

Long Divisions

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IT IS ALIVE, THE COLORADO, its heavy brown waters pulsing through limestone and sandstone layers gouged out before it learned manners from the government and Glen Canyon Dam.

"She don't give a hot sheep shit," sings Terrill, oaring to his own beat. "She don't give a red-hot damn."

I smile into the sun, my scabbed, bandaged fingers warm on the hot, gray rubber. I am, without much hope, watching the river's edge for beavers. Across from me Rob is sunbathing on the raftsides. Sunbathing, that is, in a plastic yellow rainsuit and regulation orange life jacket, Coast Guard and Park Service approved. We're in between rapids, in between storms, in between the two main trails that connect the rims to the river. "I'm going to close my eyes," Rob says, "so I won't see any hikers."

"Why?" I ask. "They're closer to nature than we are." *We* got to the bottom of the canyon on the Navajo bus.

Only one person on our raft has been burning many calories today. I look over my shoulder at Terrill, our raftsmen. He rotates his shoulders, his oars slack for the moment in their locks. He is perched on a muddy food locker. The other three boatmen and the boatwoman, Karly, keep their rafts and their locker seats clean, growl at us if we track in mud. Terrill tracks in his own mud. "Muscles sore?" I ask.

"Know anything about massage?" He looks at me through half-closed eyes. It's part of his act, these signals he sends. No woman wearing a wet suit top, a wool shirt, a blue rain slicker, and a life jacket could look very desirable.

"How long before you get used to it?"

He shrugs. "Soon as I find me a ripe young woman."

"Maybe you need a ripe old chiropractor."

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"I think I'll buy me an eighteen-year-old Somalian," he says, smiling into the river beyond me. He has already shed his life jacket — a yellow kayaker's number — and his rain slicker, and now he peels off his T-shirt, also yellow, faded, with BELCH printed on the front in large letters. Behind him in the back of the raft, Lona, a laid-off schoolteacher from South San Francisco, and Mark, an accountant from Denver, both bundled like us in rain gear and life jackets, are gazing at the Redwall. Lona, I suspect, is trying to spot the first blue heron. Yesterday she was on Andy's boat with us, and she was the first to see the black-necked stilts. Like me, she is thirtyish and intense; unlike me, she is brave enough to spend a thousand dollars for a raft trip without knowing where next year's rent is coming from. She is outfitted with binoculars and nose plugs, the one to better see the heron with, the other in case we flip or she is bounced off the raft. In rough water, she clips on the nose plugs, and the binoculars swing heavily from her neck. In calm water, like now, she occasionally offers the binoculars to Mark. Mark is bland and smooth-chinned, apparently the only person in the canyon with a razor. Lona doesn't seem much interested in his company. I commend her judgment.

I turn sideways so I can see the ribboned wall of the gorge and squint up at Terrill at the same time. "Where do you call home then? Flagstaff?"

He waits a second before answering. "Yeah. Big Flag."

"You're not there much though."

"Enough."

"Live alone?" Rob stirs. Last night he told me that I asked Andy, yesterday's raftsmen, inappropriately personal questions.

"Naw," Terrill says. "Got a lady or two to keep my bed warm."

"Or two?" I say.

"But she don't give a piss ant's pus," he sings, oaring again in rhythm. "She don't give the Hoo-oover Dam."

The sky is too blue. Until yesterday we were wet from the rain as well as the river, and the contrast is startling. "I grew up by the Hoover Dam," I say and check to measure interest. None evident. "Close to Las Vegas." Terrill winces. "It's not what everyone thinks," I say. "The strip, the lights — that's all a stage front. Las Vegas is really just a big Mormon town. Poplar stands. Wide, straight streets. Rodeos. Church bazaars."

"Thought you two were from the Big Wormy Apple."

"We are now." I nod towards Rob. "He grew up in Salt Lake City."

"Another big Mormon town."

"Yeah."

"You big Mormons?"

Rob's leg jerks just a little. "Used to be," I say.

Terrill reaches for his life jacket. "Better wake 'im up. We're coming to Horn."

Rob opens his eyes, swings his legs down, gives me a brief look that I'm not up to interpreting, and assumes his ready-for-the-rapids pose; he clutches the blue ropes and stuffs his rubber boots under the storage bags. I draw my rainhood over my billed hat and brace myself. Terrill is standing, assessing the

brown foam. Karly's boat, just before us, drops suddenly, rises, is buffeted, rocks, and is calm. I look back to see Terrill, lips parted, lower himself to the food locker. Lona has donned her nose plugs. The boat rolls.

"Baby!" bleats Terrill, and we crash into a plume of water. "Didja see that hole? Wahoo!"

I loosen my hold a little and let myself feel the rises and falls. I hear Terrill's grunts and the oars grating in their locks and am conscious of walls of water washing in from over the side and front. Trying not to blink, I look straight ahead, and I swell again, inside.

"Bail!" yells Terrill. "Bail, you mothers!" The raft is still rolling hard. Rob manages to unlatch the buckets and hands me the small bailer, a plastic Purex bottle. I realize I am sitting in water up to my waist. Furiously we scoop water up and over the sides. Terrill, breathing a little harder, slows his oars as the waves calm, shakes his head, his blond hair and beard wet and kinky. "Wahoo," he says again. "Whatta hole." He is examining his nails. "You drop in that hole and you've got a fifty-fifty chance." Mesmerized, I am holding the Purex bottle motionless. "Keep bailing," he says, glancing at me briefly and tearing off a hangnail with his teeth. "We missed the hole by a good four inches."

The skeptic in me wonders if all of this hoopla is concocted for our entertainment. The pragmatist in me tells me just to enjoy it.

"Granite next."

"Sounds like the crosstown bus driver," Rob mumbles to me. He wipes off his sunglasses with the underside of his rainjacket. I scowl at him and tighten the drawstring on my hood.

"You ever worry?" I say back over my shoulder to Terrill.

"Sure," he says. He is stroking slowly, alternating oars. "About what?"

"The rapids. Flipping."

He shrugs. "There's a lotta things to worry about in this world. Like getting old. I worry a lot about getting old. Hey," he says, "next year I'll be thirty." He is silent, then refocuses on my question. "River's tricky. Complicated. Gotta know her." He runs his eyes down me again. "Like a woman."

Lona leans forward. Her voice twangs because of the nose plugs. "What's the worst river you've been on?"

Terrill listens for a moment to the rapids. "The worst? The worst is Puddle Creek, Nebraska. That's where I'm from. Puddle Creek, Nebraska." He stands again, and once more we follow Karly's boat into the roar and spray.

It is the best of days. Three big rapids, close on. In the third, we rise out of the water, nose almost straight up. We take the right run. Ahead of us Karly is following Andy and Buzz and Bags down the left. Water is pouring out of the raft faster than we can bail it, rushing out over the sides.

"Jesus Christ!" hollers Terrill. "You waiting for the resurrection? Bail, mothers, bail!"

Afterwards, gliding on smoother water, my eyes taking in the Muav and Redwall, I think, surprised, how a part of me shuddered when Terrill shouted

“Jesus Christ.” “Thou shalt not,” said the yarn-framed poster on my bedroom wall, “take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” A second small poster, hung for symmetry maybe as well as for my spiritual welfare, began, “We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.”

We’ve separated ourselves from that now, Rob and I. That’s one reason we’ve stayed in the East, to ease that separation from our religious roots. It’s been easier for me anyway than for him. Mom is a believer, Dad a non-believer, and I wobbled in the middle until I was twenty-two and took a faith-demoting pilgrimage to Israel. But Rob had clean hands, a pure heart, and a family that absolutely panted together in prayer. His faith began wavering at seventeen when he decided the world was about five hundred million years older than his Sunday School teacher, one Brother Emery, said it was. “Book learning,” Brother Emery had snarled. “Book learning!”

Rob never could cut the cord clean through. He still has occasional recurrences of hope, like last June when his oldest sister, LaNell, got stomach cancer and the family begged us to join them one day in fasting and prayer. Rob wouldn’t call it fasting, but he didn’t eat for most of the week. At the end of the summer he flew back to Salt Lake for LaNell’s funeral.

It’s April now, time of rebirth, not death, and Terrill has taken off his life jacket again, and Rob has shed the pants of his yellow suit and is stretched out once more, navel down on the rim, facing the multi-colored canyon wall. The hermit shale is frosted with pale sage-like brush. Terrill doesn’t know its name, but it will be brown in a week or two he says. “A western tanager!” Lona calls out, and we all crane our necks to see and don’t.

Terrill is swigging river water from the tin measuring cup that he eats all his meals from. He gargles, then spits neatly over the oarlocks into the river. He tosses me a plastic bottle of viscous white liquid and offers his back. I have to stand and lean to reach him. Over his right shoulder blade is a tattoo, two wild blue horses. I smear lotion on the wild horses, on his already red and freckled shoulders, down the curve of his spine. My rough hands and torn bandages grate on his skin.

“Doesn’t this hurt?” I ask. “It’s like getting a massage with sandpaper.”

He grunts something to convey pleasure. Just above the waist of his cut-offs is a wide, curving line. “What’s the scar from?” I hand back the capped bottle, noting that Rob is lying much too still to be asleep.

“Hippo,” he says, shifting on the seat now washed clean by all the rapids and picking up the oars. “On the Ono. Blind old mother hippo left her paw print on me. She thought my little gray raft was seducing her baby.” He whinnies, rumbles, sways from side to side. “I was seducing a woman, for God’s sake! Another guy’s woman, matter of fact. Guy who hired me.” He sets down the oars again. “Sheila. Sheila was all right. She was really ripe.” He picks at a blister on his hand, holds it out to me. “See that? It’s because it’s the first trip of the season. By June there won’t be no blisters.” I return his hand, and he easily takes up the oars. “She kept coming to my tent,” he says.

“Her old man was pissed off but wasn’t much I could do. Besides, he knew I was his best boatman.” His eyes are on the river. “I’m the best boatman on five continents.” He looks at me. “How many continents are there?”

“Seven, I think.”

“Well. I’m only the best boatman on five.”

“He’s full of crap,” Rob will say tonight as we zip ourselves into our separate mummy bags, the zippers, among other things, incompatible. But I believe Terrill’s tale. I look straight ahead now, nodding into the river.

“I keep having these recurring fantasies,” I tell Marie, a dental technician who is sitting beside me trying to pull off her rubber boots. “Fantasies of hot showers and chocolate ice cream.” Beside us Rob is anchoring our ground cloth with enormous stones. I don’t tell Marie of my other fantasies.

“Yeah,” she says. “I keep dreaming about my water bed. And you know what I’d really like? I’d really like to vacuum out my sleeping bag.” She grits her teeth and grunts. “But it wouldn’t do any good.”

“There’s a lotta upkeep to life.” I’ve just yanked off the second of my own boots and am examining between my toes. Fungus can grow on wet feet, Paula has told us. Paula is a retired school nurse from Tucson who wears a pioneer bonnet and face powder to keep off the sun. She has medicine for foot fungus. Also for motion sickness, diarrhea, and yeast infections.

Terrill saunters past in his sneakers and cut-offs, the tan pockets flapping below the fringe. He pretends to ignore us, but our eyes catch for a second. Maybe he is really watching Marie, who is down to running shorts and a tank top. Marie is short, fair, twenty-one and overweight, but still quite pleasant looking. Last night she told me she prefers to date gay men. “Less suffering,” she said. “But you probably can’t remember how painful it is to be alone.”

Terrill is wearing a small pack. He doesn’t have dinner duty tonight, I calculate. He probably wants to get away from the rest of us. He’ll camp off up the canyon. The sneakers mean serious business. Usually he hikes in thongs.

“I can’t figure that guy out,” Marie says. “Sometimes he acts like we’re human beings, and sometimes he acts like we’re toads.” She slides onto a broad, hot rock. “Elaine?” Her eyes are closed. “How’d you meet Rob?”

“In New York,” I say absently. Something about Terrill’s back lets me know he wants to be watched.

“How?”

Terrill disappears behind an outcrop. “I was coming back from Israel,” I say. “I was staying with a friend from college. She knew him.” I struggle out of my plastic pants and peel off my wet wool ones. “It’s like they’re the seniors,” I tell Marie, “and we’re the freshmen.”

“Who?”

“The boatmen.”

“Yeah,” she says. “The lowly freshmen. Except Buzz. He doesn’t act like that. And maybe Bags.” She yawns. “What were you doing in Israel? Did you know Terrill was in Israel a couple of years ago?”

I turn my rubber booties inside out to dry. “How do you know?”

“Buzz told us yesterday. He was a spy or a security guard or something.” She runs her finger over her chapped lips. “If you can believe anything Terrill tells anybody.”

I drape my wool and my plastic pants over a stiff-limbed bush and pull on my shorts. “I lived on the biggest kibbutz in Israel,” I say, propping my back against the base of Marie’s rock. “It was kind of like here. None of us knew anything. Foreign kids on a farm vacation. Six months to pick olives and grapefruit and learn a little Hebrew.” I pour lotion onto my hands and scrape them together. “We didn’t know how to survive on a farm. And the Israeli kids could’ve treated us like yokels, the way the boatmen treat us, but they didn’t. The boatmen figure they *could* be like us if they wanted — you know, going to school and having regular jobs and regular salaries — but that’s too tame and boring for them. They can *afford* to look down their noses at us.”

Rob slides onto the sand beside me, lays his head on my hip. “You’ve put her to sleep,” he says, nodding his head backwards. Marie is breathing deeply. She starts to make small snoring sounds. “Keep talking,” Rob says. “I need a nap too.”

I keep talking. “The Israelis really *were* superior to us. At least in everything that counted over there. They were big and healthy, and they knew how to run tractors and shoot guns. They’d been over every inch of Israel almost, in the army.” I think of my Israeli boyfriend, Igal, who had just finished his military service when I arrived at the kibbutz. He was big and healthy. And beardless. I feel Rob’s mustache. It is getting scraggly, and his chin and cheeks are covered with black bristle. The boatmen all started with scraggly mustaches and wild, prophetic-looking beards. I remember what I was saying. “But we foreigners seemed exotic, special to them. They *couldn’t* be what we were, even if they wanted that. They didn’t have the money to go to America or England or Belgium or Holland. They’d never been to college.”

“Don’t feel guilty,” Rob says. “They probably sat around in their cabins talking about what turkeys you all were.”

I reknit the bandanna at the nape of my neck. I lost my faith in Israel. It didn’t survive my separation from Mormon culture and my visit to Yad Vashem and the life-size photographs of the holocaust. Rob’s head becomes heavier as he relaxes. I lie still, feeling like the only person in the world who is awake. I could reach over and get my *Guide to Wild Life in the Canyon*, but I’ve already read the beaver chapter six times.

Karly is skimming barefoot over the rocks. Walking on these rocks is as miraculous to me as walking on water. I wonder about her relationship with the men who oar these rafts. Especially Terrill. Karly is pretty. She has thick braids, black except for a shock of white at one temple. She was in New York, secretary for an ad agency, she told us, the day we were on her boat. She hated it. Cousin talked her into going to whitewater school with him, and presto! her life changed. In her former life, she worked three blocks over and one down from where I work. I write letters all day too, though I don’t type them. I compose them into a dictaphone, obsequious letters to appease disgruntled customers.

I envy Karly's style. Even in my Sierra sneakers, I have trouble hiking down the talus. On yesterday's hike I skidded on a rock, crashed onto my left hand, and slashed off the tip of my third finger. I am, as always, without grace.

I look up at the cliffs. Kaibab limestone, Toroweap, Coconino sandstone, Hermit shale. They quiz us on it continually, the boatmen, Karly. "All right! Who can spot the Muav limestone?" All heads swivel. "See the Great Unconformity? An extra chop at dinner for anyone who can figure out what fossils we'll find in the Bright Angel." I try rhythmic mnemonic patterns. Kaibab, Coconino, Hermit shale. Supai, Redwall, bail, bail, bail.

"See up there?" On yesterday's hike Terrill had pointed to the rim of the canyon, only then I didn't know he had wild blue horses tattooed on his shoulder blade. "The Kaibab and the Toroweap alone are more than five hundred feet thick. And that's just the frosting." He had just salved my damaged finger and was holding my left hand up, pressing it to slow the bleeding. The cap of the finger was attached by a small sliver of flesh. I was too surprised to hurt. "And people," he said, oblivious of the blood running down both our arms, "people are about an inch of the top layer. Maybe not even an inch."

He pressed a bandage hard on the top of the finger and held it a minute. We were silent. I was thinking about bleeding on Terrill and holding up the hike. Rob was probably thinking about the age of the earth, the Precambrian and Paleozoic divisions. I don't know what Terrill was thinking about.

We've seen traces of life millions of years older than man. I wonder how Rob's old Sunday School teacher would explain all this. It's more than book learning. Rob is still dozing on my hip. I don't wake him to ask.

One afternoon we felt with our roughened fingers the smooth impressions of nautiloids in the limestone. The number of years dazzles me for a few minutes — then fades into the abstractions to which I relegate all numbers over thirty-two. Besides, I say to myself, I'd rather see a beaver. Yet another recurring fantasy. Young kids who grow up in the desert and old kids who grow middle-aged in the biggest of cities are zoologically deprived. Sometimes on the river we pass what Bags tells us are beaver holes, but none of us, this trip, have yet seen the real thing. I'm not sure I even believe in the real thing. Easter bunnies. Easter beavers. Hobbits and gryphons. Mock turtles.

Rob and Marie are still asleep. I hear pots banging. Karly and Bags have dinner detail. I slide out from under Rob's head. He stirs and opens his eyes. "I think I'll go help with supper," I say.

"You don't have to. We paid for this trip."

"I don't like being waited on. They're doing all the work."

"I don't know." He raises himself up on one elbow and looks at me. "Sometimes it's hard work just hanging on."

In the morning while Bags is flipping eggs over the porta-stove, Terrill, fresh from his overnight outside the camp, slides behind him, catches an egg in his measuring cup, and disappears behind the cliffside. Bags is thick-necked,

short, hairy, and docile. I suspect he doesn't remember anyone's name. "Can we ride with you today?" I ask.

"You bet, dear," he says. "We do Crystal first thing." He winks. "Last time I did Crystal, I flipped." He winks again, and I don't know whether he is serious or not. I take a swallow of my oatmeal. I decide to believe him. I have decided, haven't I, to believe them all?

"Hey," says Paula, already decked out in her pioneer bonnet. "Know what today is?"

"Sunday," says Mark. He looks at his waterproof, shockproof, digital wristpiece that adds, subtracts, multiplies, divides up to six places, calculates square roots, and plays "Oh, Susannah." It also, he has shown us, tells four time zones, converts to a stopwatch, and indicates AM and PM in case the wearer can't tell the difference.

"Easter Sunday," says Paula, and she sticks her plate of fried eggs in front of Bags's face. "I'd like mine with a chocolate bunny."

"Easter," repeats Mark.

"Well!" says Terrill, reappearing in back of Bags. "Hot sheep shit. Easter."

Bags is quiet on the boat. He rolls his whole body forward when he oars. He has brought us through Crystal without mishap, without event either — almost mechanically. We turn to see, two boats back, Terrill's raft rolling through the rocks, Terrill seeming to stand atop a wave.

Rob is talkative today. He asks Bags if he prefers skiing in Montana — Bags comes from Bozeman — or Arizona. Is it harder to find temporary work in the winter or the summer? Does Bags think they should relocate the burros or shoot them? Rob loves either-or questions. His idea of a showstopper is to ask a preschooler in the company of his parents whom he prefers — his mommy or his daddy. We are bumping through the jewel-named rapids. The names seem incongruous. "Why not Toilet Bowl?" I say. "Or Spin Cycle." Bags looks over his shoulder and smiles patiently.

"Elaine's not a romantic," Rob explains.

Rob is, of course, wrong. I am right now dreaming as the rafts loll a little, drifting fairly close together. We're in the back of the raft today. I sit in the crook close to Bags's seat locker and look at where we've been. Behind us, Karly is oaring alternately, slowly, relaxed. Terrill seems to be picking at his knee.

In the front of our boat, Jerry P. is snapping pictures of the canyon, of us, of the other boats. He has a tupperware salad mixer with twenty-five rolls of film in it. I like Jerry P. "What roll are you on?" I call.

"Seven."

"Long way to go."

"Might not make it through 'em all."

Jerry P. is the other transplanted westerner. He left Sacramento after college to become a soil engineer in New Jersey. A soul engineer, says Rob, who also likes Jerry P. We call him Jerry P. to distinguish him from Jerry A., or Big Jerry. Jerry A. owns a roofing company in Barstow. I've noticed he thinks

he owns his wife too, a large blond woman with no contrary opinions. All of Jerry A.'s opinions are contrary. "It's good for us to be around someone like him," I tell Rob. "A real redneck. Broadens our horizons."

"You ever been back east?" I smile now at Bags.

"No, dear. Not yet."

"Want to go?"

"Maybe. When I'm real old."

"Like thirty?"

"Yeah." He leans over, scoops up a cup of river water and drinks it. "Lots of places I want to go first."

"Like where?"

"Alaska. And Peru. Even Guatemala. Terrill sometimes does winter runs in Peru and Guatemala." We pull into shore behind Buzz's boat. "Lunch," says Bags.

We lumber off the rafts, dragging the wooden folding table and the big bailing bucket, alias the hand-rinse barrel, to which will be added some compound strong enough to disinfect a whole hospital. I help peel and chop hard-boiled eggs. To celebrate Easter. Rob hates egg-salad sandwiches, I think, with a touch of malicious pleasure. But there's always peanut butter for the dissenters.

Buzz, the tallest and hairiest of the boatmen, Marie's favorite, is squatting on a rock with his harmonica. He plays a tune I struggle to recognize, minorish and slow. I have what I refer to as a miserable melodic memory. What words go to that? I fluff out the wadded alfalfa sprouts. "Chow!" croons Andy. Rob and Jerry A. are first in line. There is yellow bread and wheat. Egg bread, I think, and then I remember what the tune is. "Hatikvah." One of those songs we were supposed to sing on the kibbutz but didn't very often. I have it on a record though. I can really only remember the last word, *Yerushaleim* — Jerusalem. I hum it with Buzz now.

"What's that matzoh music?" I hear Terrill's voice behind me; but when I turn, he is addressing Buzz. "Don't you know that Jesus Christ is your lord and savior?"

I forget I am still holding the egg-salad spatula. I have heard Terrill expound on Rastafarians and the U.S. Marines and Friends of the Earth, a variety of convictions in a variety of voices, but this is a new lecture topic with a new intonation. Are we supposed to laugh?

Terrill leans into the circle he is making around Buzz, moving slowly, rhythmically. "It's true," he chants. Buzz straightens up, still blowing on the harmonica. Terrill waves his empty cup. "Here I was at the tomb in Jerusalem, and I was really feeling something for once when this puking priest comes up and asks for a donation. 'Look,' I told him, 'I'm having a religious experience for the first time in my life and you're asking for money?' He's sorry, he's sorry, the old guy says, and he backs off." Terrill bows and shuffles backwards, looking a little like a Chinese vaudeville performer. Those close by are watching, eyes amused over their egg-salad sandwiches. They know how to react. This is just another of his little solos. Karly smiles uncomfortably as if she has heard it all before. She lets out a little sigh. Buzz keeps playing what seems to me an appropriate accompaniment to the sermon.

"Jesus lives," says Terrill. "I maybe knew it in the back of my head all along, but then I really knew it." He closes his eyes for a second. "Jesus Christ is the savior of the world."

I stand all amazed. I have the impression that I am the only one who is really listening. Terrill maybe senses that because he looks at me for an instant, then makes another circle around Buzz. "Enough matzoh music," he says. "A hymn. An Easter hymn." Buzz lowers his harmonica for a second, nods, and lifts it again to his lips. He erupts into "When the Saints Come Marching In." A few, those who have finished their sandwiches and have free palms, start to clap. A few more sing. Terrill leads with gusto, waving his tin cup. "And when the new," clap clap clap clap, "world is revealed," clap clap clap clap.

"Don't forget to eat," Rob whispers into my hair. I look down at the immobile spatula and spread myself a sandwich. It tastes heavy, lumpy. I swallow it without really chewing and wash it down with pink lemonade. The song ends, but the clapping continues a few minutes until everyone scatters to clean up or suit up. Just before Andy and Bags fold the table, Terrill swipes a few gingersnaps and steps close to me to fill his cup with lemonade.

"You didn't get a sandwich," I say. I am struggling with the middle buckle of my life jacket.

He swallows his lemonade in one gulp and clips the cup onto a belt loop. "Some things are more important than food." He fastens the middle buckle for me. "Some things are even more important than sex," he says. "But not very many."

In February, back in our studio on East 96th Street, on top of the linoleum slab that covers our bathtub and serves as our kitchen table, our friend Jean laid out all her snapshots. She had ridden the Colorado the summer before, with another outfitter, one that used dories instead of rafts. "Halfway through," she had told us, "I looked at myself in my steel mirror and said, 'What are you doing here?'" She had stacked up the snapshots while she talked and then dealt them out again like a pinochle hand. "But after a day the sun came up and my reservations disappeared." She spread out the pictures again. "I loved the rest of the trip," she said.

Because of Jean, I have prepared myself for letdowns, relapses. I have felt none. My knee slips out of joint scrambling up and down the trailless hills in Deer Creek Canyon. But ahead of us Terrill is singing what seems to be "Amazing Grace" with a reggae beat, and I snap my rebellious knee back in. Up Havesu my bare legs are abraded by stinging nettle, and my camera, lodged with my canteen in a daypack, gets wet when I ford the creek. This time I don't have to fall; the creek reaches my armpits while I'm standing. "Oh well," Rob says, "the pictures of the bighorn wouldn't show up without a telephoto anyway." And Jerry P. offers to have copies made of the best of his twenty-five rolls of film.

I am on a day-after-day high. I am faintly conscious of the speed at which time is passing, but even that seems no reason for depression yet. Except for Mark and Buzz, we have no clocks and no calendars. We tell days by rapids.

Everyone has been discussing the big one, Lava Falls, rated eight to ten in our plastic river books, legendary granddaddy of North American whitewater. Both Bags and Buzz flipped there last year. And Buzz had never flipped anywhere else.

Sitting in a lotus position on her sleeping bag, her binoculars at rest on her air pillow, Lona reckons that the safest place to be is with Andy. Andy, she says, has a perfect record. "No flips anywhere."

"Andy," says Jerry P., "has only been down this river four times."

"Odds are against anyone flipping twice in a row," says Mark. "I'm going with Bags."

Marie looks up from her can of diet Sprite. "Good reasoning," she says, "but I'll be on Buzz's boat. If I have to flip, I want to go with him."

"I'm going for the big ride," says Jerry P., shielding his camera from the late afternoon sun as he changes rolls of film. "I'm going with Terrill."

"Me too," I say. I glance at Rob. "Us too."

The boatmen are visibly tense on Lava morning, but that might just be for show, I think. If so, it works. Waiting, shifting about in the wet sand, stuffed into our rainsuits and life jackets, we all feel tense. The mood melts a little when Terrill starts springing from boat to boat like a wallaby. I'm wishing I could collect his imitations. I have watched him do a dozen canyon wrens (he talks with them "like St. Francis," he says), a mama hippo, a baby hippo, two crazed lions (one at the foot of the Ethiopian safari van he was riding the roof of, the other through the wall of his and Sheila's collapsed tent), an angry father, Henry Kissinger (Matzoh Man), Jimmy Cliff, and about forty weeping, ranting, oversexed, undersexed, willing, or reluctant women. "Oh, Terrill," he raises his voice to a falsetto, "I have a headache." Or "Terrill, why can't you be a cattleman like my daddy?" or "You'll never amount to anything, you son of a bitch. You're wasting my best child-bearing years." Rob chastizes me because I enjoy the performances so thoroughly, openly, uncritically.

Above Lava, we all pile out of the boats to assess the situation, the boatmen and Karly huddling on the rocks below us, calculating. When they finally return, Rob chews on his knuckle scabs and mutters in a tone I am familiar with, "Well, at least today God's on our side." I feel baked in my life jacket and rainsuit. I hear Bags saying to Buzz, "Yeah, but there isn't a right run."

Andy goes first. Lona is sitting primly in the front, nose plugs firmly in place. The Jerry A.'s are hunched over in the back. The raft slides down left of center and rises clumsily, teetering, then rises, fast, and falls, hard, out of our view. We hear their squeals and see them bobbing and bailing further down. Buzz is ready, waiting.

Terrill has been chewing gum, but he spits it sharply into the river, then climbs onto our boat with the anchor rope in his teeth. "Matzoh's better than macho," Rob grumbles, but like Jerry P. and bonneted Paula in the back of the raft, like me across from him in the front, he nervously watches Terrill's face. Terrill fastens his life jacket slowly, looks at his blisters, oars out into the middle of the river. "One up," he says. "Four to go." Buzz's boat moves,

again down the left. Terrill is standing. "Looks like he's going for that hole," he says calmly. "Looks like he's gonna hit it." The boat, we can see, is perpendicular, then flips back on itself. It is too low for us to see well. "One down," Terrill says. "Don't worry. I see Marie. Andy'll pick 'em all up."

I chew on my lip and watch Karly and Bags exchange grim looks. When the river is clear, Bags goes, again down the left, but not so far this time. We hold our breaths. "Cleared it," says Terrill after we see the thrashing. He makes a fist at Karly, who doesn't reply. She follows as exactly as she can in Bags's trail.

"Okay, guys," says Terrill, becoming more animated. "We're taking the right run!" I imitate Rob's hanging-on pose, stuff both boots under the storage bags, grip the blue front ropes, and crouch, head up to see what is coming. An enormous brown wave is coming. "Jesus Christ!" yells Terrill, and I wonder for the smallest of seconds if he is praying. I repeat to myself, "Jesus Christ." We catch the wave on the tip. The oars are shrieking in their sockets, and Terrill says again, softer, "Jesus!" I am filled with an odd joy. We climb another wave, plunge down it, into two hitting from the sides. For a minute I wonder if I'm in the boat or out of it. There is water everywhere. We are climbing again.

And then Terrill is bouncing on the locker seat, yipping to the other boatmen. I bail, feeling myself smile beyond all control. The rafts are quite close. Everyone is back in Buzz's now upturned boat. Rob waves at Marie who makes a small hand movement and shivers. Paula is leaning over the back side of the raft, wringing out her hat. Jerry P., his arm still slung through the handle of a bailing bucket, is struggling to undo his plastic camera case. I snap my bailer back on the ropes and grin up at Terrill. He half closes his eyes.

We glide downstream for a while, the winds not objecting, all feeling as if we've accomplished something, although most of us of course haven't. Still, Karly says karma determines if a boat can right itself. I don't know too much about karma. Maybe it's akin to the Holy Ghost.

"The motor rigs are always losing beer in Lava," says Terrill. "It floats down here. I've picked a lot of beer out of these waters." He smiles sleepily. "And some other things. Two oars. All I need now is my own boat." He hands me his tin cup, motions towards the river. I fill it and hand it back to him. "'Course the oars were different lengths." He hands back the cup for a refill. "Best thing though was an eighteen-year-old woman. Fell out of Karly's boat. 'Oh Terrill!'" His falsetto again. "'I'm so cold I'm gonna die. I think I've got hypothermia. Cure me! Cure me!'" He laughs and gulps the water in one swallow. "Yep. River's been good to me."

That afternoon we are all playful, elated. Around us the reds, buffs, grays, greens are dazzling. Here and there enormous rivers of lava surge down the canyon walls. When we finally pull the boats in, we toss high the heavy rubber duffels we've been dragging and pushing down the unloading lines for the past two weeks.

The boatmen and Karly gather on Bags's boat and sit in a circle drinking beer, swatting Buzz on the back and shoulders. They speak softly but urgently.

Some of us unroll our sleeping bags on the sand in another sociable circle. We sit on them, pulling off wet boots and outer clothing, rubbing lotion on our hands and faces, opening cans of beer and pop. Jerry P. stretches out on his bag, his camera dormant for a minute at his side. Then he sits bolt upright. "Hot sheep shit," he begins, and we all guffaw. Then he says, "I don't want to go home."

"Me either," says Paula, snapping shut her powder case.

"Damn," says Jerry P. "I gotta be at work Tuesday morning."

"No work talk allowed," warns Marie.

There is no talk at all. Rob lies on his back looking at the too-blue sky. Jerry P. draws idly in the sand. I reach for my daypack, break through the tamarisks and brittle mesquite, and head for the cliffs. After a while, I hear Rob splintering branches behind me.

"Want to be alone?"

"In a minute. Hey." I look at my feet. A small animal skull is lying there. I pick it up and run my rough fingers along its smooth, perfectly formed teeth. "Good orthodontist." I hold it out to Rob. "I want to move back. We belong in the West. Even if it has to be California."

Rob makes a face. "Elaine, the only place I could get a transfer to is L.A. That's no different from New York. A big city's a big city."

"Some big cities are closer to what matters."

He scuffs his sneakers in the sand. "We can think about it," he says softly. "We'll have a better perspective when we're back home."

"I don't want a better perspective. You hope I'll forget about it. And New York's not our home."

He takes the little skull. After a few minutes he asks, "What do you think it was?"

"Alas, poor Yorick. Shrunk."

"Not a beaver anyway. Not unless it wore braces."

I turn towards the cliff. He lays down the skull and slips back through the tamarisk. Finding my first foothold, I edge up the granite. It's always easier to climb up than down. I already know I'll be sorry. I keep on climbing. Maybe, I think, Rob will tell the boatmen about the skull, and maybe one of them will shoulder through the mesquite now, and maybe he'll find me, trapped on a ledge, unable to come down, unable to go up, and he'll rescue me on the back of a wild blue horse and carry me off to a hidden cave in the Bright Angel shale. But the boatmen are drinking on Bags's boat. At the end of a trip, the boatmen, too, will go back to work. They'll go back to Lee's Ferry and get back on the green-blue-brown river.

Gingerly I make my way skyward. I perch on a rough rock, high enough to see the five boats lined up along the bank, too high to see who is sitting where. The ground cloths and bedrolls are tiny, insignificant splashes of color on the sand. The wind is getting fierce. I feel vulnerable up here. A few shrill sounds from the kitchen rocks carry up on gusts.

I lower myself down the rough, jagged slopes, mostly with my hands. My feet slide out from beneath me, and I catch myself with my palms on the schist.

My right hand starts bleeding; my legs are scraped white. I move very slowly, out of sight of camp so no one can see my clumsy descent. I keep sucking my right hand so I won't leave a trail of blood. We are not, after all, supposed to litter in the canyon.

Finally, just as I am about to explode with impatience and fear, I reach the base of the cliffs. Someone else is there too, squatting, examining the little skull. I draw in my breath and hide my hand behind my back, pressing the palm hard.

"Your old man told me you found something, dear," says Bags, straightening up. "Probably a ringtail cat."

With dinner, clam sauce on spaghetti, our spirits revive. The boatmen have put together a freeze-dried, gooey cheesecake, and we all take big portions and settle on the sand. I have bandaged my palm. Buzz gives instructions on the final half-day on the water. The Californians start planning a reunion in San Jose.

"We can come back next year," Rob says as we lie in our mummy bags and stare at the stars.

I have already thought of that. "I thought we were going to try to have a baby next year."

"Which do you want most?" I hear the playful tone of his either-or questions.

"I don't know what I want." I close my eyes on the star-speckled sky.

I sleep poorly. For the first time since we came into the canyon, I dream about the office. I rouse myself awake. Next to me I hear Rob's daytime breathing. I consciously slow down my breaths so I'll sound asleep and I roll over, towards the river.

This last morning we are supposed to float down to Diamond Creek in silence. Rob has put our bags on Karly's raft, and we climb aboard in the gray dawn and shove off. It's too dark to see who is in what other boats, but everyone is quiet and anonymous anyway, and the distance between the rafts stretches out. Oars splash. I scour the shoreline for beaver holes. I look beyond the dark deep canyon walls at the whitening sky. The last stars have just disappeared. The bowels of the earth. We and the river have descended sixteen hundred million years.

This would be an appropriate time, I think, for a religious experience. I try to recite one of my childhood prayers. Heavenly Father. Bless Mommy and Daddy, Stevie and Ben, Grandmas and Grandpas. I concentrate hard. Grandmas and Grandpas, soldiers and sailors, beavers and wallabies. I hear irreverent noises behind us. Terrill, brushing his teeth and gargling. In the half light Karly frowns. Suddenly the canyon is full of small noises. A canyon wren. Terrill's whistled response. The bending and twanging back of a willow at the water's edge. I look closely through the gray; and though I don't see it, part of one of my prayers has been answered. I have heard a beaver.

And we are at Diamond Creek. We derig the rafts and scrub them out, splashing water on them and us with the bailing buckets. We load the boats

on the waiting truck, load our gear on the waiting Navajo bus. Drenched, numb, we move awkwardly about on the sand. "Karly and Andy and I will be on the bus with you," says Buzz. "Bags and Terrill are riding with the boats back to the warehouse. Better tell 'em goodbye. Some of you got planes to catch in Phoenix."

We have a plane to catch in Phoenix. Alarm rises within me. Rob steps towards Terrill and thrusts out his hand. Another Mormon-town trait. Jerry P. is slapping Bags on the back. I hang back, confused, caught in the milling and lining up. I push behind Paula who is cuffing Terrill on the cheeks and stick out my hand in his direction. He looks at me with some amazement. "Holy Christ, woman," he says. "Don't you have no manners?" He hugs me roughly in his left arm, then turns abruptly to Marie who gives him a hard kiss. Marie has wet eyes. So does Jerry P. Bags squeezes my shoulders. "You're a good scout, dear," he says.

I stand helpless until Rob takes me by the elbow like an old lady and leads me onto the jammed and rickety bus. I am sitting on a rubber duffel in the aisle behind him. I am too far from the window, as we shift into gear and rumble up the gravel road, to see the canyon or the river or the truck. I stare instead at my hideous hands. The bandage on my palm is spongy with water. The one on my finger is fraying. I peel it slowly off. The finger is healed and, miracle of miracles, is smooth and pink, just the tiniest line showing where the top had lifted off.

"Hey," Karly is saying. She is wedged between me and Jerry P. and is examining his palm on her knee. "Look at that lifeline. You're going to live to be a hundred and twenty-five." She runs her finger down another crease. "This is your progeny line. Look out, New Jersey. Big Daddy is coming!"

"And this," Jerry P. points to a cracked knuckle, "is my water line." Karly laughs. Keeping his hand between her knees, she reaches for mine.

"Can't read you," she says, "unless you take off that bandage. What'd you do to yourself?"

"She was trying to slit her wrists," says Jerry P., leaning over. "These New Yorkers don't know nothing about anatomy."

"These New Jersians don't know nothing about grammar."

Behind us Buzz has extracted his harmonica from the pack I am sitting on. "Who wants a little matzoh music?" he says.

"Matzoh music! Let's have matzoh music!" calls out Marie. She slaps her thighs. But Buzz plays instead, in loud chords and heavy accents, "When the Saints Come Marching In," and everyone, even Rob, even I, clap with our wounded hands and sing.