

River Warriors

Growing up I heard tales from my dad's epic river running days and I was awed by the godlike abilities of the river guides. It was as if the river god bestowed them with powers in order to navigate thrashing rapids in a canoe. They were swimmers and acrobats. They were rescuers, able to lift whole canoes out from the watery depths, and serving as a beacon of hope to those fallen from their boats. Some were even rumored to have the ability to breathe underwater. They were strong, they were tan...and now I was to be one of them.

The culture in Jackson, Wyoming is centered on the Tetons and the Snake River. It is a place of river enthusiasts, mountaineers, fishermen, and beards. Four in five cars have a trailer hauling rafts, kayaks, canoes, or fishing boats. On every city block along the main road there is a rafting business, water sport rental store, and cowboy bar. According to my dad, Jackson in the 1960s was a very different place. There weren't multiple rafting companies and the river wasn't divided up and given out in permits. No one asked permission and safety procedures and waivers were more like guidelines than enforced rules.

The guides back then wore their lifejackets buckled loosely upside-down around their waists, serving less as a flotation device and more as a cushion against the aluminum seat that often resulted in a condition known as Gunnel Butt. They wore Converse All-Star's instead of Chaco's, Levi cut-offs instead of neoprene shorts, used wooden paddles instead of plastic ones, and had ammo cans instead of dry bags. Wetsuits were practically unheard of and were considered a mark of shame to anyone who couldn't handle the freezing water.

With a reputation to uphold and the Gubler name to protect, I set off for Jackson eagerly with high hopes for the best summer ever and very little *actual* river experience. Training began with scare tactics, starting with things that can kill you and things that will kill you and how others' lives depend on you. The lore of the Snake River was daunting. They showed us, the first-year guides, the mangled canoes that had been salvaged as mere aluminum tacos that had been pinned against bridge pylons, which usually wrap around the pillars in less than three

seconds! After completely shattering our confidence they decided it was time to test us on the river and we set off to pick our canoes.

From a distance I could see the lineup of canoes, stacked against each other like sardines and gleaming in the sun. As I got closer I could see that the duct tape outshone the scratched aluminum underneath, which in some cases was almost entirely hidden under layers of tape. Some of it was old and fraying until a new strip was added on top like a bandage, mummifying the old boats. Each canoe had a story and a name branded along the side in the blocky style lettering of a ransom note. "*El Bandito Negro*," "*Bringin' Sexy Back*," "*Tenacious-C*," "*GREAT*," "*Flesh & Metal*," "*Fatty*," "*Invictus*," and "*Bruce*." As each canoe was claimed, my canoe was uncovered... "*Don't Panic*," flashed along the side among the excessive dents. As if speaking directly to me, it became my guardian, quieting my nerves for my first trip down the river. They would be the words I'd see after capsizing in the frigid water.

My first instinct to panic would kick in during my first encounter with white water on "*King Rapid*," which occurred just two minutes after I'd been pushed away from the shore by one of the second-year guides. I'd hardly figured out how to steer with the awkward paddle when I heard the roar of the rapids. I dropped to my knees, cowering in the canoe and I got as low as I could, my shoulders barely clearing the sides of the canoe. After successfully passing the first wave, the second wave threw my canoe up to a ninety degree angle and in a comically slow fashion it tumbled over full circle on top of me, ousting me into the river. The temperature of the water knocked the wind out of me as wave upon waves of white punched me in the face, wiping out my vision and filling my lungs with water. The sheer terror of the experience was enough to make me question my decision to ever come to Jackson in the first place.

The rest of my first trip was filled with numerous encounters with death. I'd been sucked under by a whirlpool for almost an entire minute, rammed in the ribs by another canoe, fallen into the forty-degree water every couple of minutes, suffered mild hypothermia, sunburned my eyeballs, soaked my wetsuit in pee, and been yelled at by the Senior Guide the duration of the two-hour trip. At the end of the day I took inventory, I had fourteen bruises to count so far not to mention the

ones that would show up tomorrow, one gash on the thigh that drew blood, a feverish sunburn, a slightly black eye and one missing toenail. The river God had exacted sacrifice, taking everything: my self-esteem, parts of my body, and even my water bottle and sunglasses as if that other stuff wasn't enough. To top off the magical first day, we were forced to carry our canoes upside down on our shoulders, known as "turtling," up a steep hill with more than thirty rotting, ancient, wooden steps. The thought of returning the following day seemed like an impossibly bleak routine for the remainder of my summer.

Training continued with more terrifying trips down the river and many less obvious obstacles to identify than the bridges had been. There were risky scenarios to reenact, rescue drills to be rehearsed, trip procedures, guide orientations, and names and places of historical significance along the river that had to be memorized. There was a death trap around every bend on the river, dangers that never seemed harmful on land, like trees and rocks.

Here, drowned trees bobbed along downstream until they'd get stuck on whatever trap was at the bottom of the river. The protruding limbs or roots worked like a 'strainer' – as it was appropriately named – which only filtered the water through. Any new obstruction, whether it be another tree, a person, or a canoe that stood between the water and its destination downstream would be at the mercy of thousands of pounds of water crushing against it and ensnaring them indefinitely. There were several canoes along the river that served as a permanent homage to the grave encounters with strainers and other hazards.

Strong currents and eddy lines are usually adversaries on the river as well. Seemingly invisible to the untrained eye, one might feel like there are monsters akin to the Loch Ness that just tip you over for the sheer fun of it. The first day I thought that "Eddy" was the name of our river director because of the way it was referred to with words like "strong... intense... scary... sometimes violent..." It was not only after I was on the river heading toward two incredibly strong eddy lines forming a vortex so powerful it was dubbed "the *Octopus*," that I realized my misunderstanding.

Although eddies rarely warranted a namesake there were a few infamous enough to deserve it, such as “the *Octopus*” and “the *Mixer*.” “The *Octopus*” uses its powerful arms to pull you under and then in eight different directions. In high water, it can even drag whole canoes into its depths like the Kraken, sometimes resurfacing a hundred feet downstream. “The *Mixer*” – named so because of the qualities it shares with a washing machine, mixing the tributary Hoback stream with the Snake River and of course, if you’re not careful it sucks you down and shoves each bodily orifice full of water until you’ve been “washed” clean.

Apart from the whirlpools, the rapids are truly the most exciting feature on the river. Each time one of my comrades exclaimed excitement about a coming rapid I dreaded each ominous name. “*King Rapid*,” clearly the king of rapids and supreme ruler over the river. “*Rollercoaster Rapid*,” possibly the fun kind but probably the vomit kind. “*Eight for Eight Rapid*,” where eight out of eight boats tip over. “*Red Moose Rapid*,” the red cliff-face and Moose are the last things you see in this world. “*Smurf Rapid*,” where you’ll be blue like a Smurf from hypothermia by the time you are able to get back into your boat. “*Junkyard Rapid*,” the one with a huge rock in the middle and “*Rock Garden Rapid*,” the one surrounded by *lots* of pointy rocks.

The ultimate goal is to successfully navigate the rapids (by not tipping over) and to get “Big Air,” which is the equivalent of popping a wheelie canoe style. Staying in your boat is the most important skill for a guide in order to save others who may swamp their canoes. “Swamping” is when a canoe tips over, filling up with water and making it nearly impossible to get back in without assistance. Inexperienced canoers instinctively “close the coffin,” by grabbing the sides of their canoes instead of paddling to steady themselves, which results in a swamp ninety-nine percent of the time.

Guides are taught to bail out of their boat on purpose to avoid an imminent swamp so they’ll be able to hoist themselves back in. As you get more experience, dry-runs become more frequent, where you make it through an entire run without falling in. Guides ride separately in their canoes sitting on the back tip, causing the

front end of the canoe to be out of the water, making it difficult to balance but easier to navigate the river and to get big air.

Little did I know that these rapids that always swamped me were just the amateur rapids rated at II or I...the ones safe for Canoers, novice Kayakers, and family rafting trips. The high-class rapids were further down the canyon and navigated by professional rafting companies, surfers, and kayakers while photographers prowled the shoreline 24/7 to capture each glorious moment for the tourists to purchase at a high price. Those rapids merit a classification of III-IV, the scale ranging from I-VI (I being the easiest and VI being a likely death if attempted.) Those intimidating rapids are known as "*Lunchcounter*," where the rapids eat you for lunch and "*Big Kahuna*," which is just plain bigger and badder than the average Kahuna. These rapids could flip anything smaller than an eight-person raft before even entering the thick of the rapids.

In my father's day, a canoe run down Lower Canyon served as a rite of passage, a true test of one's ability and bravery to guide on the river. Now a day it is almost unheard of because of the danger associated with canoeing high-class rapids. There were just vague stories and rumors of people who had attempted it and survived, canoe and all, but they were just too badass to be true... you had to be truly extraordinary, or just plain crazy, to attempt such a run.

As the horrific days of training began to fade, my hands became calloused and my paddle felt like an extra appendage. I finally got my river legs and could stand in my canoe in turbulent current to scope out favorable channels of the river and my biceps grew to more than 70% of their original mass. Customers I took down began to look at me with the same awe-like expression when I would fish them out of the river, unswamp their canoes, do headstands on the edge of my canoe, or get big air through the rapids and land it. I was distinguished among the river folk as the "*Tan Ginger*," (which hopefully doesn't escalate to skin cancer.) Dry-runs became a regular thing and my life-jacket and Chaco tan lines became very prominent. My canoe eventually earned the name "*Deathwish*" because of a dry-run through Lower Canyon the next August.

Critiques

It is a truth universally acknowledged that in my rough drafts I tend to ignore basic grammar rules like comma splices, run-on sentences, page long paragraphs, overuse of metaphor, and mass disorganization. I read somewhere that computers were detrimental to good writing because with a paper and pencil writers are forced to articulate their thoughts before putting them down on the paper. Whereas on the computer it's a habit to type things down as they come to mind, which is always chaotic, and then reorganize later. This always leads me to terrible, terrible first, second, and third drafts. Free-writes actually are truly helpful for me and I got a good paragraph in class that establishes more of a place and time and who (which sets up a better comparison from my father's time as a river guide and mine as well as encompassing more of the culture of that place.)

One of my writing strengths is description and I suffer a lot with grammar and structure. In the class critiques I got a lot of comments on my grammar and confusing sentences (which happens every time). I do realize that I do this... I think it's because I'm more concerned with getting the ideas out and then once those ideas are solidified I can go back and correct the grammar. However, the problem with that is that I hardly ever feel like the ideas are finished evolving.

No one really liked my intro because they thought it was too impersonal (you were the only advocate.) I let your opinion take precedence because of your professional opinion, but I put the new paragraph as the second paragraph. It could be moved to be the intro I think with a little tweaking, but I do like the way it works right now and it made it easier to define the place right off the bat.

I don't know why I always have had a problem with specifying who, where, what, when, why aspects of writing. I guess I like to keep it generalized because it makes me feel awkward in this scenario since the story is about me and I definitely don't ever want to come across as stuck up or making it seem like I'm bragging, which seems inevitable in this story because I wanted to tell the tale of overcoming the almost overpowering training week that made me want to quit but I ended up becoming really good at and I got really strong and it has been a very positive force in my life (but of course I don't want to get all sentimental like that in the story.) I

want to revise a little further to make it more of a coming of age story and connecting with my father and showing the change in character of river guides being more sissy these days, but that would require me getting more facts and stories from my father which I didn't really have time for. I even got a tattoo of the symbol he drew on his wooden paddle.

I still have some areas in the story where I'm confused about the correct grammar rules, like how to list the names of the canoes and rapids. I didn't know if they should have quotations or not and there were some lists where I didn't know whether or not to use semi-colons or colons. And commas will forever be my greatest nemesis. My original goal was to take it to the writing center and get help, but I again ran out of time due to family conflicts. I'm still more than happy to do that if you would like me to continue revising it. Thanks!

3 Intros

Intro 1

Growing up I heard tales from my dad's epic river running days and I was awed by the godlike abilities of the river warriors. It was as if the river god bestowed them with powers in order to navigate thrashing rapids in a canoe. They were swimmers and acrobats. They were rescuers...the beacon of hope to those fallen from their boats amidst the rapids. Some were even rumored to have the ability to breathe underwater. They were strong, they were tan. And now I was to be one of them.

Intro 2

From a distance I could see the lineup of canoes, stacked against each other like sardines and gleaming in the sun. As I got closer I could see that the duct tape outshone the scratched aluminum underneath that in some cases was almost entirely hidden under layers of duct tape, some of it old and fraying until a new strip was wrapped around it, mummifying the old boats. Each canoe had a story and a name written along the side in the blocky style lettering of a ransom note..."El Bandito Negro," "Bringin' Sexy Back," "Tenacious-C," "GREAT," "Flesh & Metal"..."Bruce." As each canoe was claimed, she was uncovered, the name "Don't Panic," flashed along the side among the excessive dents. As if speaking directly to me, she became my guardian, quieting my nerves for my first trip down the river.

Intro 3

Finally the end of the day had arrived. Fourteen bruises to count so far not to mention the ones that would show up tomorrow. One gash on the thigh that drew blood. A sunburn. A slightly black eye and one missing toenail. The thought of returning the following day seemed impossibly bleak. The river had taken everything, from my self-esteem to my body...even my water bottle as if that other stuff wasn't enough.