

THE RIVER RERUN¹

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Morning 3, Nankoweap Camp

Across the river, she sees a big brown lump shamble over to the water's edge. She wants it to be graceful, sleek, to glide through the water, not lumber like a bear on the land. Elaine can see it through the right lens of her binoculars. It is what she longed to see thirty years ago, on that last trip down the Colorado. It is a beaver.

It does not make her heart hop.

The left lens of her binoculars fogged up yesterday, which wasn't supposed to happen since they are waterproof binoculars, good ones. They didn't have binoculars the other time. She and Rob smirked at the one person who did, the mousy woman who was always calling out bird names. They were young then; smirking came easily. The muscles of their mouths, the muscles in their legs, shoulders, backs—they all moved effortlessly, without consequence.

"Just got the permit, Aunt Elaine," Chip, Ben's boy, had said on the phone. "A cancellation. So I'm putting together a trip. I know Uncle Rob always wanted to run the Colorado again, right? Now you're both retired so you don't have an excuse. And I talked to my folks. They could stay at your place that week and visit Grandma in the nursing home every day."

He thought of everything, Chip did. And Rob so wanted to go, to prove to himself that he could do it. Just getting on the J-Rig made her

1. Excerpted from the author's recent publication, *Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Wives* (Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2015), which is reviewed later in this issue ([192](#)).

wonder. They couldn't scramble onto the J-Rig the way the others did. Rob could hop over from the rocks. Elaine's arms were pretty good, so she could haul herself up.

That first day, they saw condors through the binoculars, three of them, flying over the canyon, and she thought she might have spotted a nest. She passed the binoculars around—everyone wanted to see birds as big as gliders, a species that might—now—survive. Even Mike wanted to see, Mike who doesn't believe in evolution and extinction.

Yesterday they just rode small rapids, nothing more than Class 5s, and she doesn't think it was the water that clouded up the left lens. After all, the salesman said he cleaned his binoculars by putting them in the sink. Maybe it was the steam from her body in the sun.

It's early. The only other person up is pretty, pensive Olivia, wandering down by the river. In among the tamarisks, Rob and the others are still asleep atop sleeping bags—it's warm here, it's June. Elaine woke to a chorus of canyon wrens and tottered off with the binoculars in search of them. She found one too, through her right lens, singing its heart out.

Mornings are the best time. It's the nights that she dreads, too stiff, too stimulated, too worried to sleep. Mom in the nursing home, sometimes happy, sometimes hating it. Maybe she'll behave for Ben and Bertie. At home Elaine doesn't sleep well either, though it is soothing to have Rob next to her under the sheet instead of two feet away in a separate sleeping bag on the other cot. The first night, at South Canyon, Chip put their cots head to head because there was such a narrow spot for them.

Dear Chip brought the cots. They all, except Chip, who sleeps on the J-Rig, and Vin and Allie, who are very young and who can't stop touching each other, use cots. Vin and Allie set up their little camp as far away from the rest as possible. Could they have managed sex on a cot? Well, maybe on Mike's big cot, the one Tom and Vin scoffingly call "Princess." How old I am, Elaine thinks. Yesterday, in the late afternoon, when the others were hiking up to the Indian granaries, she and Rob stayed in camp, stripped off all their clothes in the warm sun, used the

tepid water in Chip's sun shower bag and the cold water of the Colorado to wash off the sunscreen and sweat and sand. It wasn't the least bit sexy. Rob has those love handles and a bit of a belly; she would be thin but for the fat joints, and she has that wrinkly neck and ugly moles all over her torso and mottled thighs. And the steel-colored hair, cropped short, a helmet, Rob calls it. It's the same color as his beard. If someone had been spying from the brush, they would not, alas, have been titillated.

Thirty years ago, no one had cots and almost everyone was titillated. Sex was a watery undercurrent beside the Colorado even though nobody actually did much, at least that she and Rob knew about. Too communal, too crowded. They have made a conscious effort on this trip not to bore the others with their memories. She has her old blue river guide still, with dates and notes. Saturday, while they were waiting to put in at Lee's Ferry, she was chatting with the grey-bearded guy who brought Chip his back-up motor, and she asked him if he knew any of the boatmen and boatwomen from way back when—she was thinking of Terrill, wild-man Terrill with his peeling, muscular bare arms and his effusive tales of heroism—and the grey-bearded guy said Terrill lives in Flagstaff and still does an oar trip now and then. Elaine finds that extraordinary—that Terrill is still alive, that he hasn't perished in some South American revolution or been shot by a jealous husband.

Chip's is a small, private trip—two aging relatives and five friends, not a commercial excursion like the one they did all those years ago—though they and their fellow travelers were young then and expected to pitch in, loading and unloading morning and evening, and bailing out the water that filled the bottoms of the rafts in the rapids. The commercial trips they've seen so far seem to cater to big groups of the recently retired, people as old as or even older than themselves. At Lee's Ferry, Elaine watched them wilting in the shade of their big bus or waiting in line at the cinderblock bathrooms, the last flush toilets anyone would see for some time. The women wore too much eye makeup and too-tight tank tops and fluorescent flip-flops with plastic flowers. Later

that day, coming behind them through Badger Creek Rapid, Elaine saw that they were clinging to the ropes along the sides of two enormous motorized rafts, sporting, under the orange life jackets that everyone on the river wears, matching blue windbreakers. At one campsite, their guides, “caretakers,” said Rob, had set up a neat row of matching tents.

“But *we* need care,” she told Rob. So far Allie and Vin have unloaded their heavy dry bags in the evening and dragged them back down to the J-Rig in the morning. Elaine and Rob just watch as the others heave the bags off and on, and as Mike, who has taken on “groover” duty, sets up and dismounts the metal box-toilet. They wouldn’t be able to straighten up the rest of the week if they tried to lift any of that stuff. They’ve mostly helped with meals—Chip’s wife, Kim, had packed nine days of food, some frozen, in the big bins under the deck. The deck very cleverly doubles as the meal preparation table with fold-out legs, and they have big canvas chairs with drink holders that Rob and Elaine are in charge of setting up and folding and stuffing back into their sandy bags.

“So how long have you and Rob been together?” Elaine turns to see Olivia, who has soundlessly approached from the brush. She must have walked all the way around.

“Good morning.” Elaine smiles at her, but Olivia doesn’t smile back. “Thirty-three years. Before you were born.”

Olivia runs her fingers through her coppery hair. She hasn’t tied it into a ponytail yet and stuck it through the hole in her cap. “Are you sleeping okay?” Elaine asks gently. Olivia looks as if she has been crying.

“Not really.” She looks down at her purple-red toenails. “Tom’s into this camping stuff. I’m not. He went with Chip down Cataract Canyon last summer a couple of times. He didn’t insist I go then, but the Grand Canyon, well, he says I have to do this. Chance of a lifetime and all.” She pauses. “I miss Danielle. She’s only six. She’s with my folks in Grand Junction. I didn’t know I wouldn’t even be able to *call* her every night.”

“Your camera,” Elaine points to Olivia’s wrist strap, “do you have any pictures of her?”

“Oh yeah,” Olivia says. “Here. Look.” There on the screen is a small girl, red-haired and light-skinned, hugging a large yellow dog. She looks to be about the same age as Elaine and Rob’s first grandchild, darling Penny.

“She looks like you,” Elaine says. “Who’s taking care of the dog?”

“That’s Barney.” Olivia smiles at her camera. “Next-door neighbors. We haven’t lived in Phoenix very long. Tom and Chip worked together in Grand Junction, but Tom got laid off last year—I guess he didn’t impress the boss as much as Chip did—and now he works for his dad. Phoenix is okay, but it’s so hot. Kids can’t play outside until November. And we loved Grand Junction. And *my* folks are a lot more helpful than *his* folks.” She glances at her watch. “Guess I’ll go wake up Tom. Packing the dry bags is a real bore, isn’t it?”

“Not the best part of the trip,” Elaine agrees.

But not the worst either, she thinks as Olivia disappears into the mesquite.

Afternoon 4, Elves Chasm

Rob is still on the J-Rig with Chip, but the others are on their way up, so Elaine adjusts her walking sticks and follows. In the blue river book, thirty years ago, she wrote, “Short Hike to Elves Chasm,” but now she sees there isn’t a trail. How do the others know where to go? Vin and Allie haven’t been here before, but they set off at a run up the rocks as soon as they pulled in. Tom and Olivia followed them. Tom, at least, ought to know the way—he and Chip and Mike and some other he-men took the J-Rig through the Grand Canyon two years ago. Elaine is trying to scramble up the rocks behind Mike, her least favorite person in the group. Last night he told her that he has collected plenty of weather data for the past hundred years, and he sends it to school with his kids to prove to the teachers that the earth is getting colder, not warmer.

“I wish it were true,” she told him.

“C’mon,” he says now, glancing back over his shoulder at her. “This way.”

And then he is gone and she can’t decide which is *this* way. She opts for the flattest rocks and gasps as a lizard scuttles out of the path of her hiking stick. It’s lovely here anyhow, even if she doesn’t get to Elves Chasm. Maybe she’ll intercept Chip and Rob when they start climbing.

She goes forward sometimes, backtracks sometimes, takes left turns, tries to go up. A cavern with water and ferns is very pretty, so she stops and drinks from her canteen. She is clearly lost, but she is exasperated, not afraid. Mike is a jerk. In the rapids he perches on the left pontoon just daring the waves to wash him into the river. She wishes they would.

Yesterday was the start of the big rapids, the big adrenaline rushes. Hance and Horn, and today, Hermit—she likes those breathy H names. And then Crystal. Olivia got hysterical at Crystal. Elaine had held her to calm her. She discovered it’s hard to hug someone when you’re both wearing life jackets.

She sees what could be a grassy trail back to the river. Around big rocks, she suddenly comes upon a pool with three people lazily kicking their feet in the water. They must be from the group of kayakers that passed them while they were having lunch. Kayaks on the Colorado. Elaine can hardly believe they would make themselves so vulnerable. The one in the khaki cap is a woman, and not a young woman either, maybe forty-five. Elaine waves at them. “This the way down?” she asks.

“Yeah. You on that big boat?” asks the woman. Elaine nods. “The one we saw hung up at Crystal?”

“Our nephew built that boat. He ran it onto a rock, and one of the guys jumped out to try to push us off, and we almost squashed him. He was okay though. But it took his wife a while to recover.”

“Crystal’s never easy,” says the older of the men. “Usually too little water.”

“How often have you done this?” Elaine asks. He holds up both hands, fingers extended.

“I’ve only done it four times,” says the younger man. “Mom has done it seven.”

Elaine gasps. “And I thought I was brave,” she says, “just clutching the ropes.”



She settles herself with her book in the shade near the J-Rig. During quiet times, she has been trying to read *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, but has had difficulty concentrating. John Wesley Powell was braver even than the kayakers. Uncharted territory. 1869. Wooden boats. One arm. John Wesley Powell might have needed a little help in getting up to Elves Chasm, except white men didn’t know about Elves Chasm then. But the book says Powell was about Chip’s age when he and his men tackled the Colorado, and he apparently hiked wherever his men hiked. She loves the story about his getting trapped in a side canyon, unable to go ahead or go back, and how he yelled out to George Bradley, who was always, it seems, rescuing the others, and Bradley, who didn’t have a rope, lowered his own long underwear, which Powell lunged for and which helped him either up or down, the book doesn’t say. Three of the men deserted Powell later, though. And they probably didn’t survive. Served them right, she thinks.

Of course Mom thinks *they’ve* abandoned *her*. “My kids stuck me in here,” she tells people who visit the care center. “Moved me here from Nevada. Where I’d lived ninety years. Don’t get old. They treat you like trash.” That’s what she says when she’s the most lucid. That’s when she might hit an aide with her telephone or swear a blue streak at the nurse. She’d kick people if her legs still worked. When she’s more confused, she loses her feistiness and seems helpless and pathetic. Elaine shuts her book and sighs.

Allie and Vin appear in front of her. “We were worried about you,” they chorus. Vin adds, unnecessarily, “Everyone was up there but you.”

Elaine shrugs. "I tried. I was following Mike, but he left me in the dust."

Allie shakes her head. Her hair is wet and kinky. "He shouldn't have done that," she says. "That's awful."

"It was probably too hard a scramble for me for me anyway," Elaine says. She must have inherited the martyr skills from Mom. "Did Rob make it?"

"Chip had to help him," Vin says. "But he got there. You should've seen him jumping off."

"Tom got pictures," Allie says. "It's so beautiful. They'll show you when they get back."

"Did everyone jump in?" Elaine asks. She tries not to sound annoyed. Thirty years ago, the drop from the high hole in the rock was too scary for her. Rob had done it because he felt he had to. But at least then she got to see it, the narrow gorge, the cascades, the green, green pools, and she had paddled around in the water while the others jumped.

"Everyone leapt in," says Vin. "Even Olivia."

"But she didn't want to," says Allie. "Tom kind of made her."

"But she was glad once she did it," Vin says. Allie looks unconvinced.

The others are coming down the rocks. Rob and Chip are relieved and a little abashed, she thinks, to see her. "Where did you go?" they ask. "We figured you'd decided not to come."

"Just went up a little way."

"You should've seen Uncle Rob jump," says Chip.

"I couldn't have made it up there without Chip." Rob is clearly very pleased with himself. "He practically carried me. Where were you?"

She looks at him, then looks away. "I went to the mall," she says tartly, "and bought some mascara."

Night 6, National Canyon Camp

Olivia has disappeared. Tom is frantic. He and Chip are hiking up National Canyon, a big flashlight augmenting their headlamps. Vin and

Allie and Mike are searching closer to the camp and up and down the river. Rob and Elaine hear them calling Olivia's name.

"Won't do much good to call," Rob says, "if she means to go missing." They are sitting in the canvas chairs close to the water's edge. It would be a pleasant night—mild breeze, clear sky studded with stars—if Tom hadn't come rushing back from their campsite and raised the alarm. Olivia had excused herself after dinner, didn't want to play "Murder" in the sociable circle around the pole lamp.

"She's not a happy woman," says Elaine.

"Are you a happy woman?"

Elaine thinks about this. She has thought about this a lot, especially since the newspaper went under, giving her time to think of all the connotations of that word "retire."

"Well," she says, "I wouldn't head up one of the side canyons by myself."

"So, if you could choose to live your life again, would you?"

"I guess," she says. "Yes. Sure. You would, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah." He runs his hand over hers. "Even if it doesn't make much sense."

"We've made it make sense."

"People like Mike don't have to do that, do they? Chip either. They just know there is a big purpose. They're probably reconciled to death. Find meaning in pain. All that." He clears his throat; Elaine thinks his voice catches. "Lucky bounders. Look how well my folks did after LaNell died, lots better than I did, and they're her parents. They *know* they'll see her again. They'll all be together in tidy tract houses in the sky."

"There's more to life than death," Elaine says. "Than facing death."

"Yeah, but some of those things are explained by religion too. Suffering. Injustice. Not explained satisfactorily, but, well, some people are satisfied, aren't they? Take your brothers. Steve. Ben. Ben and Bertie raised Chip to believe all that hooey, and they all claim to be happy. Do you think Mindy'd be happier if we'd raised her to be a believer?"

"I think Mindy's happy." Elaine sighs. "Who knows if someone else is happy or not? And *we* were raised to be believers. We just didn't keep believing." She sucks her lips in. "Bertie takes a lot of Zoloft. And look at Mom. Well, we function anyway. We aren't a dysfunctional family, are we?"

"No." He strokes her hand, fingers. "Your finger tips are cracking. Are you glad we came?"

"I'll tell you when we find Olivia. We *will* find her, won't we?"

"How far could she go?"

"Farther than she thought before this trip. I talked her into hiking up Havasu yesterday. She wanted to stay with us while the rest of them went. I knew *we* couldn't do it again, but I told her *she* could." She digs her feet into the sand. "I told her how gorgeous Beaver Falls are. You hiked all the way to Mooney back then. None of them made it to Mooney yesterday."

"Chip could've," Rob says, "if he didn't have to worry about everyone else. Maybe Olivia's scared of Lava tomorrow."

"We're all scared of Lava," Elaine says. "We're supposed to be scared of Lava."

"You're not as scared as last time."

"No," she says. "Even after Chip told us today how he flipped the J-Rig in Cataract Canyon last summer. I didn't know about that."

"He probably didn't tell Ben and Bertie."

She laughs. "Didn't tell them about that man who got tossed out and who ended up miles downstream and his wife who became unhinged, who'd blame her, who told Chip this wouldn't have happened if he had a prayer every morning before they set out. You know," she says, "we have faith. Mindy has faith. We just have faith in different things than Ben and Chip and especially Mike."

"Yeah."

Vin is hallooing down the river. Way down. Allie and Mike must be with him. Chip told them to stay together.

Elaine opens her river book and sets her headlamp beam on the page. "Look," she says. "Thirty years ago, we camped here. It was the eleventh night, and we were going to be on Terrill's boat the next day. He got us so worked up about Lava!"

"Terrill," Rob snorts.

"Took us a lot longer on those oared rafts. It seems too easy on the J-Rig with a motor. Except when the motor kills, that's pretty unnerving."

"We don't have to bail. Water runs right off the deck. And that truck seat Chip has for us to sit on. This is the luxurious life."

"I don't know," she says. "My hips hurt all the time."

There is the strident sound of a whistle coming from up the side canyon. Chip has given Vin a whistle too. One blast means they've found Olivia and to return to camp. Two means "come."

Rob lets out a breath. "Now let's hope she's okay."

"She's okay," Elaine says, "physically."

Vin and Allie and Mike get back to the campsite first.

"I'm so glad." Allie sinks into a canvas chair next to Elaine and switches off her headlamp. "What could she be thinking?"

"She's not thinking," Mike says.

"We've got to make her feel comfortable," Allie says. "Tell her we love her and everything. Don't tell her how she got us all worried sick."

"How she almost ruined our trip," Mike says.

"We don't know what happened," says Rob. "Let's make like she was just walking around, maybe on the way to the groover, and she couldn't find her way back."

"Right," Vin says.

Chip and the spotlight lead the way. Behind him, fierce little headlamps shining, the two others. Tom's arm is around Olivia. She is sobbing. Rob reaches them first. "It's so easy to get lost." He touches Olivia's shoulder. "We're just happy they found you." She stops crying for just an instant and looks at him, then buries her head in Tom's chest.

“We all need a good night’s sleep,” Chip says. “We’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

Morning 7, Lava Falls

“Vulcan’s Anvil,” says Chip from the back of the J-Rig. He motions toward the black mound of lava in the river as they pass it. “Vulcan, the Roman god of fire.”

“Live long and prosper,” says Rob, doing the Vulcan salute.

“They’re all too young to know *Star Trek*,” says Elaine, but Mike laughs.

“Mr. Spock,” he says. “I remember.”

Mike is in his regular spot, atop the left pontoon. Tom, who usually rides the right pontoon, is sitting on the deck, his arm around Olivia’s waist. She is wearing dark glasses and looks at no one.

“Reruns,” Rob whispers to Elaine. “Remember, Mindy could do the Vulcan salute.”

Chip pulls the J-Rig onto the rocks. “Mike and I’ll scout Lava,” he says, “so we can decide how to run her. You all sit tight.” Mike ties up the boat, and the two of them trot down the rocky trail.

“So what are our chances of flipping?” Allie asks Tom.

“Minuscule. This is a *big* boat. And Chip knows what he’s doing.” He glances down at Olivia, but she doesn’t acknowledge his attention.

“He did flip in Cataract,” Allie reminds him, “on the upper Colorado. Were you with him then?”

“Naw,” Tom says. “He had a group from his church. But that was Big Drops. They’re more serious rapids than Lava.”

“I didn’t think anything was more serious than Lava,” Allie says. “Chip even said a prayer this morning.”

That was after everyone had finished their cold cereal and oranges. It had been a simple prayer for protection and guidance, and Chip hadn’t mentioned Lava by name. The people who didn’t say prayers were look-

ing around at those who had their heads bowed—Mike, Tom, Olivia. “When I’m in a tight spot,” Chip had said afterward, “I say, ‘Lord, if you get me out of this one, I’ll never get back on the river again.’ And the Lord always gets me out of trouble. And I always get back on the river.”

It seems to take a very long time before Chip and Mike return. Vin has found a sack of cashews and has passed them around. He offers them to Chip when he bounds back onto the J-Rig.

“It’s doable,” Chip says. Mike unties the rope, pushes the J-Rig away from the rocks and jumps to his pontoon.

“Now, I don’t want anyone on the pontoons,” Chip says. “I want you all on the deck, hanging onto the straps. Allie, you get onto the truck seat, and you too, Olivia, next to Elaine and Rob. Mike, Tom, Vin, here, in front of them.” He has Olivia and Allie trade places, so Olivia and Elaine are in the middle, the safest spots. He winds an extra line on the deck for them to grab.

“What if you’re bounced off the boat?” Allie asks.

“Then Tom or Mike will take over till I’m fished out,” Chip says. “Everyone ready?”

He settles his cap back onto his head and starts up the motor. Elaine clenches the rope across her lap. With white knuckles Rob clutches the rope too.

“Wahoo!” shouts Chip.

“Wahoo!” shouts Mike.

“Yeah!” shouts Vin.

“Go for it!” says Rob, not as loudly.

They are, for a moment, submerged in an enormous wave, then thrust above it, then slammed under water again. Elaine remembers to keep her eyes open. They burst through and are suddenly in calm water. All that anticipation and what did it take? Half a minute?

“Man!” Chip roars. “What a great run!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah!” howls Mike.

They all laugh. Elaine squeezes Olivia’s hand. She is laughing too.

Day 8, Separation Canyon

They've pulled into Separation Canyon for lunch. On the deck-table, Elaine and Rob have spread out the bread, mustard, cheese, lunchmeat, lettuce, oranges, Oreos; sliced the tomatoes, pickles. Mike builds an enormous sandwich with everything but oranges. The others laugh when he places two Oreos between his cheese and lunchmeat.

"How you gonna get your mouth around that?" Tom asks. Mike answers him by taking an enormous bite. Only one pickle slice falls into the sand. He picks it up and considers eating it, then drops it into the trash sack. Everything they carry in has to be carried out.

"Are you wearing sunscreen?" Olivia pokes Mike's shoulder tentatively. "You're as red as the rock."

"He's wearing tanning solution," Tom says.

"That stuff doesn't keep you from burning," says Rob.

"Hell," says Mike. "My only souvenir—a tan, a burn. They won't let us take anything else out of the canyon."

"You got to eat the trout you caught," Allie says. She's a little sore that he didn't share.

"Yeah, I guess that's leaving the canyon in some form," says Mike. The groover bags are all stored somewhere beneath the deck.

Allie makes a face, raises her eyebrows at Elaine.

"After we eat, we hike up to the plaque," says Chip. He's told them about the men who separated from Powell's first expedition. "We'll get a group picture." He turns to Elaine. "You've never seen it."

She shakes her head. "This is new territory for us. We took out at Diamond Creek, ten, fifteen miles back. A little Indian bus took us back up to the top of the canyon."

"What I want to know," interrupts Vin, "is why those guys left Powell *here*."

"Yeah," says Allie. "I don't see any white water."

"No," Chip says. "Hoover Dam didn't go in until 1935. This here is really part of Lake Mead now. I guess Separation was the mother of all

rapids before that. The guys who left Powell were sure the guys on the boat were going to die. And the guys on the boat were sure the guys who left them were going to die. Guys on the boat were right.”

“Lotta guys on boats did die,” says Allie. She has been reading a book Chip keeps in a locker—stories of those who met their end on the Colorado. She is especially impressed with the story of the honeymooners who drowned in 1928.

Elaine struggles, pole, step up, pole, step up, trying to follow Allie, who seems to be skipping up the side of the hill. Suddenly, she stops and turns around. “Hey, Elaine,” she says. “I’ll wait for you.” The others, even Rob, are ahead. Elaine pants and grunts and hopes the sounds are taken as signs of appreciation.

Chip sets a camera on a rock. “Gather up,” he says, and herds them against the wall next to the plaque. He pushes the button, then scurries back to the group. Mike and Rob make Vulcan salutes. “Grin,” Chip says, “whether you feel like it or not.” They all grin. Elaine feels like it.

“The irony,” Chip says, “is that Powell’s boat ran Separation with no trouble at all. The three guys got to the top of the canyon, but no further. Probably killed by Indians.”

“Maybe they were translated,” Rob says.

“Probably not to heaven,” says Chip. “Maybe to hell. Isn’t that what happens to quitters?”

Last night was hell. First that business with Olivia. When they settled onto their cots, for the first time all week, Elaine had gone to sleep immediately. Then she heard Rob’s voice. “We’ve got to set up the tent, Elaine. It’s starting to storm.”

Chip appeared with the spotlight to help them. They could hear the others too, cussing. Theirs was such an old tent, smaller than those of the others—the tent that they had taken, new, down the Colorado decades before, the tent they hadn’t used for years although they had set it up on the back patio to make sure it still worked, that they could still work it. They had to leave the cots outside, grabbing their pads and

sleeping bags and their daypacks and pushing everything else in. Inside they lay side by side, close together for the first time this trip, listening to the rain beating on the tent, the wind blowing.

“I’m not having much fun,” Elaine had said.

Now, as they start back down the hill from the plaque, Elaine slips. Mike gets to her first, stands her up. “You okay?” Rob is in front of her, holding the tip of her pole. “Elaine?” he asks.

Her tailbone feels shattered, but she can stand. She closes her eyes for a second, then does what she always does. “I’m fine,” she lies. “Let’s go.” She moves one foot ahead of the other, leaning heavily on her poles.

My tailbone’s jammed into my hip bone, she sings to herself. My hip bone’s jammed into my thigh bone. What comes next? Oh hear the word of the Lord. Oh yes.

Day 9, Lake Mead

The channel widens again, and here they are in the lake, about three hundred river miles, Chip says, from their starting point. The canyon has flattened out—it is the desert of Elaine’s past, not a *grand* canyon, though the mountains in the distance look purplish and pretty. They camped near Pierce Ferry last night—their last night on the sand, and no, she certainly isn’t sorry about that, though Rob is whimpering about it all ending. One spot they just passed, Chip told them, is called God’s Pocket.

Elaine likes that name. God’s Pocket. This lake is the lake of her childhood, and in those days she felt tucked safely in God’s Pocket.

Her family didn’t used to come to this part of the lake—they went to the other side on the flat beaches near the road to Boulder City. Here the sand slopes onto the beach, and families have set up watered plastic chutes that children slide down. Elaine looks at them through the right side of her binoculars. When she was a child, they didn’t take toys to the lake. There were anchored rafts, and you could swim to one, haul

yourself up and sun a while, then get back in the cold water and swim to the next. Ben and Steve learned to swim before she did even though they were younger. They weren't afraid of the water and the muddy bottom of the lake the way she was. There were picnic tables, where families would bring potato salad and cold chicken and watermelon and cookies. Once she crawled underneath one of the picnic tables in a game of hide-and-seek, and she was bitten all over by a hill of red ants. She cried all the way home, and her mother ran a tub of tepid water and dumped in a box of baking soda for her sit in.

Mom. As hard as it has been for her and Rob to keep up, their load has been lighter because Ben and Bertie have been dealing with Mom.

And all the other things she hasn't given a thought to. No phones, no radio, no TV, no computers, no papers, none of those horrific articles that she herself could have written a couple of years ago. And the day-to-day sad images of life in L.A.—the homeless encampments under the freeway onramps, the men sifting through the recycling bins to fill shopping carts with aluminum cans, but mostly the scenes from the nursing home. The woman across the hall from Mom, the one who shrieks for hours on end.

How quiet it is here now that the river isn't surging through its prison walls. Chip has set up a canopy on the deck so they don't broil as they lunch on what's left in the cooler—some cheese, some crackers, some apples and oranges, a lot of Oreos, and cans of Mountain Dew, which, as Rob points out to Chip, has plenty of caffeine and an unconscionable amount of sugar. Chip shrugs.

"Bath time!" shouts Mike, who has stripped off his life jacket. He holds up a plastic bottle and leaps into the lake. Vin and Allie shed their water sandals and life jackets and jump in next. Tom whispers something to Olivia, and in a minute they are bobbing up and down in the water too, Olivia giggling while Tom pours shampoo onto her head. Before Elaine can look over to Rob, she sees him descending the rope ladder that Chip has unwound.

“Go on, Aunt Elaine,” says Chip. “I have to stay with the boat.”

“I could stay with you,” she says.

“Naw. Go on. You want to.”

He’s right—she does want to. It’s the one thing she can do. She unzips the bottoms of her zip-off pants, undoes the lifejacket and sandals, and slides smoothly into the water. It feels glorious, warmer than the pool she uses at home, and, wonder of wonders, she doesn’t hurt anywhere; she can move everything. She breaststrokes, keeping her head above the water so she can see the others splashing, sudsing, tossing the shampoo bottle, squealing.

Rob paddles over to her, tugs on her shirt, smiles. She smiles back.

This afternoon, they will take the J-Rig out of the water at South Cove. Tomorrow they’ll be back in the world of worry, but she pushes that out of her mind right now. Tomorrow worry. Today squint into the blue, blue sky and be buoyed up by the water, water that has rushed through the most sublime of all the ancient canyons, the grandest canyon of all.

END