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Tawnysha Greene
Trusting the Gap

"You nervous?" asked Tuck as he checked the spray skirt on my kayak.

I could hear the roar of the Coosa River from the riverbank.

"No," I lied.

He snickered and gave my kayak a pat as he pushed it down the muddy slope into the water. The liquid felt cold against my face and arms as it splashed up when the bow hit the water. Quickly checking my helmet and life vest, I paddled into the calm stretch of water where several other classmates waited.

This was the second day of a speedy three day college kayaking class and we already knew how to steer, wet exit, perform Eskimo rescues and roll. The roll, a safety maneuver that determined whether one passed or failed the class, was the most difficult. It was dangerous and a guy in the last class had dislocated his arm trying to do it. I could roll in the calm areas we practiced in, but when I experienced difficulty steering because I was too light for my kayak, the instructor told me to put water in it to weigh it down. However, this made the roll next to impossible to perform with all the extra water collecting at areas which made the kayak roll back over on itself, trapping me underwater each time.

Kyle, our group instructor, paddled up and, fastening the first aid kit behind his seat, nodded for us to follow him. His strokes were strong, propelling his kayak almost without effort. There was no sound as his paddle cut through the water, each motion practiced and natural. The other six of us trailed behind, taking heed to avoid fallen trees and protruding rocks which would easily flip our kayaks over.

I looked warily at Steven, a scrawny freshman with dark hair who hunched in his kayak, occasionally making splashing noises with his paddle so that Kyle could hear that he was attempting to follow. He wore a long sleeved white shirt which stood out from the rest of our group who wore undershirts or swimsuit tops underneath the life vests. He was the one who tipped over the most, but instead of flipping back over, he let go of his paddle and rested under the water until someone came to pull him back up. That or he pulled off his spray skirt, releasing himself from the kayak but also filling it with water so that he and the instructor had to drain it out before any of us could continue down the river. Kyle rolled his eyes each time Steven flipped over and waited to be rescued which became more and more of a common occurrence. He frequently had to fetch Steven's paddle and ferry it back to him. Although I made an effort not to follow Steven's example, I once made the mistake of panicking on the first day when I tipped over and wet exited.

Kyle now looked at me sternly before we set off toward the river.

"I don't want to see you wet exit today."

His pointed finger at me emphasized his point.

I gulped as I nodded. I couldn't make mistakes this time. Today, we

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were going through Moccasin Gap, a place where errors meant deadly consequences.

The water by my kayak rippled and Brian, my boyfriend, came alongside me. He had already gone through this class as well as the advanced class so he already knew the roll and rescue maneuvers. It was comforting knowing that if I needed help while Kyle was helping Steven, that there was an extra set of eyes watching out for me.

We all approached an island of rocks and docked our kayaks on the land. Greg, the team leader, was standing at its highest point.

"Okay, now we're going to learn how to whitewater swim. Watch Tuck and see how he does it."

All eyes turned to Tuck as he jumped into the water which immediately snatched him in its powerful current. He raced alongside us, floating with his arms and legs outstretched. Narrowly missing the rocks on either side of him, he reached the bend where the rapids began. Turning over, he began to swim ferociously, kicking and grabbing the water with his arms, until he neared closer to the land where we were watching. Kyle was waiting for him with an outstretched hand and caught him. Heaving to pull him from the current, Kyle dragged Tuck from the water and they both sat on the rocks, breathing hard. Greg looked at me, smiling.

"Okay, your turn."

I walked to the edge of the rocks and prepared to jump.

"Oh, and you have to make it back in. If you miss it, you'll go a couple miles down river. We'll see you tomorrow 'cause the river is too strong for us to go in after you."

I stared at Tuck. He was a large and muscular man, someone much stronger than me yet he seemed to struggle with the swim and was still recovering after his brief stint in the water.

I looked at where I should start swimming, taking note of the jagged boulders which jutted out from the bottom of the riverbed—icebergs with slimy evils lurking below. I drew a deep breath and my heart quickened, pounding even before I hit the water.

I jumped.

The water grabbed me. No, it ripped me from where I landed, pulling me underwater. I put out my arms, making myself as flat as possible to avoid rocks and trees on the river bottom. My head surfaced. My breath caught.

I was already at the bend.

I flipped over and started the swim. I kicked hard, fighting the current, clawing the water in mighty strokes, but I wasn't moving. The river was fighting me, pushing me away from the rocks that would bring me rest. I was moving away. I put forth a new effort, straining as Greg's words echoed in my ears, "The river is too strong..."

I was drifting farther away. I couldn't feel my legs. I could tell they

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were still kicking, but they were numb, from cold and exhaustion. My breathing was hard now.

The river was winning.

I closed my eyes and squeezed out the last ounce of energy I had left. My hands hit something solid. Rope. I grabbed it. It held me against the current, tearing into my hands as I held on. I flipped over to my back, allowing the water to rush over my neck instead of on my face. Tuck and Kyle pulled in the rope and I was on land again. My body pulsed, beating in a strong rhythm.

Greg slapped me on the back, laughing.

"Thought we were going to lose you there for a minute."

I managed a half-hearted smile, shivering while trying to catch my breath.

The water rushed by my feet, twisting, turning, exploding over the rocks, while staring at me, knowing it won its battle with me. The waters were too strong. I had no power against it.

No one did. Each person after me had to be fetched with ropes and hauled back in. The river left her mark on all of us, leaving us all panting on the rocks, unable to fight back.

"And this is only a Class I rapid. Moccasin Gap is a Class III." Greg pointed downstream to the raging rapids in the distance.

I exchanged nervous glances with my classmates. As we each got settled in our kayaks once again, we all checked our helmets and tightened our life vests before setting back out into the water. The groups split up and once again, it was the six of us with Kyle in the lead.

The river was faster now. Colder. Louder.

And angrier.

It became difficult to steer and the kayaks shifted with the currents of the river. A pile of rocks rested in the middle, the water hugging it on either side. Kyle headed to the right. I followed. His strokes became quick as he paddled furiously to avoid the rocks in his path. His kayak tipped and he leaned hard to the right to counterbalance it. My eyes were fixed on him. If I kept him in my sight, I could fight my way through the gap. I couldn't hear my breathing or the splash of my strokes; the roar of the river was deafening. I paddled hard, digging the oar in the water in a struggling attempt to stay in control.

There was a flash of white at the corner of my eye as Steven's kayak flipped over. Almost without looking, Kyle turned around and paddled toward him. He passed behind me.

And I was alone.

The gap rushed at me.

Waves crashed from either side. The river hung on to my strokes, straining against me with each movement. I paddled blind. I couldn't see. I was thrown back by another wave. The kayak swiveled to its side and

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I swung my paddle around to straighten its course. But it was too late. I tipped and was underwater before I could take a breath.

Silence.

The world seemed to hush as the river and I battled alone, hidden from the eyes of anyone else. The roar of the rapids was muffled now. I felt the current fighting over my body.

The water was murky. I couldn't see.

I twisted my body, performing a hip snap as I pushed against the water's surface with my paddle and flipped over.

I felt the breeze against my skin as I surfaced and briefly glimpsed the bright sun over the foam of the waves. I brought my paddle up and started to stroke.

Another wave swallowed me.

Underwater again.

I snapped my hips again and clutched my paddle to bring it down on the water overhead.

But my hands were empty. I reached around for my paddle, but it was gone. I didn't know how to roll without one. I clutched the loop on my spray skirt, ready to wet exit, but Kyle's warning rang in my head. I hesitated and crouched forward.

"Crouch forward if you flip. The river bottom will take the top of your head right off," said Greg before we had left the riverbank today.

I put my hands on the bottom of my boat, a call for help. Kyle was probably helping Steven. He didn't see me turn over.

I was running out of breath.

I hit the bottom of the boat, hoping the sound would attract attention. I thought of Brian. He was behind me. He must have seen me turn over.

My chest was burning now, heaving in involuntary gasps of air which I denied with clenched teeth.

They are coming. They must be. Just a little longer.

I was getting dizzy. My face tightened and I reached for the loop on my spray skirt again. I pulled, but it wouldn't budge.

I was trapped. I had no air left.

I hit the bottom of my boat again and something collided into my kayak. I felt the thump of a paddle on the bottom and I reached for my rescuer. Finding him, I hoisted myself up, but my hand slipped and the side of my head crashed into the top of the boat. I was underwater again, dazed, the area behind my ear hot, the pain spreading across my head. I felt my kayak turn over and opened my eyes.

It was Brian. He was the one who had come after me.

I looked into the distance. The gap was far away now. Kyle was at the side of the river next to Steven. He looked at me and patted the top of his

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helmet, a sign that asked, "Are you ok?" I patted my helmet in return to affirm that I was, but winced with each tap.

The river became calm for a few miles after that and I happily slowed my strokes. I was tired and everything hurt. I was trailing the group and I soon began to question my sanity at signing up for such an intimidating course. It seemed like a good deal to get two hours of college credit for a weekend trip, but now as I thought of the waiver I signed that I understood that I could get injured or lose my life on this trip, I was second guessing my decision, especially after nearly drowning at Moccasin Gap.

That night as everyone set up their tents along the river, we set the kayaks out for the next day.

"Get a good night's sleep. We're doing the same route tomorrow," said Greg as he hauled his kayak on shore.

The same route, I thought as I lay in my tent that night. I would have to ride through the Moccasin Gap again.

I stared at the side of the tent, watching the shadows of the camp fires flickering. One of the guys who was still awake began to play his drum, a steady rhythm slowly increasing in tempo. The music played for hours and echoed in my dreams. It began to rain and the pattering overhead became the river, the drums its changing current. The tempo increased; the rain became harder. I could not rest, my body still feeling the rise and fall of the waves in the gap. Several times, I grabbed at the ground, trying to regain my balance, trying not to drown. And still the river coursed through my mind, a winding snake I could not escape. I swore I could feel its liquid scales against my skin.

I woke up, covered in cold sweat. I looked around my tent.

The fires were out. The drums had stopped. Everyone was asleep.

Except for the river.

I could hear the hiss of its waters just a short distance away.

The river waited for me.

I resolved that today, I would not be afraid. The river had control of me yesterday and I would not let it do the same today. I would adapt to it—become one with nature's beast.

I held on to my goal as I joined the class in piling in Greg's van to go to the drop-off point up the river. I ignored my tired muscles and pushed with all my strength to keep up with Kyle as we paddled down the river. I made myself smile and tried to ignore the fatigue and bruises I felt forming.

We approached the Moccasin Gap sooner than I expected and the river quickly became faster. I gripped my paddle and followed closely behind Kyle, maneuvering through the safest route possible. But still the waves crashed and I felt myself off balance. I paddled harder, leaning forward to steady my weight. I heard two boats flip behind me. One got back up. The other stayed down. Steven probably. Kyle turned his kayak around and paddled behind me.

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I was alone again.

Yesterday flooded back—flipping over, getting trapped underwater, and the battle I fought with the river—but I pushed it aside. The worst of the gap was coming now. Boulders jutted out of waters ahead, the current crashing on and around them.

“Whatever you do, don’t flip near those. You’ll get pinned and drown,” said Kyle the previous day.

I dug my paddle hard to the left and my kayak shifted, but started to tip. I leaned the other way just as a wave enveloped me. But the correction was too much. My kayak rolled and I was underwater again.

Those rocks, I kept thinking. I am right next to them.

I crouched forward to avoid hitting my head and heaved my hips to the side while swinging my paddle against the water overhead. I made it up. But there was no time to breathe. I was in the middle of the gap. I paddled hard toward the center to where the currents met. It was a pocket where I had watched the instructors paddle to and catch their breath. They still had to stroke but it was easier to keep the kayak upright as the waves came from only one direction. Reaching it, I swiveled the kayak around so that I was racing the waves head-on. It settled and I paddled hard to keep my place. Whistles sounded and I looked to my side where Tuck and his group rested in an eddy by the gap’s side. They were clapping and hollering as they watched me ride the waves. I smiled, genuinely for the first time on the river. I didn’t feel my muscles, I didn’t feel the cold, only the exhilaration of being able to conquer the river that had for so long had me in its grip.

The rest of the kayakers were approaching and I looked to the waves behind me. Getting into this pocket was easy compared to getting out of it. I turned the kayak around in one stroke and the river grabbed me. Digging into the water, I angled myself into the current while it took me racing past those in the eddy. I paddled hard to the side, pushing all the strength I had into these last few strokes. They were getting farther away and I gripped the paddle and strained against the river with my arms, my shoulders, and my back. It took everything I had to get back to them and I docked behind the rocks where the water was calm and just breathed for a few minutes.

The breeze from the Moccasin Gap blew across my kayak and I watched the beads of the river’s water travel with it. My boat bobbed up and down from the gap’s waves. I synchronized my breaths to follow its pattern. It was calming. Breathing with the water, becoming a part of it. I felt my muscles relax. The tension and fear I fed off of the last few days dissipated. The gap was behind me.

My group, rested, began paddle the last stretch of the river and I followed. These last waters were calm and didn’t contain the fury of the gap. The current was placid underneath my kayak and I let my paddle rest over my lap for a moment. My hands were sore and blistered, but no longer shook with anticipation. They were steady and knew the river’s waters now. The river had given me its strength. And I found a trust. In the gap when I was alone.

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Alone with the river.

Alone with me.

I found something in that gap, the Moccasin Gap and the gap between who I was yesterday and who I was today. I found something that I had been carrying with me my entire life, but never knew until now.

I found a trust in myself.

In the middle of the waves, there was no time to think, no time to plan. I had to rely on instinct, the core of who I really was. Only when I let go and trusted myself was I no longer afraid.

As I docked the kayak and emptied it of water, I lifted it with one hand and carried it over my shoulder. I thought of just two days ago when I struggled with the weight of it and how to carry something twice my size. It balanced on my body as I made my way up the riverbank. But it was no longer heavy.