points to the talus slope river right, and casually describes how two planes collided in midair and a careful examination of the slope opposite the confluence will reveal the wreckage. I don't see anything, but am not really looking.

We land a few miles downstream and while others prepare lunch, boatmen maneuver their boats into the shade. Resting with my feet in the river to cool myself in the blistering heat, I listen to a conversation between Walter, a hiking buddy of Mary and Robert, who until this moment has been a quiet reserved, hardly noticed member of our trip. He explains the greatest fear canyon lovers know: the flash flood.

Doc gazes across the water and says a name: George Mancuso. I had heard him mention the name earlier in the day, commenting that the Little Colorado was Mancuso's favorite place.

"He was a neat guy. He did postcards—Granite Press—he was very successful at it," Doc says, as though explaining something. He has become distant in thought, but I think he has something on his mind.

Mancuso's most famous photograph, called *Confluence*, shows the surreal mixing of the green waters of the Colorado and the turquoise of the Little Colorado.

"George had said many times that if he died he would hope to die right there and he believed his soul would be carried by the crows if they ate his body," Walter says.

"He was hiking in big canyon ... this flash flood came out of nowhere," Doc says.

"It must have been raining 20 miles away," Doc continues, shaking his head, "It took HER hair off and put her up in a tree, deader than a doornail and it buried him, damn

near. I mean it tore all his clothes off.”

As Doc recalls the story, he seems to slow down. “I guess they weren’t fit for...” he turns to Walter, “did you go to the funeral?”

“Sure did.”

“What ... did he have an open casket?”

“He sure didn’t.”

“Yeah, cause he was a mess.”

I look at Doc. Someone has to explain. Doc indicates with a gesture that it is up to Walter to tell the story. Walter takes a deep breath. “So George falls in love, for the first time in his 50 years ... and he and his new old lady decide to take their honeymoon ...”

“... and she had never hiked out here,” Doc interjects.

“... in *thee* place which George found to be *thee* spiritual center of his universe, which was the Little Colorado River. And they hiked up the Little Colorado and camped at Ann Myrtle Canyon and indeed were wiped out by a flash flood.

Her journal was there, found open so that they (rescue party) knew exactly what was going on when they left. She was indeed shredded and left in a tree while George was swept to the junction of the LCR and the Colorado ... where his body lay in a pool right opposite where the boats dock, for about two weeks while the crows ate most of him.”

Mancuso’s own photograph, *Confluence*, shows the precise location his body was found, some six miles downstream from his camp.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Fellow photographer, Alain Briot, said in a memorial:

## *Mile 69*

The camp at Tanner, which the repeaters call “Weeds,” glorifies the definition of sandbar. Here willows actively form a bench, providing roots to hold sediment as the Colorado sweeps against red rocks, cutting into the bank they form opposite our landing site. A steep bank of sand confronts those of us unloading equipment just enough to compel us to try to toss dry bags up on the fresh bench, just five feet above the rafts. The sky transitions from steely gray to purple, threatening.

Robert watches the bank across the river and I turn, expecting to see a sheep or people. He points and I realize he is speaking but I cannot hear him. But it isn’t Tanner Rapid just downstream that is drowning him out. It’s water, now trickling, now spraying out of the cliffs. Somewhere over the horizon it is raining.

Within an hour rain soaks us, warm rain. So heavy is the downpour that when I see Mary return excitedly to her boat, I know she is looking for shampoo. I strip to my swimsuit. Mary, now standing on the bank, lathers her hair and points to a large bottle of shampoo with her toe, inviting me to join in. The downpour is so thick with warm water

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“(Mancuso was) carried by mysterious forces another 6 miles downstream, forces which incomprehensibly navigated his body around house-sized boulders under which, in all logic, it should have become wedged, forces which did not allow the famed quicksand of the Little Colorado Gorge to play their favorite trick, George’s body found itself at the confluence of the Little Colorado and the Colorado, buried under sand and debris, only a few feet away from the swift current of the river which carved the Grand Canyon. Why this current did not drag him further away, downstream and perhaps never to be seen again, no one can say. The fact is, and that is the only fact we have really, that his body ended up resting at the place he loved most, a place he had visited 50 times alive and one time after his passing. A place he loved so much that he had to come back to it one last time. ... George, somehow, either by muscle or by will, managed to reach the place he called home. He was 46.”

we can barely keep the shampoo in long enough to get clean. Soon we are singing, singing in the rain. This is the closest thing to a hot shower I've had since Flagstaff. It's delicious.

Then it is over and Robert is pointing to sunshine high on the cliffs to the east. The orange-red screams out at us from its dark purple background.

Every time I camp here, at the place I prefer to call Tanner because it's also the name of a fond friend, I find my imagination running back several thousand years. The impressions left by the persistent force of nature as well as those left by people powerfully emerge from solid rock in amazing ways here.

My first trip, we follow Doc up the wash to the rocky edge of the north shore. We climb gently. I look back at our camp, trying to figure out what is wrong with our boats. Something isn't right. Then I realize it isn't our camp. Someone else has taken a camp downstream, in the bay below ours. One of the boats has a woman in a bikini, lying at an odd angle, her feet straight out over the water. As I realize it is not actually a dead person in the throes of rigor mortis, but rather a life-size inflatable doll, I laugh at myself. I realize I've fallen behind when I turn to tell the others and realize they have not stopped.

Then ahead on the next ridge I see Doc stop, drinking water from his gallon-jug. He gestures, using his water bottle as a pointer, toward a rock at the side of the trail. I do see a strangely shaped rock, water has curled a hole in it. "It's a birthing rock," he claims, when I catch up. I've heard him speak of this before, but I don't believe him really, although the shape seems suggestive of it. Then I notice the intricate markings all over the rock. Wow. There is no doubt now. How many children came into the world here in

this bowl of stone that offers the strangest coincidence of support structure for a woman in labor?

Imagining the delivery of my children in a rock, I climb the gentle trail around the edge of the bluff overlooking the alluvial plain that formed our campsite. Watching for petroglyphs now, I spot them often and pause to take pictures. Soon the others are gone. After the trail disappears along a ridge of shale I realize I am lost. I wander on, eventually following an animal trail up and over a ridge. Soon I am high above the river on a clear promontory. I have a spectacular view several miles upstream as well as across the river to distance cliffs. I recognize nearby piles of stones, cairns that had to be placed by modern humans. I scour the cliffs and ridges but see no sign of my companions. I turn to look for the path that must be somewhere between the edge and the ascending slope and almost trip over what has to be the ruins Doc had mentioned. It is a low wall forming a small chamber. Pausing, I find shards of pottery. Drops of water indicate someone has been here recently. Then I hear them. The group had gone on to visit another site farther up. They had walked into the next gulley and now, hands out to feel the rain, are returning in a hurry to camp.

I join them, following the trail, which is much more direct than the route I had taken. We get back to camp just as the clouds release their burden. As I rush toward my tent I see some dirty sandals sticking out of a small gray tent, their feet still in them. I laugh because I recognize the sandals, they are familiar. But I don't remember whose they are. Mary's voice answers: "What are you laughing at, girl?"

"That's whose they are" I answer.



Mary is laughing now too.

In the morning of our second trip we pick up Robert and son here, a prearrangement I had not been aware of. But clearly, Doc has agreed to meet them on this day at this specific location. Their hike was long, but more interesting than more commonly used routes, Robert reports. He and Mary have hiked the canyon as much as anyone alive today. For a day and a half, we will be illegal, according to a strict interpretation of NPS rules. Then Robert and I will hike out and the group's number will return to 16.

Technically, Doc informs us, we are picking up hitchhikers and giving them a ride to the other side of the river, 'which is perfectly legal, in fact encouraged, by the park,' Doc claims.

In the morning we ride through Tanner rapid and I see the inflatable woman and her hosts. They wave in greeting as they pack up. I see that we took the preferred campsite.

## ***Mile 72***

Anasazi lived here from 1070 to 1175 on the Unkar Delta, the largest agricultural site in the canyon. No one can figure out why the Anasazi abruptly left. Today the National Park Service prohibits visitation of hilltop ruins in the area and strongly urges visitors of the delta to stay on trails.

All this I learn from Mary, who is singing "Tiptoe through the Crypto" as we try to stay on the trail through the delicate cryptobiotic soils that form the delta here. She

points out shards that someone has placed on a rock and comments that it isn't hard to imagine living here, that things have not changed much. We follow cairns to find some of the ruins, stones forming foundation outlines where walls used to be. This place was only inhabited for a few hundred years. Mary points out that the lower ruins are from an earlier time than the upper ones. From 850-1050 Puebloans occupied the alluvial plain, then later, for another 100 years, the terraces above were occupied. At 38 years old, I would have been ancient as the average life expectancy for these people was 34.

I want to scale the hill to look down on the plain but Mary's voice, a deep, smoker's gravelly voice, is coming in shorter spurts. She stops to cough and catch her breath, then we turn down, winding through the lower delta as we return to the boats.

Ten years later I stop here again, this time camping and laying over at the Upper Unkar Camp. I can see the walk over to the delta is too long to complete tonight and still return before dark so instead I wander up the short box canyon just upstream of camp. Here the rocks are a deep purple, the Dox formation, Raoul tells me, creating a warm background for the contrasting brittlebush that is beginning to bloom, its blossoms bright yellow, its leaves sage green, popping out against their dark purple background. I climb up a steep slope creek left, wondering if the people who lived on the delta came up here to this private canyon, maybe the teenagers, to make out.

I awaken before dawn and without a flashlight, find my way easily to the river to pee. On my return I notice the slope where I climbed last night is lit up. I look across the canyon, which has opened up here, revealing acres and acres of stars. The moon is about to rise above the palisades, the wall of mountains to our east. The stars are not just

painted on the sky here, they are three dimensional, some clearly farther away than others. The sky itself is a deep deep blue pool, the stars at different depths in it. I sit on the stone furniture by my tent and watch a smudgy glow climb over the butte, the tallest point in the palisades wall. Soon the moon, just a sliver, shows up too. No other light pollutes the sky.

A tiny clank from the direction of the kitchen tells me someone is up making coffee. No, I decide, I imagined it. I climb back into my sleeping bag, my feet too cold to remember they are sandy.

When I awaken it's full daylight and everyone, it seems, is up except me. I find a coffee mug Elliot left for me, he said, at about 4:30 a.m. It is still hot, hot enough anyway to warm me up. Maybe the idea that Elliot thought to do that is what warms me.

The camp is abuzz with talk about a raven that has apparently stolen a roll of toilet paper from the groover and left an unsightly strip of the stuff on a ledge just upstream and overlooking camp. The raven has been shredding the roll there then taking portions of it to its cliff high high above the river.

Raoul, at the end of the day, climbs up to where the long strip dangles over the rocks and retrieves what remains of the roll. As we pack up in the morning the raven has returned to the groover and is reportedly pecking at the roll that has been secured to a branch of a tree.

The first of the canyon's toughest three rapids is on our minds. We are all worried about Hance rapid, coming up at mile 77. It's my third trip and Doc is explaining to Mark

on the beach at Unkar how to run it, while others go for a hike. Mark is listening carefully. It sounds very technical.

We stop somewhere before Hance for lunch. Kiwi, a tall gregarious man who grew up on a New Zealand sheep farm, splits open his shin leaping to shore and I watch him, his hand clamped to slow the bleeding, hobble over to Doc's boat, and ask him politely to look at it, in his charismatic New Zealand accent.

After yelling at Kiwi not to get blood on his boat, Doc determines that stitches are in order. As he threads a large, curved needle, he asks loudly if anyone has any alcohol. "I've got some, but it's buried," he confesses to me in a lower voice. I am seated nearby as Doc uses me as an assistant, handing me scissors to hold as he threads the needle.

Paul hands over a bottle of Jack Daniels.

The Rangers always know where I am, Doc narrates as he prepares to sew up Kiwi's leg, pausing only to advise Kiwi not to watch if he doesn't like needles. I don't want to have to send your whole goddamn body out of here, Doc goes on, in fact, if you drown, we will let you find your own way out because it is so much easier that way. You know none of this water actually gets to the ocean, in fact, it doesn't even get to Mexico.

I don't know whether Doc's monologue is intended to calm the patient or entertain Julia and I, who are looking on.

Those rangers always know where I am because who the hell else is down here to patch up these morons who get drunk and fall in the fire? Doc rambles on. Did you know that the majority of injuries that occur below the rim are people falling in the firepan drunk? Next is domestic violence. Shit happens down here that you would not believe.

People get divorced, just about one divorce per trip. You just watch.

Doc has cleansed the wound and is looking at it sideways.

Straightening, he addresses the face above the wound, 'here, finish that off for me will you,' Doc states, handing Kiwi a plastic coffee mug with a lid attached by caribiner in which he has poured several fingers of the whiskey.

'One time the rangers found me and dragged me up stream to some moron who split his head open, how the hell he did it I don't know, must have been one dumb mother fucker. If he wasn't before he split his head open, he sure was afterward.

They made me get in their goddamn boat – I don't come down here to get in some god damn motor boat – and they took me upstream and showed me this poor mother fucker with his head split open like a coconut.

I said "what the hell am I supposed to do about that? And they said 'We can't short haul him outta here like that so I said, 'got some duct tape?' Sure enough they did. So I wrapped a couple yards of duct tape around the moron's head, or what was left of it. They didn't need a doctor to do that. Dumb mother fuckers.'

As Doc finishes each stitch he ties it meticulously without touching it with his fingers, using clamps and tweezers. When he finishes, the bleeding gash has been replaced by five neat sutures. Doc trims the threads and refills the mug with whiskey. He splashes some whiskey from the mug on the wound and advises Kiwi to 'cover the suture with a bandage of some kind, and come find me in about a week and I'll take them out.' Then he hands the whiskey mug to him and tells him to finish it off.

Kiwi, thanking Doc effusively, is clearly relieved.

“You’ll get a bill from me at Phantom Ranch,” Doc responds, laughing.

I remember another time I’d heard about Doc sending bills to people for his services.

After a late dinner at the Marble Canyon Lodge on my third trip, I’d hitched a ride with Paul and we glided the winding road to the put-in, slipping past the campground at dusk.

Rafting with Doc, Paul commented, is a “specialized” experience. On one trip, Paul recalled, Doc seduced the trip leader’s wife and was “banging her in his tent” while the husband was off on a hike. Of course it was only a matter of time, Paul went on, before the husband found out.

“Then the shit hit the fan.” Paul says it “Shee-ut.”

But Doc gave the guy an earful about how he was a medical doctor and that ordinarily he charges \$200 an hour for his services and this time he was making an exception and that the husband should be grateful.

Even Paul’s story, its degree of truth unfathomable, could have happened, and as he told it, it *did* happen, if only in a conjectured state in our minds. But I believe Doc, shit happens down here.

### ***Mile 77***

On my first sight, Hance Rapid looks better to me, than Soap Creek even. It looks like fun, the waves smaller, the flow spread out over a broader path. But my first look at

Hance just proves my own inexperience. Over the next four trips I would learn to respect it. Unlike most other rapids, Hance increases in difficulty at low water and rates a 10 at flows below 3000 cfs. Normally a 9.

“It’s HIGHLY technical,” Doc warns.

The repeaters are worried. From the scout point river left, we clamber among boulders at water’s edge. Paul stares and stares. And smokes and smokes. So does Mary. They all listen to Doc, who dictates. Stay as close to the boulder as possible then pull right. As soon as you’re on top of that rock, pull left. HARD. And then you have to get in the wave train or you’ll end up in that eddy which will put you right there. Doc is pointing to rocks I can’t identify.

I fail to understand what we’re supposed to do, but Doc insists I ride with him and that he go first. “Just follow me,” he tells Mark.

As we enter the rapid, Doc tells me to keep an eye on the boats behind us. I am to tell him if anyone gets in trouble, so he can focus on his task.

We ride the wave train out and I report on each boat, still not understanding how we made it through what looks like a rock garden, from safely downstream. The passengers in Ricardo’s boat, which Ricardo is working to keep out of the eddy, Peggy and Katie, are bailing diligently. The grace of GOD is what gets us through some of this, Doc confesses. Coming from someone who is atheist, I consider this pretty powerful.

In 2012 a flood will rearrange Hance so that in 2013 Paul, the most skilled rafter I know, hits a rock, loses the grip on his oars, and goes sailing into the drink.

He swims the entire rapid.

“It’s completely changed,” he reports, there is no longer a left run.

It will be a few years before someone figures out a best line.

By 2015, Elliot has figured out that best line and we take it. As I finish counting the nine boats behind us and we head through the next rapid, a minor one called “Son of Hance,” a rock in the river catches my eye because of its perfectly rectangular shape.

“There’s a dry box,” I shout. Elliot turns to look.

Attached to the shiny rectangular shape, bobbing in the rushing current is a dark green object, maybe a dry bag.

As we pass it, we realize it is bigger than a dry box, much bigger. Elliot identifies it immediately, having built several himself, as an upside wooden dory.

“I hope to God there’s no one under there,” he says.

We both know that a) we can’t reach it now and b) if someone is under there, that someone is certainly dead. We quickly evaluate the risk of messing with it and decide not to do anything. Instead, we’ll just make sure the rangers at Phantom Ranch just 10 miles downstream, know about it.

### ***Mile 79***

Sockdolager: *n.* A forceful blow; an exceptional person or thing.

Doc tells us he was camped just above Sockdolager rapid one night and whoever was supposed to move the boats at night had passed out and forgot to tie up his boat.

It was 10 p.m., according to Doc, when he and Julia, in the tent on the boat, realized they



were no longer next to the beach, but were drifting downstream. The oars were shipped, the rapid was getting louder. Julia managed to get out of the tent and yell for help.

A passenger named “Caroline” was on the groover.

Caroline waddled to the shore, her pants around her ankles, and reached out. Her fingertips grabbed Julia’s and pulled. The two women pulled the boat close enough that Julia was able to hand over the bow line. They were saved.

Caroline is a good woman, Doc says.

## ***Mile 82***

We stop at Grapevine Camp my third trip. Here I climb a 10-foot steep bank of sand and plop my chair against a red wall of cliff where shade begins. Everyone seems exhausted but soon we are all sitting in a semicircle giving each other foot rubs and drinking Heinekens. Mary and I can’t stop singing Marvin Gaye’s “Heard it Through the Grape Vine.” Julia, who injured her foot just before the trip is not with us and we miss her. If she were here, Mary and I reflect, she would make us sound better.

Tomorrow we will be at Cremation, a campsite, the repeaters warn us, named for the inescapable heat. It also has ants, someone warns. We have no choice but to camp there because it is the only campsite accessible to Phantom Ranch, just across the river and slightly downstream, where we will be exchanging passengers tomorrow.

Lacy and Bruce will be hiking out and John and Maddy will be hiking in. Lacy and Doc disappear into his tent only emerging for dinner, he laboriously climbing the steep bank of sand after Lacy calls him twice. It is clear to us what is happening in the

tent, in the absence of Julia, Doc's 'wife.'

What happens in the canyon stays in the canyon, Paul says.

In the dawn I spot Elliot, tall but dwarfed against the cliff, quietly preparing coffee. I had no idea he was the early riser responsible for this daily chore and I rouse myself to join him in the morning's short-lived coolness.

"So it is you," I accuse. He looks sideways at me, half-pretending, I suspect, to not understand, picks up the heavy blue coffeepot and prepares to pour its rich black contents for me, waiting a beat as I clean the dust from my cup with a finger. As he pours he says nothing, but smiles just a tiny bit. He sits in the empty chair next to mine and we enjoy the silence for about half an hour before he points out with a tip of his head, that Robert and Mary have been awake, watching the canyon wrens from their Paco pads on their boat. We are not alone among the slumbering slugs of sleeping bags around us. It is a good way to enjoy friends, I figure, just having them there without having to talk or argue or solve any problems.

Later that morning Doc announces that he is going to try to save us from having to carry water over the rocks of Clear Creek, by pulling in to the mouth of Clear Creek. This will be difficult, he says, but he thinks he can do it. We could get water at Phantom Ranch, someone points out, but its quality is questioned by Doc. And sometimes the pipes break.

Grapevine rapid, which is tumultuous but refreshing, is followed two miles later by 83-mile rapid, mysteriously named because it is actually located just below mile 84.

This section of river cannot be better described than by the words of writer Tom Martin, who calls it ‘liquid chaos.’

We pull in to river right almost immediately and tether the boats at what appears to be a cliff of black rock. Clear Creek, someone explains, is just on the other side. Doc will wait for us to climb over to be ready to catch him when he pulls in. But when I stand in the shallows of the pristine creek twenty minutes later, Doc sails right past, caught in the current, nowhere near the mouth of the creek. Lacy, standing on his bow with a throw-rope, sees it’s futile. “We’ll see you at Cremation,” she calls.

He had no intention of landing here, Mary remarks, disapproving. Robert is shaking his head in agreement, but I think I detect a shade of a smile. We will have to haul the water over the rocks. But Mary, says “Hell if we’re going to haul water over that. We can fill up at Phantom tomorrow.” Phantom Ranch usually, but not always, has piped-in drinking water available at a spigot near the beach.

I hike up Clear Creek, more in the creek than out, in my sandals. Others, seeing the imposing cliff at the shore, had worn hiking boots and socks. Eventually, all of them are carrying their shoes and walking tenderly through the stream too. I am the first person to arrive at the waterfalls, a magic place where an eroding curve of sandstone casts a pulsating stream of water out at an angle almost perpendicular to the vertical fall nearby.

My video camera records Missy and Esther, who are bathing in the showers. They whisper together then flash my camera in unison, lifting their tops to reveal shockingly white breasts. I am too busy to notice. A month later when viewing the footage, I laugh out loud.

### ***Mile 86***

We arrive at Cremation late in the afternoon where we find Doc's boat secured in the slim shade. All is silent. I assume Lacy and Doc are off hiking somewhere, but Ricardo points to the tent with the top of his head and nods knowingly.

The tent fits perfectly between the tubes of Doc's boat, on the broad, soft paco pads where he encourages women to sunbathe during the day, right in front of his rowing seat, which is mounted on a cooler.

As we set up camp it becomes clear that Ricardo is right. Lacy emerges and helps prepare dinner. Lacy will be hiking out in the morning. Doc does not emerge.

### ***Bright Angel Trail***

On my second trip, hikers-out include me. It's frost season back at the farm and I've been away too long already.

The most heavily travelled trail into the canyon, Bright Angel trail guides mules carrying tourists and supplies to Phantom Ranch, including mail for river runners. We are all eager to rifle through the box in the cantina, searching for envelopes with our names on them. And people joke about getting ice cream, that the hikers, by tradition, will bring some in. We will also refill our water jugs and Doc, according to the other repeaters, will sneak into the women's dormitories to take a hot shower.

The hike out is ten horizontal miles and one vertical mile. The temperature rises quickly from an overnight in the 80s or 90s to above 110. Robert will hike with me, and

we plan to leave camp at the crack of dawn. Someone will row us over to Phantom Ranch before breakfast then wait for the rest of camp to pack up and meet there.

As I prepare for the climb, I select just one change of clothes for the airplane. The rest I give away. I give Ken Simpson my dry bag in exchange for his backpack and hand Mary my shampoo, soap, comb etc. After dinner I look around the circle of friends. I give Julia my flowered capri pants, because she had said she liked them, even though she is about half my size. "They're elastic waist," I tell her. "Maybe they'll work."

I give Doc my blue turtleneck because the one warm shirt he has is gross, pilled polyester, and because some of us are tired of seeing his chest hair. I give Kiwi my underwear because Julia and Mary had told me he wanted to get in it. I toss some socks to Paul who says he'll find a use for them.

In the morning I will fill both my water bottles, jam my sleeping bag and sweater into the pack, along with my bag balm-encrusted socks, my toothbrush, swimsuit and camera.

Doc asks to look at my foot cracks after dinner. "You are not going to make it," he informs me.

He pauses a full minute.

"Unless I fix those cracks."

I succumb to his method. I had been worried about my feet. He carefully glues the cracks closed, applying the clear substance he calls "superglue" from a tiny brown vial using a brush just like the ones we used for toenail polish. The smell warns me that this is bad stuff.

Doc also advises I carry a gallon of water. “You’ll be able to refill it at Indian Gardens.”

Finally Robert and I clamber off the Doc’s boat at the beach, before full daylight. We snap our PFDs onto Doc’s chicken line and adjust shoulder straps of our packs. Robert tops off his water and we head up the trail, carefully lined with large rocks so we can’t miss it. The trail crosses a bridge and I look down without regret. I am eager to see my kids and have mentally already left the river trip.

Within a mile Robert stops suddenly in the trail and puts a hand out to warn me. He then turns and in a voice that might as well be asking me if I could please pass the salt, states, “I think we’ll let this fellow cross the path before we continue.”

I peer around him to see an enormous rattlesnake, no rattling going on, slithering across the path.

When the trail is clear, we continue.

Within an hour we are hot. When a train of defeated-looking mules loaded with lumpy tourists approaches, I take off my pack and stand aside. One woman, with perfect hair and makeup looks at me and seems scared.

Am I crazy? I realize I haven’t looked in a mirror in a week . . . and haven’t missed it until now. One other passenger, a teen boy looks at me and I feel a kinship. He is feeling like he is the crazy one too, I’m sure. But he is loving it.

By the time we get to Indian Gardens, a midway point, we are ready for more water. We take a break at intervals defined by Robert. By this time I’ve learned that he and Mary and Doc started a group called “Grand Canyon Hikers Association,” and

probably know the place as well as anyone alive today. He is pacing us, I am aware, and he names the layers of rock as we climb up through them.

To know a place this well is a privilege. To remain in one place, a place that is a place, not just a human-designed cityscape, seems divine to me. My place is in western Montana yet I only visit it once a year, if I'm lucky. We tromp on and on, up and up.

As we get closer to the rim the hikers we meet change. They are less fit the closer to the rim we get. By the time we're within a mile, I have made a conscious decision to stop stepping aside for other hikers, all of whom, I reason, are heading downhill. We are both sweaty and it must be obvious we have just hiked nine miles uphill. They can move aside for us. When I see a man carrying car keys I know we are close and I lose all lethargy. Robert smiles and keeps his pace behind me.

The Heineken the waiter at the south rim restaurant places in front of me is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Clear green glass, pure and shiny, is decorated with precise white and red lettering as intricate and refined as any mesquite branch. I savor the ice-cold liquid as though it were a kiss.

### ***Mile 88***

My third trip I know what to do at Phantom. I gather my phone card, postcards and my journal. I will have to wait in line for the phone.

Also I grab an extra five-gallon water jug, this is an important refill point, the only place we will not have to treat the water.

I am the first to the phone and thrill to hear my kids, now middle-schoolers, who

are surviving dad's cooking well. They don't have much to tell me and I don't want them to worry about me so I tell them only about the weather and that I'll have many beautiful pictures when I get home. When it is time to end the call, my youngest son's voice drops an octave. "When are you coming home, Mom?" he states. I am moved to tears. I tell him in two weeks. Two piano lessons, I tell him, to give him a real measure.

"Just come home," he responds.

If that isn't heavy enough, when I return to the beach I see the jug I left by the water spout is still there so I fill it and lug it down the path. I calculate it weighs more than 40 pounds. As I get close to the beach, I see that our covey of boats has moved to the far end of the beach, replaced by another trip. I set the jug down to rest.

The new batch of boats is abandoned except for one slumbering boatman, his hat over his eyes. It's the trip with the inflatable woman. I stop to contemplate the risk and rewards. When John, who had been returning for the jug of water I have carried, comes up from our boats, I point to the sleeping boatman. "Whaddya say we kidnap her?" I whisper.

We look at each other. "Let's do it," he smiles.

We slip into the water downstream and free the inflatable woman with the release of a caribiner and a camstrap.

We then take her to the shade of a tree near our boats and strap her to the trunk.

We are casually returning for our water jugs when we are accosted by a tall, dark stranger, who immediately notices "Betty" is missing.

"What is the ransom?" he asks as we approach.



“Hmm...what kind of beer do you have?”

All they have is Olympia, which is too light for my tastes.

He offers up some whiskey but that would be too much, an unfair ransom. After extensive negotiation we finally agree that if he carries my water jug to our boats, we will emancipate Betty.

We chat amiably as he, light-footed, carries it easily along the beach.

When we all seem ready to go, another battle, a real battle, is percolating.

A pile of gear on the beach has yet to be allocated to boats. A combination of gear left behind by those who are hiking out and those who have just hiked in, the pile just needs to be distributed. Mary explains to me, as she puffs violently on a cigarette, that Doc had departed early in the morning to deliver the hikers-out. He had not loaded any of the gear he normally carries because people had still been sleeping, nothing had been ready to go. Now, he is refusing to pack it in.

Doc's boat seems to have bigger tubes and now I know why. Mary informs me it floats higher in the water because it lacks the ballast, the weight the other boats are carrying. She has moved the gear pile to the beach next to Doc's boat but he refuses. He has showered, shaved and his hair looks clean. The matter needs to be settled before the others return to the beach, but Doc is unwilling to discuss it.

Mary is furious and Doc is muttering obscenities. Robert is trying to figure out a way to solve the problem, asking other boatmen what they have in their front decks. Many are carrying deadweight: either beer, canned goods or other liquids. As he makes one suggestion after another, trading the emptied ammo cans that carry only trash for

beer, moving the crate of onions and melons. The options are few.

Doc mentions he is carrying the first aid kit, SAT phone and since he always goes first, he needs to be more maneuverable. Paul's boat is exceedingly overloaded, a mountain of gear towering higher than his head. But, he reasons, 'I asked for it. I brought a 14-footer so I have to make up for it,' he says softly. 'I'd be happy to take Maddy's gear, he offers, if you can find a place to put it.'

The stalemate goes on until everyone is back. Not recognizing there's a problem, Maddy heaves her pack into Doc's boat and asks if she can ride with him.

"Sure," Doc says, welcoming the newcomer.

Robert asks if Mark can carry two refilled water jugs that had been on Doc's boat.

"I don't give a shit," Mark says.

Mary and Doc both recognize the need to move on. Competition for everyone's favorite campsite at Granite hangs in the balance. We have seen two commercial trips leave the beach and the one with Betty is packing up.

The pile is soon distributed, mostly by Robert's polite voice and big blue eyes. No one speaks as the boats push off.

But looking at Mary's twitching braid, I know this fight is not over.

The last trip, our ten-boat trip stops at Phantom for a very brief check-in. Those of us with kids call home and everyone else seems to just settle into the seats in the Cantina with drinks to write postcards.

I open the door to the ranger station and call a 'hello,' since the desk chair is

empty. I get no response so I descend to the rangers' living quarters where I find a front room full of couches filled with about eight park employees. They don't seem happy I'm invading their private space so I apologize. "I just want to know what the story is with the dory below Hance."

Silence.

"What dory below Hance?"

Soon a bearded man in a plaid shirt is pulling out a radio. Apparently they had not been informed here, that a dory had gone missing. They want information from our trip leader, Jessica. I describe her and tell him she's 'around here somewhere.'

None of my family members answers when I try to collect-call them one by one. So I borrow a phone card and call my youngest son. He is on a bathroom break from band class, good timing. "Bad timing mom, can you call later?"

"No," I tell him. So he resolves to chat briefly. He has gotten a call from the saxophone professor at one of his top schools, urging him to enroll and offering a significant merit scholarship. I assume this means he has decided to go there. But no, he's going to wait to hear from the other schools. It will be a difficult two weeks.

When I return to the rangers' lodging, the park staff have more questions for me and a few answers. They tell me everyone who was in the dory is okay but no one knew where it was. They had asked others of our group, but apparently many of us had not noticed it, so focused were they on the rapid. I describe the location as best I can. I spot Jessica and they ask her to go up to the ranger's office to fill out a form. But we are in a hurry. Jessica and I agree there's nothing more to tell; we don't know anything. So we

descend to the beach, indulging in use of the campground flush toilets on the way.

As I approach the beach two scared looking Asian young men stop me and ask me, please, could I sell them some pure water? They have just come down the Bright Angel trail and are carrying nothing. I direct them to the water spigot at the campground. Thank you, thank you, thank you, they put their hands together and bow their heads. They had just walked past the turnoff to the spigot on the boaters beach. I guess that they don't read English.

### ***Mile 91***

Leaving Phantom Ranch the first time I feel I am delving again into wilderness, although I am again leaving my kids, I am also leaving behind all the problems society imposes, I convince myself. It is emancipating.

About an hour downstream on my last trip, our privacy is invaded by the unmistakable pulse of a helicopter. It has a long rope dangling from it and is headed low upstream. We deduce it is headed for the dory.

Then we get to Horn Creek Rapid.

Boats have to thread between the two 'horns' of this rapid, rocks that threaten to stab our rafts. It looks impossibly difficult to me and the way the boat is set up I am certain we will wrap the right horn. But Lars successfully swings the boat straight and we 'split the horns.' All the other boats go right of the right horn.

Lars is congratulated in camp for this accomplishment by Doc. "Not bad for a virgin." I protest that Lars is not a virgin, he's kayaked it. But it comes out wrong, of

course, and Doc raises an eyebrow and grins.

Day eight on many trips, this leaving Phantom is in a way starting a new trip. Passenger exchanges have shaken up the group dynamic. Robert tells me about Day Eight Syndrome. People are ready to go home. It's been a week, the natural week-of-vacation is over. A malaise settles over the group every trip, he confides, staring at a canyon wall with the gaze of a zoned zombie himself. People seem to snap at each other, don't turn around to see if everyone made it through the horns; count their remaining stash of beers and decide not to share so much. I am a part of this norm, for reasons of my own—hearing my sons' voices on the phone—and I struggle not to become a burden to the others. People just seem to need space.

Mark is decidedly somber, I notice and mechanically proceeds through each rapid, not pausing to look up in amazement at the canyon walls as is his norm. He carries Mr. and Mrs. Johansen and does not engage in conversation.

Things will be back to normal soon. If we can do a layover at Granite, that will help, Robert advises.

#### ***Mile 94***

We are at Granite late; another private trip is already camped here. But it is dusk, too late, the experienced group on the beach knows, to risk a run of Granite rapid. It's not the run itself, it's the idea of trying to right a flipped boat or find a swimmer in the dark. As our group meets to consult on the beach, we are approached by a tall, bearded man who invites us to stay.

And so we draw a line in the sand. Soon we notice our generous neighbors are up to something. It is Ricardo who figures it out. Sitting in *Orange Sunshine* with his shorts on, just watching, he realizes he is witnessing a wedding. A lesbian wedding. “This is totally awesome,” he states.

This place, the first camp after the only route out, always seems forboding but turns out magical. The first trip, this is where the teenagers relax. They make sand sculptures on the beach. Their mother photographs them. Also, it is where the man I had thought to be a somewhat conservative guy, Wig, honest-to-god that’s his name, is a pharmacist who will paddle the entire length in a yellow kayak, proposes we play a game called “Butt Darts.”

Wig gathers a few ammo cans, a bucket and someone’s dry bag. These he arranges in a line on the beach. Then he asks everyone for spare change. Not many people have any, but he jingles together a quarter, a few pennies and some nickels.

We form two teams and we push our first player forward. It’s Lars.

The pharmacist explains that the coins have to be held on the outside of clothing, between the butt cheeks. Then, as we all watch, the pharmacist hands Lars the coins and instructs Lars to walk to the first obstacle and step over it.

Lars waddles over, the rest of us clutching our guts in laughter.

He succeeds in hopping forward, backward and sideways over the obstacles without dropping many coins. When he arrives at the last object, a bucket, the pharmacist instructs him to make a deposit.

A few of the coins plunk into the bucket.

The pharmacist counts the coins. “Okay, Team One has 17 points,” he announces.

The game continues until everyone has had a turn and my stomach is so sore from laughing I don’t think I can eat any dinner.

Mentioning Granite without mentioning the camp’s other name, *Monument*, would be sacrilege. It wouldn’t be until my third trip that I would understand why.

Peter, my hiking buddy from Nankoweap, is ready to get out of Dodge. We head up early in the morning although a layover on this 23-day trip has been declared. The drainage of Monument Creek, marked by cairns of unlikely stability towering hilariously, begging an earthquake, amuses us as we wander and climb. We pass the funny cairns frequently as we walk up the only route—through the creek bed. Soon the canyon narrows and I find myself straddling a creek, one foot on a vertical pink granite wall, the other foot on the opposite vertical pink granite wall. I stop to photograph a twisted chunk of schist in the granite that takes the shape of a saxophone. My youngest son plays the saxophone and his voice is still on my mind.

Monument is named for a large vertical chunk of rock that Monument Creek seems to have forgotten and left as an island. Visitors have replicated it in the many artful cairns that dot the creek bed. A sort of installation art form, they will be washed clean in the next flood, making this form of graffiti, this ‘leave no trace’ violation somehow seem legit.

Soon we spot a trail zigzagging out of the canyon to the top of the Tapeats sandstone, the Tonto plateau. When we are once more removed again from the confines of the canyon, Peter and I smear on sunscreen, feeling the sun more than before. Here

yuccas and desert plants dominate; it is a different ecosystem. When I realize the trail leads across the plateau then up the cliffs all the way to the rim, I suggest we turn back.

### ***Mile 95***

Just below Granite is Hermit Rapid. This is a huge fun wave train if you can line the boat up to ride it straight. Brad works to execute this perfectly. But Peggie does not appreciate this. She is hunkered in the bow, trying to stay dry.

I ride with Lars, who grins through the roller coaster while I bounce, trying to punch the waves. Hermit is about respect for the river, the recognition as we slide down the tongue that this serious rapid can, if it so chooses, flip us into hypothermia. But with luck we can keep the boat straight and have a great ride. Heavy boats plow through the waves, light ones bounce over the tops.

### ***Mile 98***

Even the commercial trips in their enormous boloney boats scout Crystal Rapid, the second worst rapid in the canyon.

The maw-like hole that seems to suck volumes of water from all sides seems unavoidable. The scouting point is a low plain of boulders on river right.

But the real threat could also be the rock garden below. By running close to the hole, on its right, Lars hopes to be set up to miss the rocks downstream. We all stand on boulders trying to get a vision of how the boats could safely pass the hole. I am nervous and suddenly needed to use the groover. The space between the shore and the hole seems too



small for a raft. The hole looks like hell.

Brad and Ricardo and Doc all talk and point. Julia seems fine, calm and confident. “What’s your plan?” I ask her.

“I have no fucking idea,” she starts out. Then she regains control and says a right run should be easy but she wants to go left.

Lars gets tired of standing on the hot rocks and turns back to the boats. “C’mon,” he says to me, “let’s just do it.”

We do precisely what no one should ever do. We untie and leave before the others are ready. As I coil the bowline, as I have coiled the bowline every time we have cast off from anywhere on this and many other trips, I try to absorb some of Lars’ confidence. Instead I fumble with the line and don’t tug it as tight as I usually do, throw the coil into the bow as Lars is already on the oars, eager to go.

My brother gets a picture of what happens to us at Crystal rapid. The picture shows a shiny yellow raft, standing on end sideways so that everything in the boat, everything that isn’t obscured by the crashing white wall of water, is in motion, falling. It’s hard to tell where everything is going, but I know I must be falling up.

My upper arms are there in the picture, shiny-wet and brown, gripping the lifeline. It appears I am sitting down. But I know that I am falling, falling upstream into the white froth as the boat spins away underneath us. I had been in the middle of the boat but in the picture I am almost sitting on the left tube.

All that can be seen of Lars, is the tip of his right foot. The eye automatically travels up to where the rest of him must be, the ankle, shin, calf and knee. He is getting

immeasurably pounded with water, within a churning froth, into which the boat appears on the brink of being emptied entirely. We slug the photo “Lars’ Right Foot.”

The port oar is invisible and the starboard oar has slipped out of its lock and lies at an odd angle through the picture. The spare oar, still lashed in place appears parallel to the right tube, out of the way of Lars, who, in motion, has become part of the river upstream from the boat. The boat stands vertically on its portside tube.

I search my memory when I first see the photo. This must be the moment I realized the boat was coming over on me. I had thought that if I released my own weight, maybe the boat would flop back down right-side up. I was unaware that 174 pounds of me was unlikely to affect the ballast of a boat loaded with nearly a ton of gear. So I was about to let go.

I take a huge breath of air, like I used to when I was on the dive team in sixth grade. I was about to be swept under the boat.

I go under but my head soon hits the underside of the raft. I had been taught to use my hands to walk my way out from under the boat, but I’ve never actually done it. “Walking” in this sense refers to what your hands do to the bottom of the boat that is above you, keeping you from air, keeping you from breathing. This might work except the bowline is wrapped around my foot. I kick to free myself, making it somehow tighter.

The bowline is a snake, trying to squeeze my right leg into submission. It tightens and holds fast.

I will have to cope with my foot being caught, I reason. There is no way I can pull out my knife and cut it. I kick and finally use my thumb to peel it to my ankle so I can get

my lips to the bow and catch a breath. I surface but am too weak to help myself. When I finally achieve the edge and a delicious breath of air, it isn't enough. My body is too weak, I need to breathe for a while before I can even reach for the lifeline.

But I don't have that while.

I grab for the lifeline but I'm not strong enough in this new boneless body. I jam my fist between the line and the boat to attach myself to it, then I reach down and clear my foot of the bowline. This process takes approximately two and a half years. When I finally free myself I try to pull myself on board by grabbing the spare oar. I simply am not strong enough. But in trying I see that the boat is empty; Lars could be miles away or dead. I have to get onboard to row the boat and find him.

I look downstream, buying time. I know I am strong enough to pull myself up as soon as my oxygen level returns. If I can wait that long. Downstream I see rocks, but survivable rocks. And no Lars. Then I feel the oar above me move. Lars is climbing on board from the other side but hasn't seen me. As he positions himself to row, I yell his name, which comes out "Shlaw!" and he drops the oars, pulling me aboard in one fast motion. My face hits the cooler and I stay there. He gains control of the oars and the boat as I try to get my feet under me, my uncooperative feet.

When I sit up and pat my head to signal to anyone who might see that I am okay, I hear a yell, a cheer, from shore. The others are still scouting and have seen the whole thing. In fact, someone has recorded it on video tape.

I watch, weeks later, the boat stand on its side for more than two seconds, as though trying to decide whether to flip or flop back down. At that moment, I am deep in

the river.

Lars catches the eddy at the bottom of the rock garden below Crystal and although I am sure someone else will need rescuing and I have the throw rope ready, everyone else floats through without incident. Ricardo loses an oar and consequently gets hung up on the rocks below, but soon he floats free. As we regain the current I inspect the coffee mug I've retrieved from the eddy. A construction company, no town given, is advertised on it in worn letters. A short length of string ties the lid to the cup. A carabiner, obviously forgotten this morning, or maybe yesterday, or maybe last week, rattles on the mug's handle.

Lars loses his hat in his swim but, strangely, finds a green visor in an eddy, a good visor, like the ones you can get for \$40 at REI. That afternoon, eight miles downstream, Betsy, in the boat ahead of us, lets out a yelp of delight, pointing to the water. We are in a place where the water is churning slowly, deeply. She reaches in and pulls out Lars' hat, somewhat out of shape and entirely waterlogged. Lars puts it on for a photograph, but wears the green visor the rest of the trip.

### ***Mile 101***

The Jewels: Beginning with Agate (or, I stop to consider, with Crystal) a series of rapids named successively Sapphire, Turquoise, Emerald, Ruby then a bit clumsily, Serpentine, takes us to mile 107, where we are greedy, looking forward to a layover day. Elliot has an acronym for the jewels: ASTERS. I want to say CASTERS, but it doesn't sound as good.

At the end of the day on my last trip, Ed Talkington, a tall quiet man incessantly doing community work like filtering water or making the best lasagna ever in a stack of DO's in the fire, comments that this has been the best day of whitewater, probably on the planet. I realize he is not referring to just OUR day of whitewater. He is talking about the sequence of rapids, existentially. Sometimes I feel we are in the middle of no where. But when someone says something like that, I feel we are in the best place, the center of everywhere.

### ***Mile 109***

Mark and I, following the directions Doc has given us, clamber over a rocky, poorly marked trail, to Shinumo creek just downstream from Bass Camp. Mark seems tired and quiet. He's been morose since Phantom. I suspect he's gotten a letter from his girlfriend, or maybe not gotten a letter. Regardless, when I propose hiking over to the waterfall, he says 'okay,' as though he were doing me a favor, which, I consider, he is. Doc did not tell us the trail would lead to the upper side of the waterfall and that the falls itself is impassable. I am game for the descent along the slippery boulders adjacent to the falls, but Mark points out, wisely, that getting back up will be impossible. I decide to wander up Shinumo Creek at which point Mark says he thinks he'll just return to camp. I tell him I'm heading up to find the legendary Bass Camp rumored to be littered with artifacts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century tourist camp. He's not interested.

I head up the creek, and when I pause to remove a pebble from my sandal I hear voices. I can see Mark's hat moving. Then I see the back of Maddy's head. At the same

time I smell her trademark marijuana smoke. Mark's head turns downstream and I see him pointing to the falls. He is either protecting me or pointing Maddy in the direction of the falls. I move toward the cutbank of the stream where she won't be able to see me. I don't, I reason with myself, want to intrude on the solitude of her hike.

She descends so close to me that I think of jumping out and scaring her, but because she is alone I remain still. Also, I've known pot-smokers to be a little paranoid; she might react badly. A glance up stream would have revealed me but she is focused on her destination. When I see her gathering the legs of her billowing pants to wade across the stream away from me, I turn and head back upstream.

After about an hour wandering through the creek, over a hill, along a bench and among more rocks, I sense an unnatural curve in the landscape. Here a rock wall has been formed, whether to clear a field for planting or to keep in stock I can't tell. Soon I hear voices again and find several members of our trip including Mrs. Johansen and one of her sons. We chat briefly then I follow the stream up, as they recommend, to find vast slabs of rock angled perfectly for absorbing the heat and drying me after I dip into the pool the creek forms just upstream. This is heaven.

I pull out my journal and write extensively, then pausing to watch the wind play in a tree, almost fall asleep. The heat forces me back in the water. As I emerge I hear a shout downstream and unsure of its nature I pack up my things and walk as far as I can without my sandals. Soon I run into Joan's son, who seems to be on his way to find me. He is excited but I can't tell whether it's fear or joy.

He turns, indicating I should follow. I slip my sandals back on and soon see his

mom seated on a rock. She has hurt her ankle and seems to be in pain. I get it. I should run over the hill to get help. Although her son and I are about the same fitness level to get back over the hill to camp, I know she would be more comfortable staying with him than with me. I leave her my half-full water bottle and I jog up the trail.

This route over the hill is a shortcut from the route I'd come in and is significantly steeper and climbs much higher in elevation. By the time I get to the top and am looking down at camp, I'm exhausted and regretting having given up my water. If it was 115 degrees in camp, it must be 125 here on this south-facing slope.

I descend as quickly as I can, noting that another private group is pulling in just upstream from us.

When I arrive at camp, breathless, Doc responds without urgency. I quickly describe Joan's condition.

"Does it look like maybe she needs to be flown out?" he asks.

"I don't think so," I say. "She can walk, but she can't walk by herself. She needs crutches or somebody to help her back over the hill."

Doc is not thinking the way I am thinking.

He is looking at the next ten days on the river and what it would mean to have somebody injured on board. He begins painting a picture of what a "fucking nightmare" it would be to have to take care of this Rubenesque woman, although that's not the term he uses. "Besides," he says. "What if it's broken? We have no way of knowing. The only thing to do is fly her out. We can't fly her out anywhere downstream, there's no landing spot for another hundred miles and where there is, the goddamn tourist copters will make

it impossible.”

Mark, do you know how to land a helicopter?

“Land a helicopter?” he asks.

Doc has pulled out his SAT phone and is trying to hang the lid to the dry box on the side rail of the box with just one hand.

You have to take a bucket and water down everything. EVERYTHING. Make sure everyone stays together. Make them hold hands. They like to hold hands anyway, that bunch. Tell Joan that everything is going to be okay, she is going to be getting off this hellish river trip VERY SOON. Doc grins at me.

I have collapsed in a chair with a river-chilled Heineken at this point and watch, fascinated, as Doc prepares Mark for what he is about to do.

Soon Mark is hiking back up over the hill I just came down, with a small backpack, carrying the pee bucket.

“Now, then, where was I?” Doc says, after Mark is gone. “Conditions around here are IMPROVING.”

“There’s somebody camping over there,” I say, pointing upstream.

“Goddamn it,” Doc says.

“Maybe they have an extra sponge,” I think aloud. For several days we have been without a dishwashing sponge since I forgot it on a rock where I had left it to dry. We have been using my handkerchief instead. I know we have really good coffee, thanks to Maddy’s connections on the north coast of California, and far more than we need so I grab a 12-ounce bag and head upstream.



I enter the foreign camp unnoticed. People are setting up tents. I don't want to interrupt the first person I encounter, a man doubled over clipping his toenails, conscientiously collecting the clippings in his hand. Instead, I look for the kitchen and announce, "Hello?"

I hold up the bag of coffee. "Do you guys happen to have an extra sponge?"

A thin woman wearing the latest expensive North Face attire stares at the coffee. And then, with great gravity says, "Um."

But someone else is already on it. Soon, a friendly guy with a big smile produces a sponge. "Oh yeah, we have like, three," he says. I hand him the coffee. "We're camped just downstream," I say.

"We know," someone says after a pause. Apparently we have taken the preferred campsite. Theirs is rocky and without shade.

Then stupidly, I remember that Doc had me and Mark go ahead and scout to see if the lower camp had been taken before we proceeded. That had been yesterday, weeks ago.

Rather than start a conversation, I thank them with profligacy and turn to go.

When I return to camp with the sponge, Mary does a dance. She jabs her cigarette into her mouth to free her hands when I make a motion that I'm going to throw it to her, since she is hovering over the kitchen box.

An hour or so later we hear a helicopter. Strangely, it descends as though it would land on our beach, but the ridge surrealistically slips between it and our camp. Less than an hour later we hear it take off.

Soon, Mark, carrying the bucket, returns. His sour mood is gone. Confident and excited, he describes to me the details of meeting the guys on the copter, how they couldn't tell if the ankle was broken, but since they had flown in and she wanted to go, they took her out. The son has gone too, to help with logistics, since she might not be able to drive. "I wrapped her ankle really really well," Mark says, grinning at Doc.

Mark stares at a small piece of paper, longer than it would take to read the name and number I could see on it. "The one guy gave me his number. He said he'd take me up sometime." Mark's grin leaves little room on his face for anything else.

That evening everyone is in good spirits. Joan's husband, who until this point had not consumed any alcohol, accepts a beer from Paul.

"Interesting development," Doc comments as he watches from two boats over.

Mark tells me how the wind from the chopper blades was so strong it broke tree limbs.

Somebody discovers a bottle of tequila they had forgotten they'd packed.

"I've got a whole bag of limes," Doc volunteers.

"Let's make margaritas," I suggest.

Maddy and I start slicing limes and testing concoctions. Soon we settle on a recipe: one large lime, squeezed, two teaspoons of sugar, my tin camp cup  $\frac{3}{4}$  full of water and a finger of tequila. We set up shop.

"Who wants a margarita?" we announce. "It will cost one song."

After a few clients, Paul steps up with an empty mug and quietly says "you really don't want me to sing."

Maddy suggests that instead of a song, people should be able to get a margarita in exchange for a kiss, if they really feel they can't sing.

Mr. Johanson, our trip leader, the Mormon chiropractor whose wife has just been flown to a hospital with a swollen ankle, is undoubtedly, Maddy says, a margarita virgin. And you know what virgins are for, she squints one eye and grins at me. He finally finds his camping mug and approaches us, warning that he really, really isn't a very good singer and that we probably don't want him to sing either. Maddy gives him his choices. He is edging my way so I offer my cheek. When he delivers a peck on my lips only Maddy is more surprised than me. Grinning at our success, she fills his mug.

Then we look at each other in astonishment, our mouths wide open, and do a high-five.

When everyone has been served a margarita I retire to a chair next to Mark. Doc is grinning at me from the other side of Mark. He smiles an amused smile and whispers to Mark next to him. They are up to something.

Something amusing. To them. Maddy is involved, but I can't figure out how.

Grinning again, Mark is Mark. He has to do something. He can't just sit there and talk.

Maddy is watching me but I don't understand why until later.

"Hey Maile," Mark says loudly, "let's see if we can fix that air pump."

He had described to me earlier in the day a trick he had learned involving white gas and air pumps. "Fix" was not quite the word for what he plans to do.

But fixing an air pump is not something that would motivate Maddy to follow us.

Mark gets up and heads toward his boat.

I follow. Sure enough, Maddy does not.

I hand Doc my drink and climb aboard Mark's boat, an 18-foot narrow-tubed and well-worn rig borrowed from an outfitter Mark knows. He unties the cam strap holding his air pump and hands it to me. Then he scours the shore. He points to the bay just upstream of us, which is clear of boats and chairs.

Clutching the pump, I step carefully along the edge of the boat to shore, not an easy passage as the cool evening had softened the air-filled tubes so each step is soft and my foot settles in deep.

Finally I land on the sand and struggle to follow Mark up the sandy bank.

I watch the evening light high on the cliffs as I walk gracelessly along the shore.

Tonight the colors are redder than usual; the sun is being filtered by smoke from unseen wildfires on the rim.

Mark stops so I look over. He is getting a lighter from Paul.

When he joins me he is holding just the lighter and a small aluminum bottle of white gas, the kind I take on backpack trips for my Whisperlite stove.

He explains carefully what he is intending to do. And what I am going to do.

We are going to have Maddy light it, he says, looking me in the eye.

You are going to hold the tube, he tells me, and I am going to work the pump.

What you have to do, he says, handing me the end of the hose farthest from the pump, is keep this above this. His other hand holds an upside-down U-shape. The hose is connected to the pump then goes up, then down. I'm thinking it through. There needs to

be a loop of upness that prevents gas from flowing back into the pump. At the same time, no gas fumes could be allowed to drift out the far end. Mark shows me how the hose will have two up-and-down air gaps and I'm convinced it will work.

Once he sees that I understand, he extends the pump handle then he pours gas into the hose. Leaving me holding the gas-filled hose, he grips the pump handle, turns and calls to Maddy, who is paying attention closely enough to leap up to help.

With himself at the pump handle, he instructs Maddy, positioning her to one side of the hose opening. He then explains in very brief terms, that when he says to light it—and not before—she is to hold her hand below the hose and create a flame. Be sure to stand clear, he warns. “Keep your hair out of the way.”

I had no idea the flame would go as far out as it would. From my perspective, it was big. But when I saw the pictures later, I could see that the fireball that shot out of the air pump went thirty feet out, halfway across the river.

Maddy had jumped back, thinking I supposed, that removing the lighter would extinguish the flame.

Instead she yelled obscenities in shock and fell on the sand, her legs in the air, her hands too slow to catch her fall.

I didn't see that part either, but that is what Mark talked about afterward.

“Knocked you on your ass, Maddy,” Mark kept saying with a good-natured grin, “Knocked you on your ass.”

*Mile 117*

“This is my favorite place in the canyon,” Paul tells me. “Hell, probably my favorite place anywhere.”

He is standing on a ledge as I leap to the rock that is the shore. He ducks through the strap of his camera bag, which means he knows about something here that is worth photographing. Elves Chasm is among the most photographed sites in the canyon but Paul will somehow work beyond the clichés and produce a startling National Geographic quality image.

We have clipped the boats to each other because we know this is a popular spot and every commercial trip stops here. We may have to get linear, tying just one or two boats to shore to let others in to the narrow bay.

Paul heads straight uphill while Mark and I climb the rocks and start to explore, both of us looking for paths that digress from the main tourist trail. We end up swimming through some pools as we see others climbing along the edge of a rock trail. We do not arrive at the main attraction site first. Which is just as well. The others are having a great time climbing up behind the waterfall and leaping out from the cave into the idyllic pool below. It is hard to believe nature created something as pleasing to the human spirit as this. We all take turns climbing up the worn, slippery rocks in the dark cavern to emerge at the top of the waterfall, the pool, the small audience, the rocks and the river all laid out below. I plunge into the clear cold water then do it again.

The graceful rocks all seem greater than real life, more beautiful than any artist could have imagined. If I had seen a painting or drawing of the place first, I would not have believed it.

## *Mile 120*

All the unnamed rapids start to look the same: Lots of really cold, merciless water. But the walls of the canyon do not.

An hour or so after lunch I see Doc ahead pulling ashore. Julia reaches shore first although she is second in the line up. We all tie up to boulders and I expect someone to tell me that there's an equipment malfunction, a tube to be patched. But instead, as I see Julia clipping her PFD to a bowline and carrying her water bottle, I deduce a hike is in order. I look at her.

"This is Blacktail," she states as though we have been waiting all our lives for this moment. "Bring your flute."

Julia is being generous, referring to my penny whistle with its six holes as a "flute." A piece of tin wrapped to form a tube, barely sealed, I like it because it is light and the tone low, inoffensive.

Most of us walk leisurely over the rocky shore to the canyon and meander up its flat bed. The walls close in quickly and I hear someone ahead, whistling. The echoes are amazing, coming from all sides so that I turn to wonder, if the whistler is behind me. I sense Mary slowing, stopping to look up, one hand on a hip. I try to find a key with the penny whistle that will work for Eleanor Rigby, which Ricardo had been singing last night, substituting "Julia Holland" for "Eleanor Rigby" and referring to her rowing prowess in his improv lyrics.

Mary sings the original verse so beautifully that I want to stop playing, but when I

stop she stops, continuing just humming.

When I play I cannot hear the echoes. Julia realizes this and looks at me, tells me its amazing. These women get it at every level.

I hand the penny whistle to Julia and she produces a pleasing wandering sound without rhythm, pretense or melody. The echoes are as though from someone dying, but with pleasure.

### **Defecating with Dignity**

A strong mind outwits embarrassment. Many mornings after breakfast when tent poles clack as they are disassembled and the bags of those off hiking sit on the beach near their boats, Ricardo wanders through camp, doing whatever he is doing, singing. And his song goes something like this:

*Think about taking a poop.*

*It's that time of day . . .*

*Gonna pack the groover away*

*so it's time to . . .*

*Think about taking a poop.*

The melody varies but generally mimicks a nursery rhyme and “poop” ends on a high note.

Like a good doctor, Ricardo keeps his secrets. He claims to know everything



going on under the skin of everyone on a trip by casual observation of the contents of the groover. He says newbies are likely to hold it in for a few days at the start of a trip but by the time Nankoweap has crept into view at mile 53, everyone has released the sphincter and become a lot more fun to be around as a result. Ricardo reports that he had trips where an individual or two managed to keep it in the entire trip.

Imagine that, he remarks. ‘That’s one sorry excuse for a human being.’

I figure out right away that it’s a lot easier to admit that we all shit, that we all need to wash our hands immediately afterward, and that when someone is taking so long that I suspect s/he has taken the extra lifejacket (the “key”) to the groover and forgotten to bring it back, it is easier to holler in the direction of the groover than it is to do a headcount of everyone else in camp.

Each person has a level of politeness with which he or she is comfortable. I soon conclude that most people who prefer to deny ever having a need to use the groover are not likely to be found on a private trip. It’s a thing we all do daily. But discretion is appreciated; it’s part of good taste.

When I say that Ricardo is a beautiful human being, this is what I’m talking about. He selects a site to place the groover with grace and considerable thought. Where there’s prevailing wind direction, he sets it downwind from camp. It is always out of sight of the main camp but not too far. It is never difficult to access in the dark, nor dangerous. And most importantly, it is always set up with a beautiful view of the river.

This view is rarely marred, but on occasion, another trip floats by while one of us is on the groover. When this happened to me, I was warned by sound--those on the boat

were singing. My instinct was to finish my business as quickly as possible and fumble for my shorts, which were around my ankles. But instead, recognizing the song, “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” I made a rash decision. I grabbed the toilet paper in one hand and waving it like a flag, I put my hands in the air and remaining seated, did a little dance to their music. After all, none of my people could see me. Isn’t that what really matters? Having to live it down?

### ***Mile 131***

Bedrock Rapid has its own reputation, Grand Canyon aside. There are people who know of this rapid, but probably don’t know what river it’s on. Somewhere on the internet, on some rafting string, I have seen the name “runsleftatbedrock.” I have seen t-shirts with the same identifier, like ‘runs with scissors.’

This rapid sucks boats left and dumps them in an eddy. It is absolutely crucial, I’m told, to run right. And between the two is an enormous, well, it’s a bedrock. I have never seen anyone go left here or actually wrap the rock, but I’ve seen pictures. And at camp I hear about it.

Around the fire someone remembers a boatful of young men who ran left. The rest of the trip had pulled over to wait for them and could only see the lower section of the river left of the rock, the section where the eddy met the current.

The first time the boat went around the eddy, it got to the bottom and the other members of the trip could see the boatman rowing like hell to get out. But the boat kept going around. The next time around, someone else was at the oars, rowing as hard and

fast as humanly possible. Four large young men were on the boat. The crew watched as each circulation revealed a new man at the oars, rowing like hell.

The fifth time around, All four men were sitting in the boat drinking beer.

No one was rowing.

### ***Mile 132***

Deubendorff sounds like a Nazi. And the number of times the name comes up when people's faces lit up by the campfire recount flip stories, only adds to the anxiety in the approach to this class 7-9 rapid. The most recent trip, the one with ten boats, we are all concerned that Stone Creek camp might not be available at its base. There's a camp just upstream so for the second time this trip, because I'm in the lead boat, (not because I'm in the best shape,) I run ahead, climb atop a boulder and scour the shore downstream for tents or boats indicating someone got there first. I give the all clear sign and people start floating through, Elliot waiting for me in the rear. Although I'm already halfway to camp, he knows I love a good ride.

As I walk back among the boulders, I watch, wishing I'd thought to unstrap my camera. One by one the boats bounce right down the middle of the rapid in flawless runs. Lynn, one of two newbies on this trip, driving a 14-foot boat, considered very small for this river but lots more fun, is the only one who goes for a swim -- but pulls himself back aboard in time for the take out at Stone Creek, a feat greater than running the rapid straight.

We are thrilled to see a long beautiful sand dune, it can no longer be merely called

a beach. I want to set my tent on the very top of it, a good hike past the south end of camp. When I get there I realize I will be marring the view for everyone else and retreat to the edge where I find someone has cleared a space among rocks. I use the natural furniture to spread out my clothing to dry then rush to take the short walk up Stone Creek to its first waterfall, which I remember from every prior trip. Enroute I find frogs eggs and study them. In one puddle I find three clusters of eggs, each in a different stage of development.

Returning from my hike I pause above camp to look at the rapid, the camp, the various stages of isolation everyone has chosen for their tents. As I'm standing there I notice a rock nearby that contrasts the surrounding stones with its redness and roundness. It must have rolled down from the Supai layer. Embedded in it is a long segmented worm-like structure. It doesn't look like any fossil I've seen so I call out to the geologists. Raoul and Ed come up to examine it. It looks like the tail of a gi-normous rattlesnake. Or it's the spine of something. Raoul dates the stone to 350 million years. Ed thinks it's coral. Hearing no immediate answer and lots of conjecture, I leave them to it and descend to camp for a beer. Half an hour later, the geologists are still up there. I call out to them.

"We are stumped," Raoul calls back.

The next day, impatient for others who are still sitting around drinking coffee or fussing with Ziploc bags, I head up Stone Creek alone. I had asked Elliot who confirmed he wanted to go but apparently he has left without me. Raoul also says that he intends to go up 'in a bit,' and I start looking for the rumored trail up creek left. Soon I am following a narrow path among agave that are about to bloom as well as three other types

of prickly plants. When I am above the waterfall I look back but see no one following. I rest, drink some water then continue again with still, no one following. Soon I am at the level of the creek again, having descended slightly. The morning sun is halfway across the narrow valley and I stare at the bright green of just-emerging cottonwoods upstream, slightly greener and more advanced than their counterparts had been in Shinumo drainage. The sun is on the trail now but its not so hot that I want to walk in the shade.

Suddenly I hear the creek, making a sound as though it were running through dry leaves and I glance over to see what it is. As I do so, my right foot senses action below it and swerves to the side. At the same time, my ears turned now, I realize the sound is coming from the trail beneath me.

I know intuitively it is a rattlesnake and I leap backward.

Coiled in the trail ready to send itself flying twice the length of its own body I remember the NPS brochure and back down the trail about ten feet. The snake is flying a little flag, a rattling papery flag with about 6 or 8 segments, telling me its age. It is also telling me that unless I have a telephoto lens, which I don't, it's probably not worth taking out my camera for a picture because I'm not getting any closer.

Instead I fish around in my pack for notebook paper and scrawl a message for those who will eventually follow. "RATTLESNAKE 10 FT. AHEAD." The snake is sliding under a rock, but I don't trust it to leave its sunny spot. I place the note on a rock weighted down by another rock so that even if someone coming along doesn't pick it up to read it, they can't miss the first word.

Then I cross the creek and walk on the other side for awhile.

When I stop to take some pictures some others catch up to me and thank me for the note. Then some others come along and thank me also. Everyone who comes along seems inordinately appreciative.

At the end of the day when we are all at the base of the waterfall two miles upcreek, Herb comes down. He had started hiking before any of us. Our conversation goes like this:

Herb: "Hey, did you see the snake?"

Me: "Yes, thank you for writing a note to warn me it was there, Herb."

Raoul: "Wait, I thought you wrote the note, Maile."

Me: "I did."

Herb: (after a pause.) "Well, I didn't have a paper or pen."

### ***Mile 134***

Everyone tells me the hike up Tapeats Creek to Thunder River is a must. But everyone says every hike is a must.

The hike up Tapeats Creek really is a must.

Every hike so far has exceeded my imagination. It's not that someone planned it this way. It seems to keep getting better and better, but I decide it is the newness of it. Also, every ten miles we travel downstream we are getting closer to sea level, closer to the equator. The weather is getting hotter, the air dryer, the rocks older. And I am becoming less the person I used to be and more someone else.

The hike from the river begins with a steep ascent through shale to what seems to

be a high water line. Then Elliot, Anna and I head up along a loud creek that seems frustrated, angry even, in its eagerness to get to the main Colorado River. Like a Sierra Nevada Creek dropping quickly through recently pushed-up mountains, I wonder at its white froth, why it is furious. We cross it several times and although it is easy to cross, I am intimidated by it.

Elliot and Anna are looking up though, talking about Thunder River ahead. It is the shortest river in the world, they tell me, which raises the question of what defines a river versus any other flow of water. Volume?

Compared to the slot canyons of other side hikes this trip, Tapeats is a broad meandering valley. Soon a jet of water that seems to have just yesterday decided to rip open a hole a few hundred yards above us in the side of the mountain to our left shrieks down the cliffs to settle unhappily in the Tapeats valley, where we have been staring at its fury as we wandered up.

We begin to zigzag up the steep slope to a waterfall that is trying to erode a path through solid rock about 1,000 feet above us. Anna is younger than me, I keep telling myself, as I try to keep her tennis shoes in view. Elliot is far ahead. I strain to see the source of the loud water and see Elliot's mop of curly hair looking over the edge of his sandals at us as we inch up the vertical slope. When I've caught my breath and stand watching a red monkey flower sway in the breeze created by the spray, Elliot tells me the water shoots out a hole in the rock straight up from where Anna stands in the waterfall. I hike up and soon find myself deafeningly close to the spring, but unable, or unwilling, to get any closer. I have never seen anything like this and cannot call it a spring; it's a

freakish phenomenon, clear cold white water gushing from a dry hot rock.

I remember suddenly I have agreed to help filter water, I must get back. We return down the zigs and zags and are soon following Tapeats Creek to the main Colorado River. Now this anxious water is easier to comprehend. It's just been born, it's a wild child.

When I get back to the river I learn that others have bypassed Thunder River's steep hike and have gone up the main trickle of Tapeats Creek to a cave. This trip, Tapeats is not yet closed to camping and we enjoy the privacy provided by the noise of the stream although the camp is small. Mark and I settle our chairs in the creek with a line of 5-gallon water jugs on the bank and begin filtering from the pristine Thunder River output, hand-pumping slowly through a small filter.

I settle my chair into the water to cool off, my feet like rabbit ears, stuck out to circulate blood through them to cool. We are on our second five-gallon jug when Mary joins us in the creek with her chair, watching from the shallows downstream. Soon, Jessica wanders in, scopes out the scene and returns to her tent. She comes back with a cot, which she places in the creek, its canvas several inches above the water. Soon the entire crew is sitting on the cot, ten people in all, 20 feet in the water. Mark and I continue pumping, having found comfortable positions and a certain rhythm, we turn down offers of assistance. It would be too much effort to explain to someone the process without spilling any precious pumped-clean water into the creek. Besides, we are talking camp politics. Who is sleeping with whom and whether it will last.

When we finish I haul the last jug to shore and return the water filter and pump to



its bag. When I look up, Doc has taken my chair and is chatting with Mark animatedly. They are pointing at the cliff behind Elliot's boat.

I glance over, searching the wall of rock for goats or sheep. I am shocked to see what appears to be a huge chunk of rock about to fall on the delicate wooden dory Elliot steers magically through every rapid without a scratch. I wade over to get Doc's opinion. "I've been coming down here for thirty, forty years and every time I stop here I expect that chunk of rock to be gone," he says. Maybe tonight will be the night, he says, raising one eyebrow. We watch as Elliot, just returned from unknown regions but entirely without pants, which we would not have noticed with his long shirt had he not leaned over his boat to place something in a hatch. He absorbs in a glance that the three of us are watching and slowly moves to the other side of the boat, avoiding, I can only assume, inadvertently mooning us as he does whatever it is that he is doing. Doc mentions that Elliot built the boat himself.

Soon Elliot is ambling back our direction and seeing that we are all still watching the rock, turns himself to look and stops short.

I think I'll move my boat, he says.

With kitchen set up in the bushes, the high water line being a ways from shore, we spend a lovely afternoon watching other boats rush through the rapids.

John has been complaining about the hair in his eyes so I offer to give him a quick haircut. I'm surprised that he takes me up on it. I pull out my tiny Swiss Army knife with its folding scissors. Doc sees me, tells me not to be a moron and offers me, no *tells me* to use some surgical tools instead. John enthusiastically embraces this idea—and when John

finds his comb, I begin snipping his forelock, then proceed clockwise, moving around his ears.

It reminds me of trimming the hair of toddler boys, which has on occasion resulted in minor bloodshed. I make the mistake of mentioning this when he asks me if I've ever cut hair before.

"I won't cut your ears," I assure him, you are being a very good boy. The kids always wiggle.

Jessica asks if she can use my video camera to record the process. I think it's hilarious that she narrates whenever the camera is running so the footage shows me looking very amused. As she is describing the haircutting procedure she is suddenly distracted by something walking through in the background. It is Elliot, sans pants. "What have we here?" she asks. She is also discovering the telephoto button, I will learn weeks later when I review the footage at home.

As I continue snipping, we watch another private trip float through the long delicious wavetrain that is Tapeats Rapid. Every single person is wearing a helmet.

You can tell when they're maggots, Doc explains, his term for kayakers. They are so used to wearing helmets, learned to paddle on kayaks in the Sierras or Cascades. They don't know how to handle big water. A helmet isn't going to do anything but help you drown down here, Doc says. But they don't feel safe without them.

I watch the first boat go through. A man is rowing, a woman crouched in the bow clinging to both lifelines, helmets strapped on tight. He stays straight and has a good, fun-looking run. The next boat follows the same, straight line. As we watch the boats sail

bouncing through, something seems wrong. There's no whooping in joy at the end of the wave train or as the boats punch through the waves. No one is riding cowboy, something the teenagers like to do, riding feet in front holding onto the lifeline inside the boat the way a rodeo bull-rider holds the strap, left hand in the air. The air of seriousness, the strict lines, the sobriety ... I wonder if something has gone wrong, did they suffer a tragedy upstream?

I mention it to Doc and Mark sitting there in the shallows drinking beer.

Mark nods in agreement, something seems strange about the bunch.

Doc said he sees a lot of trips like that. "They're scared," he says. They don't have a repeater on board to tell them that everything is going to be okay ... because everything isn't going to be okay, Doc intones. If an outfit like that runs into any trouble, they have no clue what to do.

But I have my doubts. I review my trips and their rowers in my head. Brad seems pretty well prepared, knows what a SAT phone is and how to use it, even though he's never been on big water. He's done his homework and knows a lot ... but that lot includes finding Julia and Doc and Ricardo.

I nonetheless compare our attitudes. We are a happy bunch, not entirely careless and fancy free, but we are relaxed, enjoying the splendor and the outdoor lifestyle. Would things be significantly different if we had trouble? My impression is everyone knows what they are up against and is adequate to the task of enjoying a wilderness adventure.

And wait a minute, we have had trouble. We flipped a boat. And we handled it.

I decide Doc is just repeating his Public Relations Policy; private boaters need

repeaters. I'm not sure I'm convinced.

Later that night after dark, with the assistance of a black light, Maddy discovers a large boulder entirely covered with scorpions.

Maddy explains that she uses the light to check her campsite every night before laying out her bedroll. We discuss the scorpions for hours. What attracts them to that rock? I decide that it's the form of a Jesus visage on the north side of the rock and so state. Doc says it's salt. Elliot thinks it's the only rock that really gets any sun, so it's warmer.

Scorpion stings, I recall, can be fatal. Maybe Doc is right. We only need repeaters if we need them. Without Doc and his ability to flip boats, stitch up wounds and pull medical solutions out of his magic box, would we all be living in fear? If I stopped to contemplate the potential ill outcome of every step, try to predict every misstep, would I be miserable?

### ***Mile 137***

My first view of Deer Creek Falls, the sheer height of the thing scares me. Brad proceeds to wade into the shallows to allow the pounding water to give him a back massage. But as I approach, the stinging spray turns me away. Other private boats are parked here but I see no one, so I know there's a trail to somewhere. I head up a dusty path that soon ascends the steep slope just downstream from the falls. A vigorous hike leads me to a level, well-worn path along a ledge. I wait for the others, unsure if I should proceed into the slot canyon. The ledge looks dangerously narrow, the fall fatal.

I look down on the boats. A pair of commercial baloney boats has pulled in next to us, dwarfing our toy-like rafts. The massive canyon buses appear twice as long as our boats and almost square. I hope their cargo does not decide to make the hike.

Soon most our party is joining us. I watch people edge around a ledge, holding hands to gain the inner canyon. I wait for Lars, wanting to do the same, but I am unsure. Paintings on the canyon walls here made by spraying paint at a hand held against the rock appear recent but Brad tells me they're ancient. It's funny that these have been placed where we need to hold hands in order to safely proceed.

I notice Peggie is sitting against the wall of the canyon, both hands on the ground as though feeling for an earthquake. Her eyes show white all around her pupils; something is wrong. I ask if she is okay. "Will you help me down?" she asks me, the pupils of her eyes staring in terror.

I am not quite believing it and assume she is having some kind of stomach trouble. Peggy, over six feet tall, is a big strong woman. I've known her to challenge political foes behind a microphone with confidence, articulacy and the firm strength of someone who knows what she is talking about. She can be scary powerful.

She holds my hand firmly and stays as close to the wall of the canyon as she can, reaching out with her other hand to the wall for guidance, even where it is just a pile of rocks and dirt.

I lead her out to the main canyon where I expect she'll be able to descend the zigzags without too much trouble. But she holds on to me the entire way down, her feet unsure, her face alarmed and frowning, her body motions tight and hesitant. She almost

crawls, rarely standing. It takes two hours to descend what took about 15 minutes to climb up.

By the time we get down to river level I am exhausted. And I understand what fear is. Peggie, one of the strongest people I know, is afraid of heights. It is not a thing she has control over. It grips her and paralyzes her; some chemical reaction occurs in her blood stream freezing both her muscles so they can't move and her brain so it can't reason. Somehow, the experience of helping her down the cliff face has made me think she is even stronger. This fear is not a weakness, rather, her recognition of it a strength.

The next time I'm here, I hike up the zigzags with Mark and I am able to proceed past the ancient hand symbols, following the ledge inward to where Deer Creek flows among stair-like ledges decorated gracefully with cottonwood trees. This must be the place known as the patio. Mark and I sit in the shade of a cliff and I tell him about Peggie, about why I hadn't been in here on my last trip several years prior. When Doc shows up, the three of us proceed up the creek, walking in the water to another smaller waterfall where we take turns freezing our heads.

Then Mark and I continue north along a dirt path through some underbrush until we are climbing again. We pass behind a waterfall and into an area of block-like boulders. I cannot tell if these giant chunks of sand stone have been moved by humans but Mark climbs into a giant chair formed by tilted and stacked slabs of stone. This must be the "Throne Room" Doc has told us about. We are humbled by the stones and cooled by them so that we do not want to leave. Others come and go. Soon a party appears,

having hiked over from Tapeats Creek, asking for directions to the trail. We get up to show them, leading them back to the patio, which, now empty of people, is a sign we are tardy and we head back out to the main canyon and down the zigzags.

Two years later I again climb up to see the patio but a huge chunk of wall has fallen from the west side, crushing a tree ... and I wonder what else. A person could be under that rock it is so big.

### ***Mile 138***

Pancho's Kitchen is a broad mound of sand on the south side of the river about a mile downstream from Deer Creek. On my fourth trip, we leave an inflatable kayak at the mouth of Deer Creek for the two hikers, our PH—Mikal and a passenger, a guy who goes by Keeeth. Yup. He spells it with a triple-e and no last name. The two of them were dropped at Tapeats, two miles upstream and are expected to complete the hike well before dark. Listed in my hiking book as 5-8 hours, I know they are pushing it, having been dropped off after lunch. But Mikal is as physically fit a guy as I'd ever like to meet and Keeeth seems a good match.

Keeeth is a quiet dark-haired man who wears a high quality red sweater almost constantly. He is a bicyclist who started his own bicycle messenger service in San Francisco. He tells me his bicycles are custom-built in the Netherlands and cost thousands of dollars each. When I ask how big a package he can carry, he shocks me: "800 pounds."

How do you do that?

“Oh, I have a trailer.”

Their hike takes off at Thunder River, where Elliot, Anna and I had hiked. But then the two would have to achieve the ridge several hundred feet farther up, then drop into Surprise Valley. From there it's a long slow descent to the throne room. I wish I had gone.

At dusk we see the inflatable kayak arrive with just Mikal aboard. We are all alarmed. What happened to Keeeth?

But Mikal is not hurried. “Oh, he's coming down along the shore. When he shows up someone can go across and get him.

Mikal, it turns out, didn't want to risk taking his movie camera down a mile of river without the proper protection from the water so he had Keeeth carry it down along the rocky shore. In the dark.

Dark has settled over camp entirely by the time someone spots a weak flashlight across the river. Dan, the guy most adept with the inflatable kayak, paddles across with a dry box for the camera and a PFD for Keeeth. The attitude toward the PH declines two notches. Putting Keeeth, who everyone has come to respect, at this risk, walking along the base of the cliffs at the edge of the river in the dark, is unforgiveable.

Pancho's kitchen is the first site where no vegetation sufficiently hides the groover. This exposure seems to build an awkward, clammy atmosphere.

I am not the only one who is irritated. I am afraid I will tell Mikal what I think about him putting his camera above the life of Keeeth. I have a strong need to get out of camp. So, in the morning, early, I hike and climb up the cliff to a point where I can walk



along a high ledge overhanging the camp. Somehow removing myself from the embrace of the canyon walls cleanses me of my tension. I sit on a rock and watch the birds, the river, the canyon until the heat makes me retreat. When I descend I smile at Mikal. He is, after all, why I am here.

### ***Mile 144***

John Wesley Powell's second trip, (the one that had launched with my great great grandmother's chair,) gave up and overwintered here at Kanab Creek. Fred Dellenbaugh, the red-headed teenager who recorded the trip much later, regretted this end to his adventure, commenting that neither the high water nor the threat of an ambush by the Shevuits Indians was good reason for giving up the 'scientific' expedition.

So he unhappily helped dismantle and unload the boats. Three years later Dellenbaugh returned, saw the chair and took it to Salt Lake City, a gift to his friend, Francis Marion Bishop, who had abandoned the trip early. That is where history loses our family story.

The first time I look up the canyon formed by Kanab Creek, I wonder how long a hike would take me to the town of Kanab, where my father's spring geography field trips from the University of Montana would stop for breakfast after driving all night. Those trips, comprised of a dozen and a half geography students headed for spring break in Mexico packed into two or three institutional-green Chevy Suburbans, camped in the desert after lengthy lectures about geomorphology or pre-Colombian agriculture. In my

memory, Kanab—the town—is a place of long shadows and early sun on red stone. My father would pick up his spoon then wipe it clean on his napkin before using it to scoop a soft-boiled egg at the café where we always stopped. The breakfast place would be filled by our crew, observed with widening eyes by a few hunched men hiding under cowboy hats at the bar.

Kanab marked a shift from Montana landscapes. Gone were towering snowcapped mountains, welcome were gangly cacti. Soon we'd see the ocotillos I loved, with their spider-like limbs, the graceful mesquites and strange, green-armed palo verde trees. Palm trees elicited a lecture from my father about the ancient and traditional use of dates, coconuts, oil palms ... the professor would start listing species, hoping, I imagined, to get through all 250 varieties before his audience, less patient even than me at age 14, disengaged.

As I stare up Kanab, ready to explore, Julia and Doc insist I grab my water bottle, the hike will be a long one.

Kanab is a native word for willow, so everything about this place was creek-related. Of course. It's about the water.

I zipped up my fannypack with camera, lenses, notebook, pens, bandage tape, a pocket knife ... but Doc and Julia carry only water, wear only swimsuits and sandals.

My brother and a few others join us. I figure out early in the trip that water sandals, although they pick up rocks occasionally, offer the advantage that they need not be removed at creek crossings. Soon, Doc, Julia and I are well ahead. I tire of stopping to wait for the others to catch up, I want to lose them. So when our path veers east up a side

creek, a pile of boulders really, I will us to silence. But Julia is kinder and waits atop a boulder to sign those shod in hiking boots, the way.

I am steamy hot, my linen shirt's shoulders crisp and dry when we achieve a clear pool, the others just behind us. Julia, who wears nothing but her bikini always, slips into the water and emerges smiling, glowing. Since toddlerhood, I have never been nude in front of my brother but I feel like pushing the limits. This is my trip, my circle of friends, my culture. Not having a swimsuit is not going to stand in my way. I strip down and dive in, swim the length of the tank underwater, gleefully, the astonishing cold of it returning me to sanity. I emerge and spread out on a rock to dry. My brother refrains from any comment but leaves before the rest of us are ready.

When we return to camp we find Brad has thoughtfully placed a jug of drinking water in the stream, tethering it to shore, so that we have something cold to drink. Peggie and I, at shoe size 12 and 11 ½ respectively, have swapped sandals because we both have blisters. Now that we both have a new set of blisters, we swap back. Everyone is sitting so still, exhausted from the hike, that a beaver walks right through camp, steps into the water and swims away without anyone bothering to reach for a camera.

Julia calls Kanab creek an “emotional vortex” and says every trip something weird happens here.

This is where Elliot disappears with a young woman with large brown eyes named Jessica. Missy becomes distraught then finally disappears too, reappearing late for dinner.

This is where Julia confesses she thinks my brother is ‘creepy.’

My brother? Creepy? It's a startling revelation to me.

The next trip Julia is gone and I miss her. Here at Kanab, Doc is missing Lacy, who hiked out at Phantom, and asks me into his tent with him, to work on his back. Lacy having left the trip, he is enormously lonely. He has been rowing all day so I work his shoulders, his spine, and back up to his shoulders. He has two long vertical scars on his lower back, signs of surgery. I don't go near them. I slow my massage until I think he is sleeping then reach for the tent zipper, scooting to the door to leave.

He senses it and begs me to stay. I place my hand on his back and wait for him to fall back asleep. I stay with him as he curls up in a fetal position and starts to snore, but I fall asleep too. In the night, I awaken to his weeping. He is mourning the new day, the anniversary of his son's death. A death he has blamed on himself. He had given the 18-year-old a fancy fast car for his birthday and he had killed himself in an accident on the test drive. I wonder at one point whether he is talking in his sleep, so nightmarish is this reality. But I know he isn't. He mentioned it before, when passing an island in the canyon he had named after his dead son.

It is a sleepless, dreadful night.

### ***Mile 148***

Matkatamiba Canyon requires agility I didn't know I had. I have seen pictures of this place, everyone has seen pictures of this place. I know I have seen it in ads for photo paper, on postcards, on every adventure or wilderness-themed anything ever.

Here, water has created a curvy path just wide enough for human shoulders to

explore. I'm glad I brought my fanny pack to carry my camera and water bottle because as the side canyon narrows, to avoid the slippery trickle of water, we must step sideways on the walls.

Nobody wants to miss this hike so just Doc stays down with the boats.

Soon we emerge into a cavernous place where water must have eroded softer stone in a huge whirlpool. Red walls of limestone form vertical cliffs that tower too precipitously for us to see the top. It's a place where I have to sit down and just stare for awhile, so dramatic is the place.

Robert is working on a shopping list, planning to phone out to his son to do a resupply at Diamond Creek just 75 miles downstream. Paul is taking pictures of bright green mesquite branches standing out from the red-tinted shadows. His sister, Esther, wearing her signature polka-dot bikini, cleans her glasses.

As I wander upstream, I realize someone is ahead of me when I hear stones clattering. It takes me awhile to catch up and when I do I regret it. It's my hiking buddy, Peter, who has not invited me to come with him.

He too is cleaning his glasses. Then I see why. He is carrying a small zip-loc baggy containing a gray substance that can only be one thing.

It's my father, he tells me.

I'll leave you alone, I say, and head back down.

I wait in the patio area with the others until they begin drifting back down through the narrows.

Soon, only Robert is left, and he looks to me, assuming I am the last one.

I explain, tell him I'll wait for Peter and he says since there are no major rapids between here and camp, they'll leave the two of us and go ahead to secure camp at Matkat Hotel about half a mile downstream. I tell him to be sure to get my lifejacket off the other raft I'd been riding on—that I'll trade places with Maddy, who had been riding with Peter. Normally, separating like this is against park rules, but sometimes, rules have to be broken.

When Peter returns, the empty Zip-loc stuffed in his back pocket, he doesn't look at me, nor does he say anything until we have climbed back down the narrow sculpted canyon, pushed off in his boat and are approaching camp.

"Thanks for waiting up," he says.

Matkat Hotel is a long thin sliver of camp atop a steep bank of sand edged by dark gray stone cliffs of Muav limestone. Trees and angles of rock separate pockets of sand so that as we each stake out campsite with sleeping bags and pads, it seems indeed like a hotel.

Doc tells of a trail here to Matkat Canyon and we try to find it but I sense it is too tight a trail for comfort. I feel bad because I am on kitchen duty but having arrived late with Peter, have skipped out on my chores. Peter and I have also missed out on the room selection and end up walking a quarter mile to the last skinny 'room' of the hotel and end up sleeping close together. He lies awake looking up at the stars and tells me about his father until early in the morning.

As I help with breakfast, Peter rolls up my thermarest and packs my sleeping bag. I chastise him for it, seriously mad that he has invaded my space, my privacy. All day I

wonder how I could be so mad about that, how grossly I had invaded his space yesterday, and how quickly he had gotten over it and moved gracefully on.

***Paul***

Mrs. Walters couldn't read. Almost blind, she used the resource closest at hand to reveal books to her. That resource was her toddler son, Paul. Once he knew the shapes of the letters, little Paul could call them out and Mama would say the word. By the time he was four, Paul was reading on his own. The world of literature was wide open to Paul. But Paul's world was not open to literature. His grade school didn't have a lunchroom . . . or a library. When the teachers needed a break the kids would go to the basement to watch movies, which were things like old government films. One of these old voice-over films opened up Paul's world to canyon country, where at the time, big hydroelectric dams were being built by the Army Corps of Engineers. Paul, in his Indiana school basement, was fascinated.

Paul says he became a Colorado River runner when he found the book by John Wesley Powell, (the book with my great-great-grandmother's chair on the cover.) "That's when I became a boatman," Paul says.

Paul would be sent to Vietnam; he would return; get married; have a child. He would work for General Motors; then Coors. Finally, his coworkers at the brewery in Golden, Colorado, introduced him to whitewater. He had a friend, a neighbor in his apartment complex, who was a guide, who made it seem within reach. It was 1983. "The engineers and I got a permit to do the San Juan," Paul says.

“On the way home I bought a kayak.”

River rafting became popular in the 1980s, a fact Paul attributes to the baby-boomers wanting to do something before they died. He recalled TV shows about whitewater rafting broadcast 2-3 times per week. Paul sold some photographs to United Airlines, which were published in their in-flight magazines. Soon, Paul says, “We’d get these flight attendants down here, who in those days, had to be pretty.”

But soon the outdoor-sport-du-jour turned to windsurfing and Paul’s friends were no longer interested in river trips. Paul was not interested in the new fad. For a few years he had no one to boat with.

But then he landed a spot on a Colorado River roster, a private trip with friends of friends. About his first run down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, Paul recalls: “I was scared shitless.”

Soon he was rafting the major rivers in Colorado, Utah . . . and ultimately, back in Arizona.

By the time he had his own permit for the Colorado, he had run the Yampa, the Ladore, and the Middle Fork of the Salmon in Idaho. He was, Paul recalls, much better prepared.

### ***Mile 150***

Nonetheless, the first time he ran it, Paul flipped in Upset Rapid.

Not known to be among the most dangerous or difficult, I’m surprised to hear that for four or five years Paul was scared of Upset. He explains to me that just upstream of



Upset Rapid is still, 20 years later, a very special place for him. A thrilling, anticipatory, here-we-go momentary place. Now I understand why. And now we are there.

Upset is a curved rapid, shaping a cutbank. Being drunk or hungover is really a bad idea here, it's one of those rapids you really don't want to swim because the water is pounded against the wall of the canyon. If you fall in, you might flow through, or you might get scrambled like so many eggs. There's no way of knowing.

Paul's attitude is reflected in his smiling mustache as he places his craft skillfully in the middle of the rapid and keeps it straight all the way through so that I, in the bow, have the ride of my life. I know now that a 14-foot boat is better, but only if you can drive like Paul can.

### ***Mile 152***

The hottest day ever on my first trip and we all dive for the shade between the rocks at the aptly named Ledges Camp. The teenagers get to the shade first but cozying up to them gets them to move over a little. We are a quiet, hot and now close bunch as we grudgingly eat the last of our sad lettuce.

Heat makes me not want to eat. I watch the others, standing waist deep in the river eat their sandwiches. Used to be when someone was standing waist deep in the river it was because they were peeing. Now we stand in the river to cool off.

### ***Mile 157***

Havasu creek meets the Colorado river in what appears to be a child's melted

crayon mess here. The turquoise hue of Havasu, which comes from its heavy load of calcium carbonate, blends with whatever color the Colorado happens to be that day. The turquoise melting into Paria-river brown, our boats pull in to the canyon on my second trip and we tie up to rocks. From the boats most people climb a series of ledges on creek left but I choose to swim upstream through the arches of rock until I come to an impassable waterfall and have to get dry.

A lengthy hike will lead to dramatic waterfalls where I'm told a member of the Havasupai tribe that owns the place may or may not charge a hefty fee for using the trail. When I can swim no farther, I walk along the stream until I get hungry for lunch and return.

On my last trip, the turquoise melting into a sage green, Raoul explains to me the ever-changing watercourse used to follow a pattern. The calcium carbonate, falling out of solution, attaches to rocks, building layers and layers that form a dam. Pools form behind the dams until they overflow, break through and the whole mess is washed downstream. Raoul remembers hiking Havasu in the 1970s when those pools were long and deep. Now the place looks like any other tributary to the Colorado, except for the brilliant blue hue ... and the layered rocks Raoul points out along the shore.

Here also we are seeing Ocotillo now, so far south we have come. These gangly plants reach into the air with bright red flowers on thorny leg-like stalks.

### ***Mile 165***

We officially leave the Grand Canyon National Park on river left. Here Hualapai

Hualapai reservation starts; but we see no difference in the landscape.

### ***Mile 167***

My third trip Robert and Mary are hardly speaking to Doc when we land at the camp known as “Below National,” located, you got it, just downstream from National Rapid, which takes a sharp turn to river right, unless you enter the rapid too far left and end up highsiding on the mass of rock river left.

As the biggest baddest rapid on the river approaches, Lava Falls at mile 180, conversations among subgroups turn to the challenge ahead. Stories about Lava, mostly bad, dominate chatter and the collective nervousness of the group, perhaps remembering better times, seems to seek a resolution.

I watch as Robert approaches Doc, who is crossing the sand with a gait that tells me his back is hurting again. I do not want to offer a massage because honestly, I want to stand behind Robert. I don’t want to seem a traitor. I watch the two men exchange words, both looking at the sand. Then they look up and grip each other in a long hug. Robert returns to his boat wiping his eyes.

Lava suddenly seems easy now that tensions among the crew are gone.

### ***Mile 180***

After our mishap at Crystal, Lars takes the extreme cheater route here at Lava Falls, reputedly the nastiest rapid in the Grand Canyon. We go so far left that we are bumping along the rocks onshore. Although I’m happy to miss the giant boat-eating hole

in the middle of the river, I am even happier to miss the angled rock on river right called ‘cheesegrater.’

Doc tells a story about a challenge he accepted, to row through Lava backward. A female cop from Seattle, he recalls, in *Red Tomato* (her boat) refused to row through Lava. The other boatmen all pony up \$100 when Doc successfully rows through backward. In my mind, this is the only way to go, but I don’t tell Doc that, he is infinitely proud of his achievement.

Every trip my boat goes left at Lava. Until the last trip when suddenly I see the best route through the churning chaotic whitewater really is river right. Elliot is on the oars and mentions that what makes Lava tricky is you can’t tell where the hole is from above it ... there’s a bit of a false drop just above. You have to scout it and use landmarks to estimate where your entry to the rapid should be. Going river right requires entry to the right of the hole then a strong pull to the left to avoid Cheesegrater. Then you just have to stay straight through the gravy train.

As Elliot and I push off from the scout at river right, I feel the first chill this trip. The noise and sheer size of the rapid are simply terrifying. People who are sober rarely die here, I remind myself. My PFD will eventually bring me out of any whirlpool and I can hold my breath for quite a while. By the time I’ve psyched myself into the rapid, Elliot has rowed us into it. I see the Maytag hole of Youtube fame glide by on my left then swing behind me as Elliot lines up the boat for his left pull. We move downstream at a frightening pace but the water pounding onto Cheesegrater does not take us with it.

Instead, we go directly into the rollercoaster wave train. After the first three or four waves, Elliot pulls into an eddy river left to watch the others.

We are through; it's just that fast.

I grab a handful of tamarisk branches to keep us in place. One by one our friends follow Elliot's path. We see them disappear entirely behind Cheesegrater then appear, only the bottom of the raft visible to us, at the top of the wavetrain. When Matt and Tanna on a cataraft plow through the first wave, their boat hits the second wave hard and we see Tanna's feet go flying into the air. She had been sitting in the bow but when the dark green boat emerges from the froth Tanna is in her husband's lap. Elliot comments dryly that Tanna must have thought she was going to the gynecologist's office today. At the end of the day Tanna is known as rodeo queen.

But our permit holder, Jessica has the best run. Her 14-foot boat does not have the three ammo cans of sand in the bow that we had seen Lynn load into his raft of the same size. Instead of plowing through the first wave her bow goes high in the air and we all gasp at the full exposure of the bottom of her boat, fearing the boat will go end over end. But the bow comes down and Jessica still has her oars. And a huge grin.

When the first five boats are through and we're all hovering in eddies, Lynn clambers along the shore with his camera to shoot the next five boats. Raoul, who was seated at waterlevel with his camera near the hole has to climb back up to his boat as well so our wait in the eddies is lengthy. Soon enough the final five come bouncing through. No one swims and all hoot and holler down to tequila beach where Elliot and I are the first to land.

### ***Mile 181***

Someone has left cans of beer with names inked on pink duct tape here at the party spot known as Tequila Beach. A few of the cans do not have names so Raoul and I claim these for our own after a brief wrestling match on the beach. Someone has also left a small Ziploc of marijuana buds, which we leave where we found it.

This last trip is not like the others. We pass around one modest bottle of booze then continue on our way. My normal Tequila Beach experience has included emptying secreted glass jugs so wrapped in duct tape we couldn't tell what they were but by tasting. I remember someone trying to row back into the current with the bowline still tied to a tree.

A kayaking group Raoul remembers from last year, comprised of nine young kayakers all carrying their own gear, lost one of its members here. Raoul tells us that the nine boaters were extremely good boaters and had run Lava without scouting. They also partied hard. He remembers sharing a sip of tequila with the group. Later he'd learn and I noticed on a GC list serve, that one of those kayakers was found later in his kayak upside down. A heartwrenching video tells the story, all except the cause: too much at tequila beach. Raoul says he heard the autopsy showed blood alcohol level of the man was .24.

The memory sobers us; our visit to the party spot is so brief that no one even ties up. We are all happy and intend to stay that way.

### ***Mile 199***

Ken Simpson, who had hiked in at Tanner on my second trip and had swapped me his sturdy pack for my drybag, had no known allergies. But in mid-September, 2013, while rowing the boat that belonged to his father, Robert, with his mother, Mary, aboard, Ken reached into a bag of mixed nuts and grabbed a snack.

In its 47 years Ken's body had never reacted to anything the way it reacted now. His throat swelled shut, soon he wasn't breathing. By the time Mary, despite her advanced emphysema, yelled to the other two boats on this small trip to search their first-aid boxes for an epi-pen, she feared he was dead. Robert finally procured a needle and antihistamine and jammed it into his son's arm. Ken's oars floated free. His face and neck swollen and red his eyes fluttered in semi-consciousness.

The antihistamine immediately took effect and he soon sat up and vomited. Ken's recovery was immediate.

It was a close call. Everyone was shaken.

That night, the toll of injury was tallied. Paul's swim at Hance and flip at Deubendorff had left him feeling vulnerable, the swollen hand, the pulled shoulder and now Ken's mysterious allergic crisis. Of the seven members of the party, four were in bad shape, either psychologically, physically or both. Mary's foreboding feeling that had started the night before launch emerged again.

The group decided to cut the trip short and take out at Diamond Creek, the only accessible road in the first 226 miles of river, now just 20 miles downstream. Robert used his SAT phone to convey a message to his daughter to make arrangements for someone to meet them in two days.

### *Mile 209*

September 25, 2013 started out like any ordinary day on the river. No where on earth better to be. But the swim at Hance and a flip in Deubendorff have shaken Paul's confidence; he is ready for the trip to end.

It is Paul, not Robert, who tells me what happened that day.

Tomorrow the group of seven boaters and three boats would be at Diamond Creek, the traditional takeout for commercial trips and technically, outside the park. The group has already changed plans, shortening the trip to take out there, at mile 226, rather than float down to South Cove on Lake Mead at mile 297.

Now, after Ken's brush with death, Robert, for the first time this trip, took the oars from his son. Robert has rowed the canyon many times, is strong enough to snap an oar in Bedrock and had flipped his boat and survived. The major rapids all upstream, it should have been an easy day.

Ken had been battling a strong headwind and was relieved when his father took over. Mary and Ken sat together in the bow, gripping lifelines and watching the approaching froth with casual confidence.

The wind had calmed and the rapid seemed straightforward. Robert knew what he was doing. As mile 209 rapid approached, Robert remembered the hard pull to river left he would have to make.

Here the river crashed into a mysterious pulsating hole. One glance does not sufficiently tell the story. The waves all have a rhythm to them. But the big hole's wave



built in on itself, growing larger every beat until it crashed, too big to hold itself, like surf on the north shore of Oahu. It seemed that every third beat it became so enormous it could eat the boat if it weren't lined up straight. This was one of those holes to avoid if just for its unpredictability. But it seemed to draw Robert down toward it, its giant maw the result of all the flows of the strands upriver coming together.

To avoid the rock garden formed by Granite Park Canyon on the left, Robert had to enter the central tongue of the main river then pull hard to the left below the rocks to escape the huge sucking hole on river right.

Robert lined the boat up at an angle so that once past the rocks deposited by the major stream on river left, he could pull left and avoid the hole using the most powerful method of rowing: pulling the boat backward. As anyone who has watched Olympic crew teams knows, rowing has been studied as a science both to maximize the strength of the human muscular structure and to maximize the use of perhaps man's first tool: the lever.

Robert knew that if he were drawn in, he could spin it at the last second, straighten the boat out and ride through the hole. His eighteen-foot boat could handle it.

With a fulcrum about a third the length of the oar, Robert's oars were not optimized. On the human end, Robert sat in an immovable seat, unable to use the strongest part of the human body, the legs. His stroke was short and he could use only his upper body. Nonetheless, he was lined up to pull rather than push, a much stronger position, doubled because he would be pulling upriver and thereby gaining some measure of catch on the throbbing river.

The blue raft settled onto the tongue peacefully and Robert kept the boat angled

for a strong pull to river left. But a powerful gust of wind blowing upstream pushed the boat to the right. If Robert had seen it coming, he could have turned the boat straight and most likely run right through the hole. But he had positioned the boat sideways in order to pull backward to river left.

Paul was far ahead and Robert's boat was followed by Rich in the third, and last boat.

Drawn into the hole that seemed to grow with each pulse, Robert watched in horror as the port-side tube rose slowly out of the water and into the air, higher and higher until Robert was in the water. The boat came down on top of him, upside down.

With his air-filled dry-suit pinning Robert to the underside of the boat, he could not move. But he could breathe. He was inside the upside-down boat. Soon the rushing water helped push him out and he grabbed a lifeline.

He soon found and grabbed Mary, who was clinging to the lifeline on the exterior of the boat, but struggled to hold on.

The current had carried Ken downstream; he knew that in the frigid water, he had minutes before he would begin to lose his ability to reason so he swam for shore. Rich saw him on shore and spun his boat to land in order to pick him up. But Ken waved frantically, pointing downstream. Rich got the message: 'go after mom and dad. I am fine.'

As the two Simpsons rode out the wave train, Robert knew to stay with the boat. He tried to climb aboard the upside-down craft, but he had not installed a flip-line, the strap across the bottom that most rafters keep for situations precisely like this. There was

nothing to grip to pull himself onto the bottom of the raft. Robert knew that no way could he clamber aboard while he clung to Mary with one arm and to the life-line with the other.

Mary was not doing well. As Robert watched, his elbow wedged between the life-line and the boat, the other arm wrapped around Mary's PFD, her head fell back and he saw her eyes roll back in her head.

Paul had not expected or seen the flip but immediately looked for an eddy when he saw the upside-down boat with no one on it. He watched the river for swimmers but saw no one as he used the rocky shore, in the absence of any eddies, for friction to slow his progress.

He saw no swimmers, a good sign they may have gotten to shore. He spun his boat and rowed hard to intersect the Simpsons' boat, and soon spotted the bobbing Simpson couple clinging to the lifeline with just one elbow.

By the time Mary had been pulled into Paul's boat and Kristy, an Emergency Medical Technician, was performing CPR, Paul had caught the upside-down raft, attached it to his own and was rowing both to shore, despite strong winds and no favorable eddies.

After a half hour of CPR, the EMT was exhausted and Mary had not revived. Mary's eyes were dilated and did not move.

Two miles of river had passed.

With the SAT phone under the flipped raft, Ken Simpson used an aircraft radio he had brought as back up, to communicate with any aircraft that might be passing over.

Pilots on a Los Angeles-bound commercial airliner, Skywest Airlines flight 6281, tuned in and relayed the message. Two minutes before 1 p.m., the FAA office at LAX made the call to the Grand Canyon National Park to relay the message: a 68-year-old female was dead as a result of a rafting accident. Shortly thereafter, another airliner, this one bound for Las Vegas, Nevada, conveyed a similar message. The air traffic controller there contacted the park with additional information: possibly fatality at rivermile 211.

Park officials tentatively conjectured that Mary Simpson, listed on the permit as aged 68, would likely be the victim. The officials met at about 1:30 p.m., assessed weather conditions and decided a helicopter flight was too risky in the strong wind. Instead, they planned to drive the 175 miles to Diamond Creek with two motorized rafts, and power upstream—in the morning. No life, after all, was in present danger.

A commercial river trip picked up Ken Simpson and delivered him to the rest of his party. With the SAT phone of the commercial operator, Ken Simpson contacted the park, some three hours after the initial contact from LAX. His, mother, he reported, had died in rapid 209. He would not be able to make further contact as the commercial trip was moving downstream. The party, Rich, Paul, Robert, Ken, Paul's daughter and permit holder Krista, would be camped at river mile 212.

A park ranger responded via the SAT phone, with a plan to meet there in late morning.

Two motorized rafts with rangers aboard arrived about 10 a.m. to take Mary away.

An autopsy confirmed it had been Mary's time to go; she did not drown, there

was no water in her lungs. The shock of the cold water combined with her emphysema prevented her from surviving the short swim. Any healthy individual, like Robert or Ken, would—and did—survive. Mary had died, someone pointed out to Robert, in the place she loved, in the arms of the man she loved.

Robert signed a statement for the park officials that morning: “I alone am responsible for this tragedy.”

### ***Mile 213***

The Hualapai people consider Pumpkin Springs to be sacred. Although high mineral content—including 1,100 ppm of arsenic, some twenty times toxicity levels considered safe for drinking, Hualapai tradition considers this spring to be life-giving, rather than life-taking-away.

The springs itself is invisible from the river, but the mineral excrement forms a large round orange landmark on river left. Doc leads Mark and I across the river while other members of our party check out the springs. We hike up a bare ridge around a sharp bend into a lush gulley. This, Doc explains, is a clean springs frequented by miners last century. He is looking for something in the ledges, something he doesn’t find. But Mark and I find a chimney built of stone, almost invisible from the river, camouflaged in plain sight. We climb through the dense vegetation and look down on the springs across the river. Maddy and someone else is getting into the ‘pumpkin,’ which is a putrid green color, for a bath. It is the first time I have seen Maddy bathe. Mark and I share a look. Why would she bathe here, of all places?

When we descend to the boats other members of the party have walked upriver to a ledge and are jumping from its height of about 15 feet into the river.

The Hualapai hate it when people do that, Doc mentions, it's a sacred site. But some of the commercial trips stop here. It's an easy stop for them and everyone wants to see what's in the pumpkin.

### ***Mile 217***

217-mile Rapid is a multi-stage fun rapid. It's my last trip and I'm told by Elliot that it's a "long-standing tradition" for the guest to row the last major rapid of the trip. I have now been down here four times and I've never heard of this 'tradition.'

But I gleefully take the oars and realize Elliot is actually nervous as he gauges the rapid then turns to check on me, asks if I'm okay. I want desperately to nail it, to soak this guy to the skin, I don't know why. To do so I have to line up the boat perfectly before it starts sliding down the tongue because I see now that the left wave will push me to the right and if I'm not exactly in the middle, the right wave won't push me perfectly back into the left wave and so on and so forth. Unless I'm dead center and I keep it straight, we'll slide off the wave train and he won't get that second-wave punch with which he has been mercilessly soaking me the entire trip. We'll end up on some dry cheater run.

I look upstream and the water is coming straight toward me. I look downstream to figure out where the water under me is going. It is going to the right so I swing the bow to the right and pull back, angling slightly river left.

As we slide down the smooth tongue Elliot grips the lifelines and prepares to throw his meager weight into the first wave, which is on the left. The boat is still sideways as we slide down, causing him to turn to check on me peripherally again. As he does so, I pull hard on my starboard oar, directing the first bash of water straight at him.

The cold water hits my teeth again and again. Elliot is getting soaked.

The river pauses and bends before forming another delightful wave train and I struggle to maintain a straight ride down the middle.

Dripping wet, Elliot suggests I can drive this boat next year and he can return to his dory. I'm flattered, but it wouldn't be any fun without an objective so I shake my head. "I'll think about it."

### ***Mile 220***

Tonight is our last night on the river, my first trip is almost over. The temperature of the water has warmed, at least five degrees, by Steve's measure. Steve, who won two gold medals for swimming in the Olympics, is, I figure, a reliable source. According to his calculation, the temperature of the water is now 52 degrees Fahrenheit. Betsy, who grew up in Hawaii and is accustomed to swimming everywhere she wants to go, is eying an island in the river. She asks Doc if anyone ever swims out to it.

"All the time," he responds with a smile.

Soon all the swimmers have joined her at the beach. Then Lars follows her in, then Steve. They emerge shivering to dry themselves in the waning sunlight on the rocky island. Betsy looks back at us, her eyebrows forming a little mountain on her forehead,

and calls over to me, 'I didn't think about swimming back.'

Julia recalls other trips when everyone dressed for dinner. Usually, she explains, there are themes. The first trip, we learn, the trip when she met Doc, Julia's father and his boyfriend had planned dress-up nights every night. Doc recalls Neanderthal night and Hawaiian night.

We declare tonight merely 'dress up' night, just this once.

Peggie shows up wearing Brad's bright green speedos. For the full effect she has stuffed what appear to be tennis balls in the crotch.

Doc dances like a pole dancer in the dinner line in Julia's bikini.

The pharmacist uses two dry bags, clipped together at the shoulders and hips and tightened snugly to produce a risqué, if bulky outfit.

Betsy appears in a shimmery evening gown made from an emergency blanket draped over a shoulder. She doubles over in a loud crinkly noise when I tell her wildfire fighters in Montana call those blankets "Shake and Bakes."

Even my brother seems to have relaxed a little and enjoys the parade, hiding behind his camera, taking pictures we love him for later.

The dinner, which is tacos, is made up of the last cans of beans, tortillas and sundry other items leftover from other meals, discovered in the wrong boxes too late.

My brother empties a small can of crushed pineapple onto his tortilla after asking politely if anyone else would like some.

*Mile 226*



Diamond Creek is the first take-out. Here the Hualapai tribe maintains, in the most generous sense of the verb, a road. And charges a steep per-head fee to use it. For those with just two weeks' vacation, this is usually the end of the journey. A short strip of chaos, this landing site may have three groups de-rigging, washing equipment, rolling boats and loading trucks at once, all while the Hualapai are launching their own river trips on huge motorized baloney boats. The Hualapai request you do not pee in the river here, use the outhouses located just up the road. I am not the only one who breaks this rule, sneaking behind downstream willows to the river.

As the O'hana breaks down equipment and works together lugging it up to trucks and trailers, a dark mood settles in and little is spoken.

The ride out is spine-jarring and too long. The stop at the burger place often mentioned in the last few days of a trip suddenly offers little appeal, its luster lost somewhere in the packing up of boats.

And when Paul finally gets off the river, having flipped, swum and zipped a friend into a body bag, he vows not to return. "I lost my mojo," he says.

Still many continue on to take out at Pearce's Ferry at mile 280 or to South Cove on the shore of Lake Mead itself, another slow 17 miles. For these trips, boaters can arrange a re-supply here at Diamond Creek. For one of my trips the Simpsons provided fresh vegetables, more beer and a motor for the flat lake water.

### ***Mile 229***

My third trip I am riding with Mark who tells me Travertine Falls is 'supposed to

be' really neat, although he's never been. He clearly loves the challenge of stopping here, which he said, is 'supposed to be' very difficult. I am in the bow ready to leap ashore as he expertly pulls into the small, surging eddy river left. He passes on what Doc has told him, that the cave-like place is usually overrun by tourists as we are now entirely outside the park and the Hualapai tribes run cheap boat trips up and down the river here.

We land without any commercials in sight so I hurry up with a bottle of shampoo to get a shower in the relatively warm water. I climb up slippery wet rocks through a slot canyon to the stunning waterfall, which shapes a perfect shower. Since the other boats are far enough behind, I succeed in getting a real, strip-down, full shampoo and am dried and putting on my clothes when John and Esther wander in.

In descending, which includes a rope ladder, I swing out too far and when I swing back in I slam an already-injured toe into the travertine wall. I curse loudly, just as I realize a baloney boat is unloading its hefty cargo of well-fed tourists, all of whom seem to be looking up at the rope ladder, wondering if they can make it. 'You gotta do it,' I assure them, limping, my wet towel and hair evidence of my guilty pleasure. My toe is bleeding though, and the nail looks like it will come off.

### ***Mile 232***

Doc spends a great amount of time telling 'his boatmen' about Killer Fang Falls. Here, although this Rapid is not highly rated in the blue guide, two columns of sharpened schist rise up on river right. In pictures the sharp fangs appear easy to avoid, but boaters report again and again that the current always draws boats straight toward the menacing

points. Brady Black, the outfitter known as Moenkopi Riverworks, says all damage to his equipment happens here.

As we float by, it's easy to see that just like other rapids throughout the canyon, presence of mind is all that's needed. A few strokes take the boat safely to river left but those who have grown complacent, those who have psyched themselves up for Hance and Crystal and Lava and have congratulated themselves for having rowed all the serious rapids awaken here. Either before the rapid or as soon as they get in it.

### ***Brady Black***

Brady Black is today's incarnation of my great- great-grandfather, Sam Field, who ran the Green River trading post and outfitted the Powell excursions. Black's company, Moenkopi River Works, provides river equipment, meals, organization, lodging, and what I call coaching, all from a 12,000 square-foot warehouse in Flagstaff, Arizona.

I meet Brady at the end of a trip as we drifted onto lake Mead. He emancipates me from rowing Doc's boat across the lake by asking me if I have ever wake-boarded. No, I have not, but have been wanting to try. I had just turned forty and I know my chances are numbered. I abandon the grumpy Doc to his oars and I jump on the motorboat with the blue-eyed Brady, who sports a style of facial hair that reminds me of civil war photographs. In a very good way.

Brady has contracted with our trip leader to run our shuttle, and has taken the opportunity, since he is driving to the lake anyway, to take a few of his wrestling team

out for a spin on the lake.

I was too exhausted from rowing, I plead, after trying unsuccessfully as many times as I felt was okay to make Brady keep spinning the boat and picking me up again.

I check back in with Brady a decade later, in 2014, and am disappointed to see he's gotten serious about things.

Brady started his outfitting business about the same time we started planning my first river trip. In 2001 he outfitted one trip. In 2002 he outfitted two. Then it took off "sorta exponentially," in his words. In 2003 he did four, in 2005 he did eight. In 2014 he was outfitting about 60 Grand Canyon river trips per year.

"We go overboard. We try to beat everyone in every way," Brady says when, visiting in 2014, I notice that his enormous warehouse has an industrial sewing machine for baggage nets and a silk-screen press for t-shirts. He doesn't use the clichéd jargon of most businesses. He doesn't claim to offer premium or exclusive or special services. He simply states, "It's totally rockstar celebrity boating." Instead of using Days Inn as a staging area as our first trip had, Brady maintains a vacation rental home for his clients' use. He has minibuses instead of cramped 18-passenger vans, equipped for comfort and efficiency.

He coaches clients, he does everything to convince them that the Colorado is not a dangerous river. "About half our clients have never rowed before," he says. "It's fun as hell and easy to row." If a person is relatively in shape, has enough strength to control the boat, he or she can do it, Brady intones. It just kills him to see repeaters who succeed in

convincing private permit holders that a repeater is needed for the trip.

Doc, though a client and a big fan of Brady, does not agree.

“They need us,” Doc says of the virgin Colorado private boaters regarding repeaters—like himself. But Doc adds, “and we need them.” Black and Doc agree, the best people to have on any trip are ones who have never run the river before. They bring a fresh outlook and a *joie de vivre* impossible to emulate. “Always have a few on every trip,” Doc says, as though talking about some kind of gear.

### ***Mile 297***

After floating all night, boats clipped together with carabiners, my last trip with Doc and his crew quietly winds up at South Cove on the barren shore of Lake Mead. Brady delivers me to land where the others have already started to de-rig the rafts and I spend the day like an ant, moving equipment piece by piece from the shore where Doc has tossed it, up to the waiting truck. Brady’s crew carefully packs everything in. I am cold and my warm sweater is buried with my dry bag so Brady lends me his fleece Speedo jacket. He comments that my crazy batik aloha pants are cool so I leave them in exchange. I wear his jacket home and return it six years later, the next time I see him.

### ***Flagstaff***

My first trip has ended, the boats have been washed, deflated, rolled and heaved into trucks. As I move through a motel room in Flagstaff a few hours after rolling up the rafts, I detect another person, a stranger in my lodgings, through a window to an

adjoining chamber. She is dark-skinned and light-haired, thin, moving gracefully with purpose. Taller than me, she moves efficiently about her concerns. She is one of those women I always wanted to be. It costs several seconds to convince myself what I see is a mirror, not a window into another world.

When we return to ‘civilization’ from the river we are tight-lipped around others, we do not know how to stand in a crowded room. We are changed. I step into the shower and turn the knob to “Cold.” I do this for weeks. When I try warm water the first time, I step out feeling unclean.

As our group of friends re-acclimates to culture-as-we-know-it, I realize some people can’t understand why I would want to travel through the Grand Canyon on a boat. Others lock eyeballs with envy. But I worry about those who ‘don’t like camping.’ I am as incapable of understanding them, I suppose, as they are of me.

My fifth trip is a group of experienced boaters from Wyoming and northern Colorado. Following the death of Mary, most the group I had boated with the first four journeys had stowed their oars, they said, for good. This new bunch of friends, from my most recent trip is mostly new to me, but has been boating together for 30 years. At their lead is my friend Elliot, my single link to the other trips. He remains the most quiet, competent, talented boater you’ll ever meet. He describes this bunch of friends as his “A team.” Even after dozens of trips, he remains affected.

“ . . . Having trouble in crowds with the noise,” he reports to me in an email a week later. “People tell me I’m very quiet since returning but that happens and some of it

stays. Eventually I will make no sounds.”

Unlike my other trips, I am among few passengers and no drama occurs. No one tells anyone what to do, no one says a word to diminish another and no one flips. We are here to do some boating.

With the 2006 rule that no one can go down the river more than one time in any calendar year, Paul reflects after the loss of Mary, it is hard to fill out a trip late in the season. Three boats is not enough to deal with a flip, Paul would conclude later. “We knew that, but we went anyway.” Although the one-trip-per-year rule seems designed to reduce the demand for private permits, its effect includes reducing the number of experienced boaters on private trips. This, Paul says, ups the risk level for most private parties. He also notes that commercial trips get around this one-trip-per-year rule by simply listing their clients as temporary employees. Paid guides, of course, spend the summer season in the canyon. The rest of us have to settle for what we can get. And we’re lucky to go once in a lifetime.

The biggest whitewater, the wildest wilderness and the perpetual surprise of travelling through the seventh wonder of the world has become a lifestyle. Once a year, using all the vacation time available, this microculture of river runners, this tribe, retreats from its jobs managing a bike story, managing electrical needs of a coal mine, running a medical office, selling lighting. It retreats to its dreamland.

By the time I finish my fifth trip, the Grand Canyon has become familiar enough that I am no longer feel like a stranger here. Every day still provides discovery, every

rapid still thrills, the wrens' descending notes still defy imitation. To call it a 'wonderland' is grossly unjust but the looks on the faces of the others -- and I know on mine as well -- are that: wonder. Geologists can postulate for another 570 billion years but they'll never explain how or why the striped cliffs, backlit cottonwood trees and warbling birds make us feel alive.



## THE CAST AND CREW

A partial cast of characters on the four Colorado River trips I have taken in the last decade, each of whom I learned to love:

**Anna:** A photographer and hiker. Not often in camp. When she is around, you can find her washing dishes. Sweet on Paul, and doesn't notice the 30-year age difference. But aren't we all sweet on Paul?

**Betsy Clark-Clark:** Spots wildlife in the landscape before anyone else. Pulls Lars' lost hat out of the river eight miles downstream from the rapid where he lost it. Has a direct line to something magical and weird, including the sheer nutty coincidence of marrying two guys in succession named "Clark."

**Brad:** Finds humor in every limb of every tree. Learns the river by watching. Happily married to Peggie. Tells me every morning I'm putting too much milk in my coffee, that we'll run out. He turns out to be right. Witty. I love Brad in the way a dog loves that certain spot on the rug.

**David:** retired orthopedic surgeon, watches from a distance, painting the canyon with his watercolors. Doesn't take care of his feet and soon they are busting out of his shoes, swollen, red, cracked. He uses a sandal someone found in an eddy to replace his outgrown shoe. Finds humor in daily life, ignores pain.

**Doc:** Master of all that offends. If you do anything wrong, he calls you a ‘moron.’ Unless he finds you to be a good-looking woman, then he tries to get you in his bed. Tells a mean story. Stitches and duct-tapes people back together anywhere, anyhow. Always thinking ahead. Won’t sleep on shore. Has to lead, but has good reason.

**Elliot:** Beautiful male specimen, left his wife at home. Rows a wooden dory the whole distance without scratching it. A dory he built himself. First, best coffee maker. Good hiking buddy. Patient. Great musician. Disappears with Missy a lot.

**Hal:** My brother, older by two years. Cruel as a child but kind as an adult. Geek defined, his company makes photovoltaic instruments (invented by him). Loves to travel, but doesn’t buy new clothes. Ever. Vegan. Intolerant of all who stray from his strict moral path.

**Iowa:** Tells a nasty joke well. Gregarious. Carries fifths of tequila in the pockets of his pants but you can’t tell they’re there. Keeps his oversized boat light. Doesn’t worry about too much. Hot air balloonist in real life.

**Johansens:** A family of five, dad a chiropractor, three grown kids. Mom, **Joan**, wears a determined smile the whole trip. One kid came back from the Army shell-shocked and mentally challenged but I wonder if that is a gift. The other two kids have the times of their lives. Dad relaxes when Joan is med-evacked, relieved she’s safe?

**Julia:** A delicate, wispy 29-year-old claims to be the wife of Doc. Reads the water intuitively, brilliantly, a skill Doc claims to have taught her. Later we notice her wedding ring is too large and she confesses: they’d been together four years, but were not married. A few years after our first trip, she would file restraining orders against Doc, it got ugly. Serious cannabis addiction.

**Keeeth:** A convicted felon who speaks rarely. Makes a living as a bicycle messenger in San Francisco. His crime, for which he served time in the pen with a Wall street embezzler, was to break into a U.S. military communications center and destroy expensive equipment. It was his way of protesting the war in Iraq.

**Ken Simpson:** Sweet, quiet, large competent man. Son of Mary and Robert. Kind to a fault, up for anything. Maybe allergic to nuts.

**Peter:** Tough contender for “Best boater” title, but loses to Paul because Peter is more conservative. Translation: Safest boater ever. Helpful to a fault. Keeps an ammo box devoted to gin and tonic supplies. Leaves his father’s ashes in Matkatamiba Canyon. Frugal but generous. Upon arriving back in Flagstaff sees that Mary and Robert’s firewood needs stacking so he does it, moving a cord of wood three floors up a hill in an afternoon. Good hiking buddy.

**Kiwi:** Sheepherder from New Zealand, eager to give a backrub to any woman, great companion on hikes, very large and gentle. Clueless in the kitchen but eager to help. Lovely to listen to just talking because of his accent. States the obvious.

**Lacy:** Master of all trades, sweet, innocent and beautiful, peace-keeper, creative cook, eager to climb anything. Special friend of Doc. Can turn chaos into graceful dance.

**Lars:** Smells good always. My husband and my Grand Canyon debut permit holder. Fearless of all things. Skilled river runner, former green-beret. Lots of close calls but doesn’t kill anyone. Sleeps lightly. Still waters run deep.

**Maddy:** Outgoing lesbian who never washes her voluminous hair. Always generous and eager to share some bud. Excellent and expensive taste. Native French speaker, brilliant cook, kind. Always sits too close. Doesn’t smell good.

**Mark:** The Ingénue, 24-year-old, exceedingly competent and strong despite a slight build and zero experience. He listens to Doc and does not talk back. Doc calls him “mini-Doc.” Although I am his mother’s age, we develop a strong friendship that endures beyond the river.

**Mary:** See “Robert and Mary” below.

**Mikal:** Permit holder. A filmmaker I’d never heard of; has a deep appreciation for beauty. Mostly gone from camp on extended hikes. Breaks the rules by hiking alone, keeps to himself. Sees beauty.

**Missy:** Beer for breakfast, constant companion to Elliot. Bleached blonde. Doesn’t hesitate to grab the gunwales and punch the waves. In real life? Ski bum.

**Paul:** Speaks softly but everyone stops to listen. Best boater ever. Best photographer ever. Paul takes the best line, not the macho line, keeps the boat straight, doesn’t flip, takes huge amounts of gear on his boat. Drives a 14-foot Achilles, (Avon?) which many think too small for the Colorado. Paul explains that it’s a better ride. His favorite place on the river? Just upstream from Upset Rapid, mile 149.

**Peggie:** Could “make a gourmet meal out of sand,” in her husband’s words. Seriously afraid of heights. Former hand model. She could lift a train to save her child.

**Raoul:** Part academician, part river rat, this muscly bearded geologist leaps into eddies to rescue tomatoes, fights with me for river booty beers and teaches me everything I want to know about the history of the earth. In addition to conjecturing about the origins of rock, from three perspectives (modern geologist, religious nut and extreme religious nut) he plays the harmonica beautifully.

**Ricardo:** Nicknamed ‘nude dude,’ would “just rather not” wear clothes. Musician, groover guy, everyone’s best friend. Peacekeeper. Calls ‘safety meetings’ often. Best friend of Doc. When he takes off his sunglasses he’s perfectly camouflaged against a canyon wall.

**Robert and Mary:** The truest of couples, still madly in love 50 years later, the Simpsons own and operate a general store on the Navajo reservation, a modern trading post, providing beverages, sandwiches, sunscreen and anything else that might have been forgotten by river rats racing to their game, located on the main route to the put-in between Flagstaff and Lees’ Ferry. Also host elegant jewelry stores featuring native art. Loved by all, benevolent, generous, often hosting the entire roster before and after trips in their own home. We assemble meals and pack everything in their basement. Mary is related to the late, great governor of Arizona and Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt. Mom and Pop of every trip.

**Steve Clark:** Husband of Betsy, second marriages both. A lawyer with a sense of humor not everybody understands, Steve likes to find tent sites as far from the river as possible. Two-time Olympic gold-medalist -- swimmer. Helluva a good guy, for a lawyer.

## GLOSSARY

**Ammo Can-** almost always a military surplus ammunition storage device made of steel, equipped with rubber gasket and clamps at either end. Ammo cans are standard equipment on any river trip, also referred to as ‘dry boxes,’ although dry boxes can also be more highly-engineered containers.

**CFS-**Cubic Feet per Second, usually written lower case, the standard measurement used for estimating flow of all western U.S. rivers.

**Chicken line-** another term for a line that connects D-rings around the interior or exterior of an inflatable raft. It’s purpose is to provide a grip for people to hold onto the boat

**Cowboy run-** A macho way of running a rapid that makes passengers feel they are in the rodeo. Blurs the line between stupid and fun.

**DO-**Dutch Oven- This pot for cooking over coals, the standard on western rivers since Powell’s first descent in 1869, has three legs and is traditionally made of iron. Newer models made of anodized aluminum are much lighter and easier to clean. Standard sizes, four to five inches deep, are 12, 14 and 16-inch, measured at the diameter of the top. DO cooking is considered an art form. A sophisticated river rat can prepare a three course meal using a stack of DO’s, all cooking at the same time, one on top of another in a firepan.

**Eddy-**a place where a river reverses itself, usually in the downstream ‘shadow’ of a solid object. Eddies flow upstream and provide places for boaters to ‘pull over’ and wait for friends to catch up.

**Firepan**-The National Park Service, in an attempt to prevent pollution of beaches with ash and coals, requires a metal tray be used under all fires. The tray must be elevated to prevent scorching of life on the beach. Other specifics apply.

**Flip line**-a rope attached to the bottom of a boat for use in boarding an upside down boat in case of a flip.

**Groover**-a 20 mm. recycled ammunition can used for containing human feces.

**High-side**-an action by passengers toward the rising side of a boat as it climbs an obstruction in the river, committed to prevent a flip.

**Hole**—a feature of most rapids formed by hydraulics.

**Life line**-the rope strung between D-rings around the outside of a boat to which swimmers can hold on until they are able to re-board the boat.

**Maggot boat**- a term some rafters use to refer to kayaks. This derogatory term derives from the dependence of kayakers on the larger rafts when the latter carry their gear.

**Maytag**- a verb used to describe the repeated circular motion a boat caught in a large hole makes. Usually maytagging results in loss of all passengers and equipment to the river, the downriver effects of which are called a “yard sale.”

**NPS**-National Park Service, the federal agency charged with management of Grand Canyon National Park.

**PATL**- Potential Alternate Trip Leader- a person named by a permit applicant during the application process as a replacement should the permit holder be unable to go.

**PFD**- Personal Flotation Device, aka lifejacket.

**PH-** Permit Holder. The member of any boating party who bears all responsibility, according to the NPS, for the trip. The PH is revered on most trips as the person also responsible for obtaining the permit enabling the trip to occur.

**River rat-** a devoted boater.

**River right, river left.** Like stage right and stage left, these terms refer to sides or shores of the river as one faces downstream.

**Rocket box-**another term for ammo box.

**SAT phone- satellite phone.** The only somewhat dependable communication device in the Grand Canyon. Every trip is required to carry one for emergency use.

**Swim-** to fall into the river.

**Swim club, swim team-** membership is the consolation prize for having suffered the freezing temperatures of the Colorado River. Joining is never preferred.

**Technical-** an adjective used to describe a rapid in which the boat must be moved around rocks and other features in order to gain safe passage.

**TL-**Trip Leader. This person, usually the PH, but sometimes appointed by the PH, holds decision-making authority for the trip and is the point of contact for other groups and rangers.

**Tolio-**catch-all term for foot diseases common on the river, usually fungal.

**VHF airband radio-** a back-up communication device that can be used to communicate with aircraft passing overhead in order to get an emergency message out.

**Yard Sale-** the distribution of gear and passengers across the river that occurs when an improperly rigged boat flips or any boat is Maytagged.



## APPENDIX I: FOOD

My first trip was a “Painless Private” with food purchased and packed by Professional River Outfitters (known as “PRO.”) Although these kind people meant well, they forgot the daily tofu for the vegan, they forgot Day 9’s food entirely, and they packed many things in glass, which anyone with any kind of conscience knows is absolutely a no-no on any river, but especially a river as pristine as the Colorado. If a jar breaks, there is no way to pick up those pieces of broken glass, not to mention hauling it out. Check online reviews to find out if things have improved. Ask how things like pickles and peanut butter, which do not need to be in glass, are packed.

All subsequent trips I’ve participated in, we’ve packed ourselves with varying levels of involvement by participants from each boat brings X number of breakfast and dinner meals with everyone providing their own lunches and trip leaders writing and shopping for the entire trip menu.

Moenkopi Riverworks offers prepped meals in-a-bag to fit everyone’s dietary needs and wants. Their Seal-a-Meal concept is efficient on waste.

For a complete updated list of current river support purveyors, I recommend checking the National Park Service’s list at:

[http://www.nps.gov/grca/planyourvisit/river\\_support.htm](http://www.nps.gov/grca/planyourvisit/river_support.htm)

## APPENDIX II: GEAR

GEAR COMMENTS: Some trip organizers expect all trip participants to bring their own boats and a portion of communal gear like stoves, tables, handwash stations and water filters. On my trips, almost all equipment was provided by trip participants. You may want to consider compensating those who contribute expensive equipment at least at the lowest standard rental rates if some renting occurs. This can be problematic because most river rat equipment is in pretty sad shape. Adequate, but not up to rental standards. Also, when money is involved, expectations follow. Most boaters who are decent people are happy to contribute whatever equipment they have in their back shed. Just try to arrange it so one person isn't hauling his or her entire barnful of boating gear to and from the put-in when others who also have a shedful of gear are bringing only their own PFDs. And obviously, it's not cool to spread boat rental prices over the whole group, only among those who did not bring boats.

I cannot urge you too strongly to provide estimated accounting to all trip participants far enough in advance of the trip so that individuals can bow out. Always follow-up with an accounting afterward. This should include all costs, all participants and who is paying how much to whom. Use a spreadsheet, do it right.

To make the roster easier to manage, demand a deposit up front to get people to commit. I was amazed how many people dropped out. Provide a refund only when a replacement is found or you will end up eating the fees you already paid to the NPS.

On the trip I organized, I required a 25 percent deposit several months before the trip with full payment of distributed estimated costs about a month in advance. I thereby avoided trying to track down money after the show ended. I ended up underestimating by about \$25, an amount I was happy to eat.

#### GEAR LIST:

Below is my own personal recommendation for what to take and what not to take. Be sure to check the official NPS rules for any updates.

For the minority of you doing winter trips, with which I have no familiarity, use the GCPBA gear list, found at [gcpba.org](http://gcpba.org).

**NPS>>** signals a required item you will have to show to NPS rangers at launch site.

**COORD>>** you should coordinate with other trip participants ... not everyone will need this item, but someone will.

#### PERSONAL GEAR:

Tent- yes, you will need this to keep out scorpions, flies and rain.

Sleeping bag

Ground Pad (Thermarest or Paco pad, Thermarest repair kit-coordinate)

Ground tarp

Folding Chair.

**NPS>>** Life jacket Type I, II, III, or V

Camera

Extra camera battery, memory card or film

Journal

Paper, Pen

Books to read

Shampoo

conditioner

dental floss

Toothbrush

Toothpaste

Hair brush

Hair ties

**NPS>>** Signal Mirror, for toilet kit and emergency use in a pinch

Fem hygiene products

Condoms (you may get lucky!)

Hand lotion,

Aloe gel

Sun screen,

Chapstick  
 Mole skin  
 Handkerchief  
 Pocket Knife  
 Hand-powered flashlight  
 Needle and thread  
 Calling card, cash and phone #s, for Phantom Ranch  
 Shades (with straps!) (2 pair)  
 Spare prescription eyewear  
 Musical instruments that you know how to play  
 Whistle (non ball-type)  
 River knife  
 Large dry bag 4400-5500 cu. in.  
 Small dry bag or Small Ammo Can for day use items  
 Water Bottles (2 x 1 qt.)  
 Straw of life (H2O filter for personal use in side creeks)  
 Day Pack or fanny pack  
 Personal thermos mug  
 Matches  
 Extra Ziploc bags  
 Good supply of heavy-duty moisturizer for feet and hands. I use bag balm, others use Burt's bees etc. Think axle grease, not 'lotion.'  
 Carabiners (5-10), --these should be labeled with your unique colored tape pattern  
 Stash of personal munchies (+to share)  
 Personal Meds (If drug dependent, meds split into 2 supplies and stash on 2 different boats.)  
 If you are tobacco dependent, bring enough so you don't have to deal with involuntarily going cold turkey and ruining everyone else's trip.  
 Beverages-- I recommend adding 50% to what you think you'll consume so you can share comfortably  
 Liquor in plastic bottles (may have to transfer to get the good stuff), lemons and or limes.

CLOTHING COMMENTS: This is largely up to personal style of course, but I find that bringing just 2 of the basic items of clothing I wear every day is sufficient. I take a big bottle of shampoo and use it for washing clothing.  
 My rule of thumb for personal gear including clothing, toiletries, everything, is you should be able to carry all your bags up the beach at once. This includes tent, sleeping bag, camera, everything. Okay, maybe you can leave your beer supply in the boat, but every boatman or woman hates the person who brought too much stuff because it has to be unloaded and reloaded every day.  
 I like to wear bright clothing because in an emergency it makes me more visible. No one cares at all what you look like. Take this opportunity to relax. Leave your nice clothes at home and wear what you feel good in. Always wear a smile.

## CLOTHING:

Splash jacket-this can be any type of waterproof parka, rainjacket or paddling jacket.

Pile/Fleece jacket or wool sweater (think 'warm when wet.')

1 warm shirt (I loved my wool LLBean riverdriver's shirt)

farmerjohn or longsleeve wetsuit for shoulder season.

2xShort-sleeve shirt or tank top

1 longsleeve linen or woven cotton shirt for sun protection on-river. I dipped mine in the river and wore it wet hot days.

1 pair fleece pants

2xcapri pants or knee-length shorts for on the raft (rafts stick to your legs if you wear shorts)

1xcomfy shorts for off-river

Lightweight quickdry pants for on-river

Tough pants for hiking--jeans or twill

Swimsuit

3xUnderwear

2xWool Socks

Widebrim crushable hat with tiedown

Wool hat, (shoulder season)

Wool gloves or mittens.

Wetsuit Booties

River Sandals (Teva or Keens) bring extra pair if you have them

Pee bucket so you don't have to walk to the river in the dark

Post-trip change of clothes to leave in car

## BOAT GEAR-RAFTS

ropes (misc. Lengths 2', 6', 20')

Cargo Net (This is optional depending on your rigging style

Water cannon (summer only)

Bailing buckets with tie in (yes, even for self-bailers, for summer water fights, winter produce shopping)

**COORD>>** Water Jugs 5 gal

**COORD>>** Tool Kit

**NPS>>** Repair Kit Major (one required, every boat must have a major or minor)

Repair Kit Minor (w/ glue, patch material, pen, razor blade, toluene,

**NPS>>** roller, medium sandpaper, spare oarlock/pin-clip, Allen wrench.)

**NPS>>** Oars (2 runners, 2 spares)

Bow line (30 to 40 feet)

**NPS>>** Spare Life Jacket (1 per boat (raft or dory) or 1 per 10 people, which ever is greater)

**NPS>>** At least one air pump (per boat)

**NPS>>** A throwable cushion is required for each craft 16 feet and over

Rope/Cord (25-50')

Nylon Runners/Slings (2-4, various sizes) (just cause they come in handy!)

**NPS>>** First-Aid kit -Advanced (1. See NPS NCOR's for suggested supplies)

**NPS>>** First-Aid kit -Basic (every boat)

Rocket Boxes (for personal gear) painted white with unique identifying marks)

Spare break-down kayak paddles (at least 1 per 4 kayaks)

Beaver Board (rear drop deck)

Foot well floor deck

Cam Straps (lots of 2', 4', and 6' lengths)

Drag bags

Coolers

Drop Bags

Throw bag (at least 1 per boat)

Duct tape and electrical (vinyl) tape

#### RESCUE GEAR

static line or 3-4 throw lines

Pulleys (block and tackle) and or Locking Carabineers

**NPS>>** Orange signal Panels (2) 3' x 10'

#### **COORD>>** KITCHEN GEAR

Propane Tanks (4x20 although 10#s are better)

Stove(s). (Repair kit w/spare o-rings)

Matches and butane lighters

4x 8.0 Fluid ounce Anti-bacterial hand soap pump bottles

Katydyne industrial Water filter

Kitchen Box

Pots, pans, cooking utensils

Silverware

Sharp cutting knives

Bowls, plates, hot/cold cups

Pot Scrubbers/sponges

**NPS>>** Dishwater Screen

Dishwashing detergent

Dishwashing Buckets 4x Metal for ease of heating on stoves, durability

Bleach (liquid, Clorox. Enough to pour 1/4-1/2 cup min. in every trash container)

Water (Bailing) Buckets (5-gal size, and clean inside)

Kitchen Tables (bring 3, 2 for the kitchen, and one for dishes)

Kitchen Tarp (to catch crumbs & micro trash)

Mesh dish rack to hang under table

Dry boxes (for breads etc.)

1-3 Dutch ovens, # depending on menu

Channel lock pliers

**NPS>>** fire pan if you plan to use charcoal or have a fire

Wire brush for cleaning grill  
Folding shovel  
Charcoal

**NPS>> GROOVER GEAR**

**NPS>>** Washable reusable containers (depends on size how many you bring) I recommend 5-6 standard-sized ammo cans for a 16-person, 16 day trip. Rent these.

1 x 5-gal. Designated pee bucket

TP (1 roll industrial type (1000 sheets single ply/roll)/2 people/10 days.

Yes, this may be excessive, but TP is a good bartering tool toward the end of the trip,)

Powdered Clorox (2 boxes to keep smell down)

Scrub brush and rubber gloves to clean seat

Zip locks or “tupper wear” container to hold TP.

Pump type designated Groover antibacterial hand soap (2 bottles)

Toilet seat affixed to Groover frame

Groover monkey-something to mark the gateway to the groover to signal whether it’s in use.

### APPENDIX III: TRANSPORTATION

For transportation efficiency the trip leaders should consider arranging transportation to the put-in from a staging area, especially if passengers are flying in. If individuals bring boats and/or significant amounts of gear, they may want to hire one of many shuttle services to pick up their vehicles and deliver them to the take-out.

Depending on the takeout location, hiring a shuttle and trucks to pick you up and return you to Lee's Ferry may be preferable. If you are taking out below Diamond Creek at mile 226, consider having your vehicles shuttled to the takeout on the appointed day.

For our first trip some people brought large amounts of equipment including boats but many others flew in and oared rental boats. I used Flagstaff's Days Inn as a staging area. The motel staff did not mind our loading trucks in their parking lot.

Moenkopi Riverworks offers a complete package including lodging and shuttlebus. Other outfitters provide elements as needed. For my last trip Ceiba met us at the take-out and hauled all fifteen people and ten boats back to the put-in. The disadvantage to this method is we had to load then reload back at the put-in. Having personal vehicles shuttled to the take-out is more expensive and if the trip is ending at Diamond Creek, keep in mind the road is sometimes impassable and always very hard on vehicles.

Each person should make his/her own travel arrangements to/from the put-in or staging site. Take-out transport should be arranged by trip leaders. As in any organization, it's all about communication.



## APPENDIX IV: Recommended Reading

Three excellent mile-by-mile guides are currently in print, offering topographical maps on waterproof paper. The first one listed is a must-have for boatmen and women. Also recommended is your choice of #2 or #3 below. Add one of them to your gear list.

### ***#1 Rivermaps' Guide to the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon***

by Tom Martin and Duwain Whitis.

ISBN-13: 978-09819395-7-5

\$30

Most private boaters keep handy this large-format called “The Martin Guide” that offers narrative information on the left page with accompanying river maps on the right in a ‘gotta slap it down on the cooler’ size. Photographs and comprehensive text cover geology, archeology, history, a section on wildlife titled “plants and animals” as well as a thorough treatise on resource protection including brief coverage of political history. Written by the founder of River Runners for Wilderness and author of the popular Day Hikes from the River, Martin’s guide is first choice for boatmen and women because it offers advice on how to run most of the difficult rapids; the maps are actual USGS 7.5 minute maps with 40-foot contour intervals; and indispensable is the Martin guide’s identification of all camps in the river corridor. This allows private parties to accurately communicate about camps, minimizing strife. Boaters confirm the mapping of campsites in this edition is the most comprehensive in print. Maps are printed upside down so that a boater can read from bottom to top, as the river would appear ahead.

Written by Tom Martin with maps by Duwain Whitis, both well-known private boaters, this plastic spiral bound Rivermaps edition is a winner of the National Outdoor Book Award. This is a must-have for every boat.

### ***#2 The Colorado River in Grand Canyon***

By Larry Stevens

ISBN-13: 978-0-615-84280-6

\$27

Formerly known as “The Blue Bible,” the new, 2013 edition is no longer blue. Significantly updated with cryptic but decipherable seasonal sun/shade notes for each campsite, this guide also rates each major rapid at four water level ranges. This edition includes a single-page black and white stratification chart showing the layers of rock visible in the canyon, not nearly as useful as Martin or Belknap’s (see below) full-color enlarged versions. The new edition expands prior geology notes significantly.

Although topo lines are only 400-foot intervals and only shown in the immediate river corridor, they seem sufficient for boating.

An advantage to the Stevens guide is a sturdy metal coil binding so that the guide stays open to your page. The new edition offers extensive text on geography, geology, human history, biology (including photos of common plants and animal species,) ecology, the dam as well as additional maps of popular side hikes. Of lesser value but interesting are a variety of charts showing river flow, temperature and precipitation data. Maps are presented upside down so that a boater can read from bottom to top, as the river would appear ahead. All proceeds from sales of the 2013 edition fund conservation efforts of Grand Canyon Wildlands Council.

### ***#3 Grand Canyon River Guide***

By Buzz Belknap and Lois Belknap Evans

ISBN-13: 978-0916370169

\$26

“The Belknap guide” has topo lines at 50’-intervals, offering much better side canyon articulation than Stevens’ and gives rapid-ratings -- but only a single number based on flows of 5-25,000 cfs. The Belknap guide explains the new river mile system, based on the 2002 USGS Grand Canyon Monitoring and Research Center measured along the river’s centerline. This replaces and slightly alters prior maps based on a 1923 survey.

One charming feature of the Belknap guide is carefully selected quotes – sprinkled throughout -- from Major John Wesley Powell, whose observations date to 1869, the first confirmed passage by boat through the canyon.

### **Online Resources:**

In addition to the hardcopy guides you will take with you, a number of online resources are available free of charge that will assist in the planning process from navigating the permit lottery to coping psychologically with your return to the rim. Both organizations feature list serves and other social media outlets where you can subscribe to hear river rat chatter and post questions to more than a thousand experienced boaters.

- River Runners for Wilderness offers savvy boating advice as well as savvy political opinion at [rrfw.org](http://rrfw.org).
- The Grand Canyon Private Boaters Association, an advocacy group that grew from the waiting list problem of decades past can be accessed at [gcpba.org](http://gcpba.org).

Also spend some time exploring all that the NPS has to offer:

- <http://www.nps.gov/grca/planyourvisit/noncommercial-riv-docs.htm>

And read the NPS regs:

- [http://www.nps.gov/grca/planyourvisit/upload/Noncommercial\\_River\\_Trip\\_Regulations.pdf](http://www.nps.gov/grca/planyourvisit/upload/Noncommercial_River_Trip_Regulations.pdf)

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## BIOGRAPHY

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