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Cataract

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CATARACT

I GUESS I SHOULD have known the trip was doomed from the start.

When Josh forgot the Coleman stove *and* the five-gallon water thermos but only remembered to tell me about the stove on the truck-stop phone, and Henry's plane, four hours late into Salt Lake City from Chicago, he and Thea fighting over the Wagoneer's front seat, baiting each other like teenagers before we even got on the I-15 headed south.

I put in a Leonard Cohen tape, which Thea exchanged for something grungy and indecipherable, which Henry exchanged for Jimmy Buffett's *Living and Dying in 3/4 Time*.

Thea said, "Henry's not happy unless the music he listens to exploits at least three cultures simultaneously."

It had been three years since Josh had come into my life wanting to know how to run rivers, two years since I taught him to row, six months since he decided he knew more about the river than I did, two weeks since he stopped speaking, since he started forgetting indispensable pieces of gear.

By the time we got to Hite's Crossing, ready to leave the truck at the take-out, we couldn't find the pilot who was supposed to fly us back upriver.

The little Beachcraft 270 sat on the runway, wings flexing against the wire tiedowns and I knew that meant we were paying for ground time while we all walked around separate coves and inlets trying to find the pilot, hands over our eyes, over our sunglasses, trying to fend off the glare and the hot wind and the waves of dizzying afternoon heat.

By the time we did find him the wind was up further, and he said it was too rough to fly, and would we mind keeping him posted while he ran down to the trailers where he had a little girlfriend, and it wouldn't—he winked at Henry—take him but a minute to go down there and see about her.

Thea and I sat on the short runway in the shade of the plane's left wing and looked out across the surface of Lake Powell, al-

most turquoise in the late-in-the-day sun, and the white and rust colored mesa tops that receded into forever beyond it.

"Not a bird, not a tree, not even a blade of grass," Thea said. "What precise level of hell is this?"

I looked at the scaly bathtub ring that circled the canyon walls thirty feet above the lake's present surface, at the log and silt jam that floated in the dead space where what used to be the Colorado River once came roaring through.

"Somebody's bright idea," I said. "Land of many uses."

The wind howled across the surface of the lake making a hundred thousand rows of diamonds moving toward us fast.

"And there's really a river up there?" Thea said, pointing with her chin to the north, to the other side of the log jam, a hundred miles beyond that to the put-in where Russell and Josh and the boats had been ready for hours, to the place the plane would take us if the wind would ever stop.

"Thirty miles up-canyon," I said, "is the wildest whitest water in America. The wind can howl up that canyon all day sometimes, and once you get through the rapids, once you hit lake level, you can row as hard as you want to—you won't be going anywhere but upstream in a blow even half this strong."

"Lucy," she said, "you're always going upstream."

"I know," I said, "but not as bad as that."

I looked along the shore to where the pilot had disappeared and tried not to think about the river level, 61,000 cubic feet of water per second and rising. Everybody who ran Cataract Canyon knew the sixty thousands were the most difficult level to negotiate, not counting, of course, the hundred-year flood.

I'd been running rivers a lot of years by then but I didn't overwhelm anybody with my level of confidence, hadn't ever acquired what I would call an athlete's natural grace.

It all went back to my father, I guess, as most things did, how he'd wanted me to be Chris Evert—not to be *like* her, understand, but *be* her. And *being her* always meant *to the exclusion of me*.

I got decent on the tennis court when I was seven and twelve and fourteen but could never move my feet fast enough across the hard clay surface to win a first place prize.

I'm strong for a girl, and stubborn enough not to give up without a dogfight. I took to the river because I believed it talked to me.

I believed that I could read the river, that I could understand its language, that I could let it tell me, sometimes even mid-rapid, exactly where it wanted me to be.

Thea said, "So how *are* things between Josh and you anyway?"

"Stagnant," I said, "is the word that comes to mind."

"You invited Josh to go to sleep," Henry said, startling us from behind. "He accepted."

"Easy thing to do, sleep," I said, "when you keep your eyes closed all the time."

"You're getting smarter," Henry said, "slowly."

"That's quite the blessing," Thea said, "coming from you." She turned back to me. "I, by the way, have ended things with Charlie."

"Charlie," I said. "Did I know about Charlie?"

"He was in love with me," Thea said. "I was in love with the Universe."

"You can't be fussy," Henry said, "if you're gonna fuck 'em all."

"When are you gonna bring one of these guys down the river," I asked her.

"With us?" she said, "With you? Never in a hundred billion years."

Henry and Thea had come into my life in the same year and both because of photography. Thea was my student at a semester-long seminar I taught in Denver, and Henry had bought one of my prints out of a gallery in Chicago and liked it so well he'd hunted me down. They had taken an instantaneous dislike to each other at a party I'd had the summer before to celebrate the summer solstice. I was running four or five rivers a year in those days and Thea hardly ever missed a launch date. Cataract was Henry's first trip.

I had been down Cataract Canyon three times before, but always in the drought years, thumping along through the Big Drops in the slow motion of six or eleven or fifteen thousand cubic feet per second while the Park Service waited for the one big snow that was going to come down from the high country as melt water and fill the reservoir to the top again.

Now the river had come back with a vengeance, filling the lake and threatening daily to burn up the dam's sluggish turbines.

The spillways were carrying too much water, and the sandstone was being eaten away on either side of the dam. Thirty miles upriver, five people were dead at the bottom of Satan's Gut already, the season barely three weeks old.

"Tell me about the people who died," Thea said, and I blinked at her, my eyes dry as sockets in the wind. She read my mind like that a couple times daily. It still unsettled me.

"Well," I said, "Two of 'em were that father and son that came down the Green in their powerboat, got to the confluence and turned the wrong way."

Thea nodded and I knew she'd have studied the maps before she came.

She didn't have a lot of experience but she wanted it bad, was the best student of the river I'd ever trained. When we were in the boat all I'd have to do was think of something I needed—a throw line or a spare oar blade, even a drink of water—and I'd open my mouth to ask her for it and there she'd be already putting it into my hand.

"And another one," I said, "was that crazy who tried to swim the whole series at high-water each year."

"Twenty-six rapids?" Thea said.

"In the drought years the water is warmer," I said, "and there's ages of time between falls. They say he wore three life jackets, one right on top of the other. I know it sounds impossible, but there were witnesses, five years in a row."

"Not this year," Henry said.

"No," I said, "he was dead before he even got to the Big Drops."

"And the other two?" Henry said.

"The other two were experienced boaters," I said, "out to have a little fun."

"Just like us," Thea said.

"Yep," I said. "Just like us."

The wind died right at seven like an alarm clock, and the pilot flew along the tops of the canyon walls, our flight path winding like a snake no more than two thousand feet above the surface of the water.

To the east we could see the heaved-up blocks of the Devil's Kitchen, the white humped back of Elephant Hill, the red and yellow spires of the Needles District, lit up like big bouquets of roses by the setting sun.

To the west was Ernie's Country, the Fins, and the Maze, multi-colored canyon walls repeating and repeating themselves like God gone mad with the Play-doh.

After thirty miles the long finger of lake turned into a moving river again, the canyon walls squeezed even tighter, and in two more bends we could see the falls that were known as the Big Drops.

The rapids in Cataract Canyon are not named but numbered, 1 through 26, a decision that said to me *for serious practitioners only*. The rapids come after three whole days of hot and silent floating without so much as an eddy, a riffle, a pool.

Numbers 20, 21, and 22 are bigger and badder by far than the others, deserve to be named a second time and are: Big Drop 1, Big Drop 2, Big Drop 3. Big Drop 2 is famous for being the third highest runnable falls in America. Big Drop 3 is famous for the wave in the dead center of it: an unavoidable twenty-foot curler by the name of Satan's Gut.

Even from that far above them, I could feel the rapids roar, and my stomach did flip-flops while the pilot dipped first one wing, and then the other so that Henry and Thea and I could see.

I could see the rock in Big Drop 2, dangerously close to the only safe run and bigger than a locomotive, saw the havoc it created in the river on every side.

Below it, in 3, the Gut surged and receded, built to its full height and toppled in on itself. Bits of broken metal and brightly painted river gear winked up at us from the rock gardens on either side.

People said I was good at running rivers and I'd come to believe that they liked me because of it. I never gave much thought to what would happen if I stopped. I just kept taking each river on, like I took on every other thing my life served up to me: not an *if*, but a *how*.

The nineteen rapids above the Big Drops sailed under us like an old-time movie in reverse, and before we knew it we were over Spanish Bottom.

The pilot circled the confluence, the place where the waters of the Green and the Colorado come together. The waters don't mix right away, but flow along side by side for almost a mile before mingling, the greenish Colorado, the browner Green finally becoming indistinguishable in the bend that leads to rapid #1.

The pilot dipped his wing one more time before turning for the airstrip, and pointed toward the severed brown and green edges of the formation called Upheaval Dome.

"They used to think the dome was made of salt," he said, "squeezed out of the ground hundreds of thousands of years ago, built up and up like a pillar before time collapsed it, before weather turned it into the crater you see. But now they think it's the site, not of a rise but of an impact, the place where a meteorite one third of a mile in diameter crashed into the side of the earth."

I talked the pilot into driving us to the City Market so we could replace the cook stove, talked him further into taking us the eighteen miles to the put-in, out of town and back down-river, near the mostly defunct Potash Mine.

By the time we got there it was almost nine o'clock, near dark with a full moon on the rise right above the canyon, the mosquitoes so thick I was worried for the grocery bags of food.

Josh and Russell had the boats in the water and were trying to keep the bugs off by drinking beer and smoking fat cigars. Russell was a sports photographer from San Diego who had been a conference buddy of mine until the day he met Josh and our friendship instantly receded.

"Took you long enough," was the first thing Josh said, and then when he saw me put the new stove into my boat he said, "Oh yeah, I forgot the water thermos too."

We studied each other in the moonlight for a minute.

"It's not like it's any big deal," he said. "We can manage without it."

And technically speaking he was right. But it was July 15, the quick-baked middle of the hottest month on the river, and we had four full days to get ourselves good and dehydrated under the Utah summer sun in the bottom of a canyon that didn't know the meaning of the word shade.

The drinking water would heat up to ninety degrees in no time, would taste like the hot insides of a melting plastic jug. A thermos would keep ice through the first day, maybe into the second. We could steal a half a block a day from the food cooler after that.

The mosquitoes weren't going to let anyone sleep, that was clear, and I was too mad at Josh to lie next to him, so I set out walking for the City Market, which I knew was open twenty-four hours a day.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Josh called after me, and I didn't turn around, even though I had set out without a water bottle, and I could already feel my throat start to close, even in the first half mile, even in the dark of the night.

The summer triangle hung bright in the sky above me, and the tamarisk, still in their spring blossoms, scraped the canyon walls in a wind that had all of a sudden rekindled itself. A couple of tiny stones skittered down the wall and onto the road in front of me and I strained my eyes upward in the twilight looking for whatever it was, wild sheep or coyote, that might have knocked them off.

My throat got drier still and I was almost ready to give up and turn back when I saw headlights behind me, moving slow and from a long ways off.

I thought briefly about the part of the world I was in, a place so far away from the city that the danger curve had bottomed out and started to rise again, a place where raping a woman and cutting her up into little pieces could be seen either as violence or religion, depending upon your point of view.

Then I thought about how mad I was at Josh, how dry my throat was, how dry it would be in five days without a water cooler, and I smiled into the oncoming lights and stuck out my thumb.

He worked the late shift, just off duty from the Potash plant. He was born again, recently, had sworn off liquor and cocaine.

He was a big fan of Red Skelton, was picking up part-time work as an extra in a movie they were making in Lavender Canyon. He played a cowboy, he said, and the funny thing was he'd never gotten near a horse in his life.

The more he talked the slower he drove. But every time he got to saying how lonely he was, how in need of female company, I just sat up straight like one of the boys and said I knew that if he stayed sober one day soon something good would come his way.

When he stopped the car in front of the market I was out the door and running before his hand was off the gear shift and I didn't stop until I felt the whoosh behind me of the automatic doors.

I bought the thermos, filled it with ice cubes and started the long walk back to Potash. The town was deserted, except for the trucks that lined the roadway, their decorator lights glowing, their radios murmuring softly in the dark.

"Where do you think that little girl's going with a great big water jug at this time of night?" a husky voice crackled loud across the citizens' band.

I hunched my shoulders over and didn't lift my eyes. Eighteen miles was a long way; but I had water now, and by first light I'd have more than half the distance behind me and there would be friendlier cars on the road by that time, mountain bikers and climbers, and everything would look different than it did in this eerie 2 a.m.

I walked through the portal, the big sandstone gate that says soon the Colorado River will start to plunge again. Above me lay The Land Behind the Rocks: a wilderness of knobs and chutes and pinnacles, a playground for mountain lions and coyotes, for lizards, tarantulas and snakes.

I considered climbing the broken rock wall a couple thousand feet up and into it. Taking my thermos and getting lost back there for as long as I could make the water last. Staying up there till the level of the river ran itself back down into the fifty thousands. Till Josh and Russell and Henry had floated on down deep into the heart of the canyon. Then Thea and I would make our run, barely speaking, never shouting, the boat moving through the rapids as easily as if it had wings.

Russell was pretty impressed that I came up with the water cooler before he'd even gotten out of his sleeping bag, and Henry was impressed generally. Being from the city, even the put-in felt like a million miles from anywhere to him. Thea just smiled as if doing a thirty-six mile turnaround in the middle of the night without a vehicle was the most logical thing in the world.

Henry said, "I think that girl's in awe of you."

And Josh said, "I'm afraid it's even worse than that."

We launched early, before the sun crawled over the canyon wall, Russell and Henry in Josh's sixteen-foot Riken, Thea and I in my Achilles, a foot shorter than Josh's boat, and the tubes less than half as big around.

"Damned if it isn't hot already," Henry said.

We hooked the boats together with a caribiner and let them float down the river, all the way to Dead Horse Point with only a few words between us, the sun climbing higher in the sky, the canyon walls slick with desert varnish, the heat pressing down on us, not a breath of breeze, too hot it seemed even to lift the water jug to our lips.

Then it got hotter still and we lay stretched out across the tubes like sea lions, hands and feet dangling in the water. We could have all slept like that till nightfall, till three days later when we'd hit the rapids, till the late summer rains came at last to cool us down.

"Well, what I think," Henry said, breaking at least an hour's silence, "is that things will never get right in the world until women are willing to give up some of their rights and privileges."

That's how it was with Henry, always had been, when the silence got too much.

"Say that again..." Thea said, and then they were off and into it: custody rights and fetal tissue, maternity leaves and female sportscasters in locker rooms, job quotas and income tax breaks.

I picked up the oars for a minute and gave the boats a nudge away from the bank, back toward the center of the river.

"Okay," Henry said, "if we're all so equal, then tell me this. Why is everybody so goddamned accepting of hetero girls falling in love with each other." He looked from Josh to Russell and

then back to Thea. "Why's there no similar deal between heterosexual men?"

I watched both Russell and Josh startle, watched them arc their bodies slightly away from Henry as if in a dance.

"Maybe in your fantasies, Henry," Thea said, not quite under her breath.

"Lugs" I said, louder than I meant to, trying to remember, and all four heads turned my way. "Lesbians until graduation," I said. "In college we called them Lugs."

"It's not that it's unacceptable," Russell said, his voice rising. "Men just aren't attracted in that way to other men."

"I hope that isn't true," Thea said, "for all your sakes."

"But it is," Henry said, "Women are trained to appreciate each other's bodies. Men aren't. Josh, for instance, would never tell Russell that he had a nice ass."

"Even if he did," I said, and winked at Russell.

My mind was running three days ahead to the rapids, and how our lives might depend on resolving our sociological differences if we all found ourselves in the water, needing to work together just to survive.

"It's just not something I'm interested in," Russell said, "and don't tell me I'm in denial."

"When a woman meets someone," Thea said, "she decides whether or not she is attracted to them prior to noticing if it's a man or a woman."

"Prior to?" said Henry.

"Separate from, if you like," said Thea, "but I really do mean prior to."

"Let me put it this way," Russell said. "I've never gotten a hard-on for a man. That's the bottom line, isn't it?"

"How lucky for you," Thea said, "to have such an infallible bottom line."

Thea unhooked the caribiner that held the two rafts together and gave their boat a push. We floated to the other side of the river and began my favorite girl's boat conversation, naming in order all the men we'd made love to in our lives.

My total always came out somewhere between twenty-three and twenty-seven, depending on how sharp my memory was that day, and also what we'd all agreed would count. Thea had had

only half as many, but she was five years younger and, because of her stepfather, a whole world angrier at men than me.

We camped that night on a fin of Navajo Sandstone and listened to the thunder rumble, watched far-off lightning flash a warning in the darkening sky. I made Josh and Russell cool their beer in the river which made Josh even madder, though he was the one who told me aluminum eats up cooler ice fastest of all.

After dinner we ran out of talk so Thea started us singing songs we could all agree on: *Pancho and Lefty* and old Janis Joplin, *Moon River*, *You Don't Know Me*, and *Light as a Breeze*.

"So Thea," Henry said before we'd been floating five minutes the next morning, "who's the better river runner, Lucy or Josh?"

"Please let's talk about something else," I said.

"Josh has a lot of strength," Thea said. "Lucy has a lot of patience."

"Patience?" Russell said. "Like for what?"

In the days when I called Josh and me the perfect couple, I said it was because his carelessness tempered my exactitude; I had too many fears, he had none.

Josh was strong enough to get himself out of tight corners where the river tossed him, and brave enough to go for the odds-against run. He had no fear of the river, which only I saw as a problem. Everything he knew about reading water would fit on the blade of an oar. I still led us into all the major rapids, but I knew those days were numbered, maybe even gone.

"Lucy waits on the river," Thea said, "waits for it to help her. Like her goal—once in the rapid—is not to have to use the oars."

"That's lovely, Thea," I said.

"I've seen her use her oars a few times," Josh said.

"Okay," I said, "can we please talk about something else?"

"I don't know why she wouldn't use them," Russell said, kicking Josh's oar with his foot. "They don't weight a third of what these do. Have you felt Lucy's oars, Henry? They're like tooth-picks, like feathers, compared to these."

"But generally speaking, Thea," Henry said, "you have to admit that the average man is better equipped to run rivers than the average woman."

"Not," Thea said, "unless it's one of those special trips where the only thing you're allowed to use is your dick."

"Is everybody drinking enough water?" I said. "Has everybody peed at least once today?"

"Yes, your majesty," Josh said, "Oh great protectress of the block ice."

I sent Thea and Russell hiking up and over a big sandstone fin that the river took six miles to circle, folding back on itself and winding up, as the crow flies less than a hundred yards from where I dropped them off. Then I made Henry row my boat the six miles.

The only good thing about how hot it was, was that it might stop the river rising, that with heat so severe and no rain, evaporation and usage would start to surpass runoff; not too long after that, the river would fall.

In the afternoon, thunder rumbled again in some far-off corner of the sky, and by the time we entered Meander Canyon a few clouds were sailing in the wind that must have been whipping somewhere high above the canyon, and a rainbow stretched above us, reaching from rim to rim.

On the third day we came to the confluence and Russell dove into the place where the rivers ran alongside each other and tried to mix the two strips of colored water together with his hands. We stopped at the huge salmon-colored danger sign to take pictures, and I wondered how the men in the powerboat could have missed it, wondered how any boatman could be mistaken about whether he was moving upstream or down.

We camped that night in Spanish Bottom, two miles up-river from the start of the rapids, knew we'd hear them roaring all night long. Thea and Russell and I climbed up the canyon rim to the Doll's House, its candy-striped spires like a toll booth, taking tickets for Cataract's wild ride. We goofed around at the base of the towers, took pictures of each other and laughed a lot, and I thought how different the trip might have been without Henry, who caused trouble everywhere he went, and Josh, who could get so far inside himself that the sound of his laughter would make everybody feel hollow and afraid.

To the north Junction Butte rose like the Hall of Justice on the horizon, and behind it the big flat mesa top called Island in

the Sky. Russell went off to explore on his own and left Thea and me sitting on a big slab of orange rock.

"If the Doll's House were my Doll's House," I said, "I wouldn't have wanted to play ball with the boys."

"Lucy," Thea said, "have you ever made love to a woman?"

"I've been in love with a woman," I said. "More than one."

"That's not what I asked you," she said. "It's not the same thing."

"No it isn't," I said. "No I haven't."

"And *no* to the next question," Thea said. "And *no*, and *no*, and *no* again."

During dinner we watched a thunderstorm roll down the canyon, turning the clouds behind the mesa tops black and lifting the sand into Tasmanian devils all around us. The sun broke low out of the clouds just before setting and lit the buttes bright orange against the black.

Then we heard a rumble above our heads, a noise I first associated with an earthquake in a city, highway overpasses tumbling into each other, apartment buildings buckling and collapsing in on themselves.

We jumped out of the low folding chairs and ran to the top of a dune and looked back toward the Doll's House.

"There," Thea said, pointing. We followed her finger to a large wash that plummeted into Spanish Bottom just north of the Doll's House. A thick ribbon of what looked like molten chocolate had just crested the rim and was thundering down the vertical face of the wash. It took something like ten seconds for the front of it to reach the bottom, where it exploded into a giant fan, covering half the floor of Spanish Bottom.

As it got closer we could see the cargo it carried: tree trunks, car parts, something that looked like the desiccated carcass of a sheep.

"You think the tents are all right?" I said to Josh.

"Yeah," he said. "The ground is a little higher here, and anyway, this thing won't last."

As if in response to his voice the fan closed itself down by a third in that instant, and the thunder coming down the face of the wash changed into a much duller roar.

A rumble began out of sight down canyon, and then another beyond it, even farther down.

"I guess we don't have to worry about the river falling to below sixty thousand now," Josh said.

The next day, we all hit the rapids smiling.

Thea and I strapped everything down twice, threw our shoulders into it and hauled on the straps, fastened each other's life jackets and pulled the buckles tight. The water was thick after last night's thunderstorms, roiling, still the color of hot milk chocolate.

I led us out among the tree limbs and tires that the flood had brought down, wondered if the debris would give us any trouble, but forgot my worry instantly as I felt the tug of the V-slick in rapid #1.

We rambled through the first several rapids in short order, me pulling hard on the oars, Thea watching for holes and bailing. We got knocked around pretty good in 9, and we filled the boat in the upper reaches of 15, and in 19 I had to spin around backwards to make the final cut.

I was feeling a little out-muscled by the river, feeling like maybe it was trying to tell me something I ought to hear, but as we pulled over to scout Big Drop 1 we were still smiling and, thanks to the sun, almost dry.

In the sixty thousands Big Drop 1 is huge, but not technical, and Thea and I eased through it with so much finesse it was a little scary, the water pounding all around us, my hands strong on the oars. Thea was ready to bail at any second, but we were so well lined up, so precise in our timing, and the river so good to us we hardly took on enough water to make it worthwhile.

We pulled to the side and watched Josh bring his big boat through the rapid. Then we walked downriver to look at Big Drops 2 and 3. There was no way to stop between them. If you flipped in 2 you swam Satan's Gut, sacrificed yourself to it like a kamikaze.

I looked hard at the boat carnage that littered the sides of the canyon: broken oars, cracked water bottles, even rafts damaged so badly they were unsalvageable, their tubes split open on the toothy rocks, their frames twisted beyond repair.

I knew the river was telling me not to run it. *Not in that little boat*, it said, *not with only the two of you, not during the highest water in a decade*, not when it was roaring past me, pounding in my ears, telling me *no*.

I watched Josh's jaw twitch just slightly as he stared at the rapid and I knew we wouldn't have to portage. He was gonna go for it. And if he didn't die taking his big boat through, he'd like nothing better than a second chance at it in mine.

"I don't want to run it," I said, for the very first time in my boating career. "It's too big for me."

Henry and Russell lowered their eyes, as if I'd just taken off my shirt.

"It's a piece of cake," Josh said. "No problem. Why don't you follow me this time, if you're nervous. Then you don't have to worry about where to be."

I looked at the big rock I'd seen from the airplane, the size of a seven-story apartment building, and at the torrent of water going over its top.

"I don't know," Henry said, "it doesn't look all that bad to me."

"You take my boat through then, Henry," I said, and he smacked me on the butt with his life jacket and turned to Josh, who shrugged.

"It's not a piece of cake," Thea said, "It's a son of a bitch, but I believe you can do it."

"Okay," I said, tugging the straps on her lifejacket down and tight, "then let's just the hell go."

We agreed that we were going to try to enter the rapid just right of a medium-sized rock that was showing mid-stream, then we'd turn our noses to the right and keep pulling left and away from the seven-story rock, which we'd leave to our right as we entered the heart of the rapid. Once through the biggest waves we'd have to row like hell to get far enough back to the right again to be in position for Big Drop 3.

I was worried about a funny little wave at the top of 2 on the right-hand side, a little curler that wouldn't be big enough to flood my boat but might turn it sideways, and I needed to hit every wave that came after it head on.

Josh said that wave was no problem, and it wasn't for his boat and his big tubes, but I decided I was going to try to miss it by staying slightly to the right of wherever he went in.

We pulled away from the bank, my heart beating so fast I could feel it there between my palms and the oar handles. I watched Josh tie his hat to his boat frame, take a last-minute drink of water.

"Watch the goddamn rapid," I muttered, and finally he looked up.

"Does he seem too far right to you?" Thea said, fear edging into her voice.

"There's no way to tell with him right in front of us," I said. "We'll just have to take him at his word."

It was right about then that I saw the funny little wave I had wanted to miss more than thirty yards to the left of us and then I saw Josh's boat disappear, vertically, as if it had fallen over a cliff, and I realized in that moment we *were* too far right, *way* too far right, and we were about to go straight down over the seven-story rock. We would fall through the air off the face of that rock, land at the bottom of a seven-story waterfall, where there would be nothing but rocks and tree limbs and sixty-some thousand feet per second of pounding white water which would shake us and crush us and hold us under until we drowned.

I don't know what I said to Thea in that moment, as I made one last desperate effort, one hard long pull to the left. I don't know if it was *Oh shit* or *Did you see that* or just my usual *Hang on* or if there was, in that moment between us, only a silent stony awe.

And as we went over the edge of the seven-story boulder down, down, into the snarling white hole, not only wide and deep and boat-stopping but corkscrew-shaped besides, time slowed down to another version of itself, started moving like rough-cut slow motion, one frame at a time in measured stops and starts. And of all the stops and starts I remember, all the frozen frames I will see in my head for as long as I live, as the boat fell through space, as it hit the corkscrew wave, as its nose began to rise again, the one I remember most clearly is this:

My hands are still on the oars and the water that has been so brown for days is suddenly as white as lightening. It is white, and

it is alive and it is moving toward me from both sides, coming at me like two jagged white walls with only me in between them, and Thea is airborne, is sailing backwards, is flying over my head, like a prayer.

Then everything went dark, and there was nothing around me but water and I was breathing it in, helpless to fight it as it wrapped itself around me and tossed me so hard I thought I would break before I drowned. Every third moment my foot or arm would catch a piece of Thea below me, or was it above me, somewhere beside me doing her own watery dance.

Then we popped up, both of us almost together, out of the back wave and moving by some miracle downstream. The boat popped up next to us, upside down and partly deflated, but I grabbed onto it, and so did Thea and that's when the truth about where we were got a hold of me and I screamed, though it was more of a yowl than a scream, an animal sound, the sound maybe of the river itself inside me. And though there were words involved, words that later we decided were "Heeeeeeeellllllpppppppp uuuuuusssss!" it was some part of me I didn't recognize that made that noise in the rapid, a part just scared enough and mad enough to turn into the face of the river and start fighting like hell for its life.

Thea's eyes got big. "It's okay," she said. "Come here."

I smiled, a little embarrassed and human again, as if to say I was only kidding about the scream... and Thea laughed with me for a moment, though we both knew it had been the other voice that was the truest thing.

The waves were getting smaller, only pulling us under every now and again and I knew we were in the calmer water between 2 and 3. I got a glimpse of Josh's boat, somehow still topside, Russell and Henry bailing like crazy, Josh's face wild with fear and red.

"Help us," I screamed again, like a human being this time, and Josh's eyes widened like his face was slapped and I knew that his boat was full of water, way too heavy to move and that he was as out of control as we were, and that Thea and I were going to have to face Satan's Gut in our life jackets after all.

"Leave the boat and swim to the right," Josh screamed, and it took me a minute to realize he was right, to picture the way the

rapids lined up when we scouted, to realize that the raft was headed straight into another rock fall, one that would snap our bodies like matchsticks before we had time to say casualties number six and seven, and that our only chance of surviving was to get hard and fast to the right.

I took off swimming, hoping to God Thea was behind me, but I only got about ten strokes in when I saw Josh's boat disappear sideways into the heart of the Gut, which meant that I was too far to the left of him, and Thea farther left still, maybe already in the rock garden, maybe dead on impact, maybe drowning in her own blood.

This is the one that gets me, I thought, as I rode the V-slick right into the heart of Satan's Gut and all twenty feet of back wave crashed over my head. The white water grabbed me for a minute and shook me hard, like an angry airport mother, and then just as roughly it spat me out, it let me go.

Wave after wave crashed over my head, but I knew I was past the Gut so I just kept breathing every time I got near the surface, choking down water as often as air. My knee banged into a rock during one of the poundings and I braced for the next rock, the bigger one that would smash my back or my spine, but it never came.

Finally the waves started getting smaller, so small that I could ride on top of them, and that's when in between them, I got a glimpse of Josh's boat, still topside, and Thea inside it, safe.

"Throw the rope!" Josh said to Russell, and he did throw it, but behind me, and too far to the left. He pulled it in fast to throw it again but by that time I was well past him, not very far from exhaustion, and headed for the entrance to rapid 23.

That's when the water jug popped up beside me, and I grabbed for it, got it, and stuffed it between my legs. Rapid 23 isn't big, unless it's high-water and you are sitting not in a boat but on a five-gallon thermos. I gripped the thermos between my thighs like it was the wildest horse I'd ever been on and rode the series of rollers down the middle, my head above water, my feet ready to fend off the rocks.

Then the rapid was over, and Josh was rowing toward me, and Russell had the throw rope again in his hands. This time he

threw it well and I caught it, wrapped my hands around it tight. Henry hauled me to the boat and then into it, and I found myself for a moment back under the water that filled it, clawing my way up Russell's leg, trying just to get my head high enough to breathe.

"Grab that oar," Josh shouted to Henry, and he did, and I saw that it was one of mine, floating near to us, and for the first time I wondered how the wreck of my boat would look.

Josh got us to shore and the three men went back to look for the boat while Thea and I coughed and sputtered and hugged and cried together there on the sand.

The boys came back lining my boat down the side of the river, one tube punctured and deflating badly, the spare oar gone to the bottom of the river, but other than that, not too much the worse for wear. I looked for a minute toward the remaining rapids, zipped up my life jacket and jumped in the boat.

"Come on," I said to Thea. "Let's get through the rest of these mothers before we run out of air."

All we had left before us was a long pull out of the canyon. We'd lose the current gradually over the next twenty miles, and eventually—ten miles from the take-out—we'd hit the backwash of Lake Powell and lose it altogether.

We agreed to float until our progress slowed to less than three miles an hour, then we'd row in half-hour shifts, all night if it was required, to miss the winds that would start early in the morning and could keep us from getting across that last long arm of the lake.

For the first time we all sat together on Josh's boat and I made sandwiches. Thea and I couldn't stop burping up river water, and every now and then one or the other of us would erupt into a fit of the chills.

Henry and I sang *A Pirate Looks and Forty*, and Thea and I sang *Angel From Montgomery* and then Thea sang *Duncan* all by herself. My boat, half deflated, limped along in tow.

"Well," Henry said, raising his sandwich, "now that we're all safe and sound and feeding our faces, I'd like to tell you that I, for one, have had the perfect day."

"Here, here," Russell said. "Here's to Josh, river guide extraordinaire." He raised the bilge pump to his forehead in salute. "I would go anywhere with this man."

I could feel Thea's eyes on me but I kept my head down.

"It was good fun," Josh said, waving away the bilge pump, "nothing more or less than that."

"You girls should have seen it," Henry said. "You should have heard the way Josh shouted those commands."

I handed Thea her sandwich and the back of her hand rested, for a moment, on mine.

"I'm telling you guys," Henry said, "the day couldn't have been any better."

"Good fun," Josh said again, like it was an expression he was learning.

"Henry," Thea said, "weren't you ever just a little concerned that one of us might not make it?"

"I know what you're saying," Henry said, "I do. But Josh had it under control right from the beginning. And what a rush it was." He grabbed my elbow. "I wish I had a photo of your face when I pulled you in."

"I would go anywhere with that man," Russell said again, dozing now, his words little more than a murmur.

"What I always wish," Josh said, "is that we could go back up there and do it again."

I studied his profile in the rose-colored light of a sun long gone behind the canyon wall.

"I saw your face while I was in the water," I said, "I know you were scared."

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Your face," I said. "It was red. You were worried about me, I know."

A light snore came from Russell's lips. Henry jiggled his shoulder.

"What color do you think my face should have been?" Josh said. "I was trying to move 200 gallons of water."

Night fell on the canyon softly just as we decided we'd crossed the three-mile-an-hour line, but the sky in the east was already

bright with the moon, the canyon walls so well defined that rowing all night would be no problem.

Russell took the first shift, then Henry, then Thea, then me. Josh slept in a hammock he'd rigged up between his frame and the oarlocks on my boat.

"You know, Lucy," Henry said, "I know you were only kidding when you said I should have taken the boat through the Big Drops, but looking back now... I really think I could have done it."

Thea snorted, didn't speak.

"Josh's turn," I said, when my watch beeped.

"Let him sleep," Henry said. "I'll cover him. He's done enough for one day."

I turned the oars over to Henry, watched the moon rise into fullness on the rim of the canyon, saw in its reflection everything wrong with how I'd come to the river, everything wrong with why I stayed.

"They'll never get it," Thea said. "You can't expect them to."

But I was thinking, in fact, about my father, who wasn't now and never would be on that river, how even if I made a hundred runs through the Big Drops, I'd never be Chris Evert, not in a hundred billion years.

Thea and I moved to the back of the raft and sang every song we could think of with Continental Divide in the lyrics until it was our turn to row again.

"What I wanted just one of them to say," Thea said, "Is that they were glad we made it."

"What I wanted one of them to say," I said, "is tell me what it felt like under there."

Eventually, Russell and Henry faded, and Thea and I took fifteen-minute shifts till we crossed under the bridge that meant the reservoir, the parking lot, civilization, and a world once again bigger than just us five.

The moon was high in the sky by then, and lighting the canyon walls like daylight. We'd rowed ourselves right into the log jam and I couldn't see the edges of it, so I said we should try to sleep until first light, which I knew couldn't be far.

I could see the lights in the trailer court and tried to imagine which one belonged to the pilot's girlfriend. The marina would be a ghost town, they said, before the end of the century, completely silted in and useless, a graveyard for cows and cottonwoods and car parts, every dead thing the river brought down.

We were cold by then, sick from the river water, and shaken from the ten-minute swim, the long night of rowing, and all that remained unspoken between us, though I didn't know whether it was terror, or love.

"Lucy," Thea said, "if you were to kill yourself ever, what would it be over?"

"A man," I said, though I didn't have a face for him. "It would only be over a man. And you?"

"I don't think so," she said. "Maybe something, not that."

"What then?" I said. But she didn't answer.

"If you are ever about to kill yourself over a man," she said, "get yourself to my house. Knock on my door."

"You do the same," I said. "For any reason."

"We'll talk about what it was like being under the water," she said, "what it was like when we popped out free."

"Maybe we should talk about that now," I said.

"I don't think so," she said. "Not quite yet."

On the long drive home from Cataract, Thea and I slept in the back of the Wagoneer curled around each other like puppies while the boys told and retold the story, trying to keep Josh and each other awake.

I dreamed of the place where the scream lived inside me. I dreamed I was a meteor returned again to crash into the top of Upheaval Dome. I dreamed of riding the V-slick again and again into the dark heart of a rapid. I dreamed of a life alone inside the Land Behind the Rocks.

"Christ almighty," I heard Henry say, "did you see the way Josh passed that semi?"

The sun beat down through the windows and the sweat poured out of me and I couldn't tell Thea's breathing from my own. In my dream everything around us was soft and bright, like water.