

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

Frank Scozzari  
**Last Man Standing**

The icy water had been rising steadily for the past hour and was now above the upper deck of the bulldozer, and despite her every effort, Ingrid was nearly completely submerged in it, stretching now with each new surge just to keep her mouth above the waterline. Throughout the night she had been the brave one; the one who had chanted words of encouragement to the others and who had given hope when there was no hope left to be given. She had watched as the others had been swept away by the river, enduring their hapless cries, until there was only two remaining.

Now her time had come.

Her fingers, cold and numb, and weak from clinging to the cold metal for more than three hours, were finally giving in. The strength in them was utterly gone.

"I can't hold on," she yelled.

"You must hold on!" Benjamin shouted back.

"I can't!"

Benjamin firmed a one-hand grip on the ladder bar and reached out with his free hand, grabbing a tight hold of her collar. He looked into her desperate eyes. The water rushed by above her chin.

"Hold on!" he cried.

But Ingrid could not. She let out an involuntary *yelp*, her hand opened, and although Benjamin's grasp tightened, the strength of the current quickly broke her free. He watched as she was whisked away downriver into the darkness of the night.

Now Ingrid was rushing in a torrent downstream, helplessly thrashing her arms in the white, churning water, to no avail. In an instant she was swirling beneath the water, the vastness of it pressing in upon her with overwhelming force. She could not tell which way was up and which way was down. Nor did it matter. It was the river's choice which direction she would go. Then she was at the surface again, gasping for air. She came against a boulder, which hurled her in another direction. Before she could pull herself back upright, she was under the water again, completely submerged in it. Her helpless arms could no longer paddle against the wakes. Her body was too exhausted and numb to fight it.

*If only it came easy*, she thought.

Like a stone dropping through a hay chute.

Like a river finding its ocean.

*I must let the river take me*, she told herself.

Yet the life in her made her fight. As natural as it is to breathe in air, it was unnatural to inhale water, and despite her absence of will, the breath that brought her life was not something her body would give up easily.

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Momentarily breaching the surface, she felt the cold night air rush past her face and she breathed it in hungrily. Then she was under it again, twirling uncontrollably.

*You can't fight a river, she told herself. You cannot fight something bigger and stronger than you.*

And with this revelation, she let go, in the same manner as one would exhale their last breath, and her body went limp, and she let the river take her in the way it saw fit. She found herself flat on her back, face up, feet first, rushing down in the current with her arms trailing back.

Above was the night. The rain had stopped. And rushing past was the tall, dark forest and the upper ridge of the river gorge, beyond which was dark sky. She saw the stars sweeping past, and then a peak of a bright light flashing by, and she saw in her mind a place that she loved on the shore of a river which she had visited many times and wished to return. She saw a sun blazing brightly in a blue sky; a fire on a camp stove; a meteor streaking through the night. All her life's pleasures and all the good things she had found in her short journey of twenty-two years, now revived in her and came rushing back.

She curved down the canyon, her body flowing like a piece of rubber, oscillating over the wakes and swells through the path of least resistance. Though she came against boulders and was hit by branches and debris, they were vague collisions now, seemingly occurring outside her body, like distant planets colliding in outer space. The frigid water was like a morphine, making her body comfortably numb. And she was no longer afraid. Her sense of panic was gone. Within she found a calmness as she rode the cascades, carefree and indestructible, down through the deepest portion of the gorge; sliding between huge boulders of granite, cascading over waterfalls, until a final vertical plunge washed her out into a wide portion of the river.

She reached with her feet but the river was still too deep to find bottom. She could see that the steep walls of the gorge had given way to gentle slopes of a mountain forest, and there were sand embankments on either side. The stars were bright overhead, but the light was gone.

She hit something that pulled her like a giant hand, but it broke loose. She hit something again, the branch of a fallen tree, which snatched her from the river like a ladle. She looped beneath it, popping up on the opposite side, and found herself completely upside down with her arms and legs wrapped around it. She saw the shore, not far away, and she pulled her way toward it. The water was still rushing against her, but as she rose higher the strength of it lessened. Struggling, pulling, and struggling again, she eventually reached shallow water beneath her and she dropped herself into it.

She laid there on the bank of the river, partially submerged in water, her back resting against the sand, gazing up into the dark foliage of a grand old sycamore tree. She could feel herself breathing heavily. Her whole body felt numb, and it was probably a good thing, she thought. But through the numbness she began feeling the cold, and within minutes she could not stop her body from shivering.

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*Must not let the fire go out, she thought. Must find shelter.*

She crawled from the water, up the short distance to the top of the embankment, and tumbled down the other side into a ditch filled with sycamore leaves and mulch. She closed her eyes and let the blackness surround her, but it was not long before her whole body began trembling again. In a sweeping motion, she reached with her arms and pulled the sycamore leaves in close and around her. She raked them into a pile which rose along her sides, and when there were no more leaves, she dug with her nails into the soft earth and pulled up mud and debris which she packed on top of the leaves until she was completely covered in it.

Again her mind began to fade. And for a moment she found herself back in the river, clinging to the bulldozer; surrounded by the nine frightful faces. They had climbed on to the Cat D8 bulldozer in hopes of crossing the river and reaching the Maricopa Highway. With the storm worsening, the group leaders had decided it was best to leave the camp and make way for their cars. Once they reached the highway, they thought, all would be well. No one knew that the diesel engine would stall halfway across the river. No one could have foreseen rainfall that would not stop, and a river that would keep rising.

For several hours they clung to the steel, molded body of the bulldozer, which offered little in terms of places to grip. Everyone had to search beneath the frigid water with numb fingers to find an edge. There were children among them, and they put the four twelve-year-olds on the upper deck; the two youngest ones were placed in the driver's seat where there were levers they could cling to. But the water continued to rise, and with it came swift-moving branches and debris, and slowly, despite everyone's best effort to hold them, they began to drop off. It became a matter of self-survival. Eventual the water level became too high, and too cold, and too swift, and even the strongest among them could no longer hold on. One by one they disappear into the darkness.

And now Ingrid could hear their cries again.

When the light of day is gone, she thought, the darkness of night takes away all hope. And there is no such darkness as the darkness that comes just before the light except for the darkness when there is no more light. *And it can get so dark, she thought, that the light of your soul is taken eternally.* And she recalled a time when she was a child, alone and lost in a forest at night. The blackness was so complete, she could not see to put one foot in front of the other, and she felt this fear again, and her body began trembling again.

In a mindless panic, she pulled more leaves and mud around her. She tried to wallow deeper into the earth. The pile rose high, weighing upon her chest, until it seemed to be a mound of earth with only her face exposed.

Finally she ceased. It is no use, she thought. She could feel the cold still piercing deeply into her bones. *I will freeze to death. It is my fate.* In her quest to live life, to swallow up as much as she could as quickly as she could, she would loose it. Nature gives, but also takes.

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Then she remembered the moment in the river when she acquiesced. You cannot stand against a rising tide, she thought. *You must flow with it.*

And in that instant, she let the life in her release, and all that she had known and all that she had been was surrendered unequivocally. And she immediately felt a peaceful calm come over her. She was no longer lost, alone in the forest. She was warm again, and she saw the light once more, momentarily flashing across the sky, and every ounce of fear that had been in her body, was there and then abolished. She closed her eyes and slept.

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The morning sunlight came crashing through the leaves of the grand sycamore tree, awaking Ingrid with its brightness. She could feel the weight of the mud upon her, heavy on her chest. And she could hear the sound of footsteps crunching through foliage, distantly at first, but coming closer until they were upon her. And when she looked up, there were three men standing over her, with white helmets and bright yellow parkas and rescue gear strapped to their waists and on to their backs. Large, black letters; *S A R*, were written across the crest of their helmets.

Kneeling over her was a friendly face; that of a man in his mid-thirties with a brown beard and blue eyes.

"How are you feeling," he asked.

She nodded her head.

"Do you have any pain?"

Ingrid shook her head.

"We're here to help you. You just need to relax."

Ingrid nodded again.

The man briefly examined her, shining a penlight in her eyes and taking her vitals.

"What's your name?" he asked, as he continued his examination.

"Ingrid."

"Okay Ingrid, everything is going to be okay."

Ingrid acknowledged with a nod.

Pulling away the mud, the man ran his hands down her legs checking for broken bones. Then he checked her ribs and put pressure on her abdomen.

"Do you feel that?"

"Yes."

"Does it hurt?"

"No."

The man looked into her eyes again and said, "We are going to lift you now."

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She was pulled from the mud and wrapped in a thermal blanket. She could feel straps being pulled snugly across her body. Each of the men had a radio, strapped to their utility belts, and she could hear one of them crackling now.

"It is Ingrid," one of the other men said into his radio. He looked down at a list of names scribbled on the notepad. "Ingrid Simpson."

The radio spoke again, cracking out an inaudible human voice, to which the man replied; "No, she's the only one."

The radio spoke once more.

"That's a Ten-Four. We came all the way up along the south side of the river, from below the Sespe Gorge."

The man paused for the radio to speak again.

"That's right. All the way up from Tar Creek. There was no one else. There were no other signs of life."

Ingrid felt the sensation of being lifted, and she was carried, over uneven terrain. She lay comfortably flat on the gurney as the men cut through marsh-like underbrush and up a second embankment. She could hear them speaking to one another, and into the radio, though their voices were muddled and distant. She could hear birds chirping and the river below, flowing eternally, though it was all very dream-like. Above was blue sky, and white clouds, through which broke rays of sunlight.

She took a deep breath, feeling the cold air go down deep into her lungs, appreciating it now more than ever before.

They followed along a trail that led up and out of the canyon, to where an all-terrain vehicle waited. When they neared the rim, the sunlight broke completely through, casting sheets of yellow and gold across the distant mountains. They were beautiful rays of yellow and gold, Ingrid thought, full of light and life. And she could feel the warmth of them, and the freshness of the air, which she breathed in greedily, and she smiled.