

The Colorado

by Walt Sutton

“The journey towards self-knowledge is a long and tough one. It needs a jolt to start it, the sort of jolt that comes from a brush with death, divorce or redundancy”

--Charles Handy

We gather in the dark, well before sunrise. As if by some genetic telegram, we form a single line of march, moving down a zigzag cliff-clinging trail called Bright Angel, in honor of a geological fault of the same name. We are beginning a descent into the Grand Canyon.

We could be cave dwellers on the move. It looks and feels eerie, especially in the half-gray light of pre-dawn. Someone ahead titters at a sign which warns about taking lots of water and the need to be prepared for a physically demanding and strenuous experience.

The optimistic part of me is excited. But the single file of human shadows marching against a gray curtain of rock makes me edgy. The space between first light and sunrise is colorless, even in this wildly colorful place.

A crow caws at no one in particular, making me jump. I shake my head at myself as the bird's cry echoes away from me. I am a city boy, and I have a premonition that this whole exercise is way over my head. As if in reply, rocks clatter, falling, and crashing nearby. Nature is stupendously beautiful in this place but nature is also unpredictable and unforgiving. I think about people who made this a trail before there was anything named a geological fault and how dangerous their lives must have been. The price of carelessness in this place is an abrupt death.

The trail is over three feet wide much of the way but in that first two miles it is edged by a shear drop-off to a place called Indian Gardens, two thousand feet below, about half way between the rim and the river. And it is the river we're aiming for. We're making for the Colorado. Lake Meade is nine days away, downstream.

We've been told the trail is seven-and-a-half miles long, all downhill. We will descend almost five thousand feet before it's over and I hope we get some light soon because the farther we go down this trail, the darker it gets.

Three hours later, the sun is up and the warning about “plenty of water” is making sense. We are on a high shear cliff face, in an area called the Devil's Cork Screw, well down and in the canyon. Looking up and across the miles to the other side, or up at what can be seen of the rim above, the clear air plays a trick, because the scene is just too big, too grand. It must be a diorama. I give in to the urge to reach out with my hand to smudge the impossible picture in front of me. Reaching touches nothing but air and the length of my arm is short by miles.



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Mountain trekkers know the experience of climbing ever upward along a trail, looking at each horizon as the hoped-for summit. Then, approaching the high point, another horizon appears. Descending in to the canyon is the same experience in reverse. Several times, I was sure we were at the bottom, only to see the trail fall away again, five or six hundred feet down and still no river.

Then, rounding a nondescript corner in an unidentifiable part of the trail, the river surprisingly appears below. My ankles ache from rolling along over the uneven rocky ground, I am soaked with sweat, my hand is scraped raw on the fleshy part below the palm, the result of a fall, and I am a little numb with walking.

It's another visual trick though, because the water looks to be just a few feet away. There is nothing to give my addled senses the necessary perspective to communicate that I will walk for another fifteen minutes and descend several hundred vertical feet before we will actually reach the river's bank. Even in the confusion of measurements, the blue-green flow, broken with shards of sunlight coursing over iridescent rocks is a balm for all of the anxiety that has been circling around me since we started out.

We stop. My wife Deborah and I high-five around with the rest of the party, and we wet ourselves – the water is 43 degrees, so we don't get so carried away as to actually jump in, but splashing and head dunking do wonders for furnace-hot body temperature. We then head upstream, walking along the trail which humps up the canyon wall a hundred feet or so to a suspension bridge which takes us across the river. It's a steel cable bridge, but there's enough swing to keep your interest and the floor of the bridge is wire mesh so I can see right between my feet down to the flashing splashing water eighty feet below. I call out to my wife to take care.

About an hour later we are gathered on the riverbank for a safety lecture, as our guide Mat puts it.

“Before you even have a chance to set foot in one of these rafts I've got to do this, for your sake and the sake of those around you. If this makes you feel like you just buckled into an airplane, well I'm sorry about that.”

Black-bearded twenty-something Mat, with his boatman's hat pushed back, is relentlessly thin. His arms are stripped with different versions of the “farmer's tan” caused by shirts worn with varying sleeve lengths.

He has been on the river for a month so far this season, and the sun hasn't yet evened out his coloring. Hiking shorts reveal the same stripping on his legs. He stands on the river bank, knees bowed, body strangely balanced over parenthetical legs, hips detached so as to give him an articulated motion as he paces and speaks to us about the rafts, the river, wet bags, seating, life preservers, fun, portable toilets, teamwork and danger.

“Most of you have never seen anything like this river, it ain't no Disneyland, getting down the river takes a lot more vigilance than keeping your hands inside the ride.”



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I look up at the desperately blue sky above the mile-high walls in front of and behind me. The water is colder than I thought it could be (it made the ankles ache) the sun is hotter than I could have imagined, even with what we would come to call the “hair dryer wind.” According to Mat, we need to prepare for a litany of real life dangers. Alertness and caution, unusual caution, are the most useful attributes for all river runners. We are then regaled with descriptions of real poisonous snakes, lizards, scorpions, centipedes, and diseased rodents. From venom to sunburn to drowning, we are treated to it all. By the time Mat bids us enter the rafts we are obediently under his spell. This is clearly his trip, and we are guests who have a lot to learn about life on the river.

Within two hours of being on the river, we hit two of the bigger sections of white water right off, Crystal Rapids and Hermit. Our rafts are tumbling and crashing through waves of white water well overhead as we bounce dangerously, legs flying about the raft, all shouts and screams in the roar of an angry maelstrom. There are less rough sections connected by long stretches of drifting, turning in bright blue rafts, four guests and a guide in each - drifting, turning like a kaleidoscope, the scenery breaking up and reforming with light.

That first night in camp upon a sandy bank we have eaten, drunk our ration of two beers, and are trying to make some sense out of the day and where we are. Starting with the predawn meeting at the trailhead, hiking down, finding the river, being baptized by the rapids, completely cut off from anything outside of the canyon.

In the middle of this discussion, one of the other rafters asks me what I did for a living and for a moment, I cannot remember. I look dumbly at him until I finally am able to say that I own a computer services business. It takes me so long to get it out that it sounds contrived or made up, either an exaggeration or perhaps a bold-faced lie.

“You own the company then,” he presses.

“Yes, really, I own it, I’ve got, let me see 120 employees, yea I own it,” I reply, my wife nodding supportively at my side.

“Oh, sure” he says, not believing a word.

I suddenly realize how far from the box I have ventured. This is a place where all that I have worked to achieve all of my medals, all the club memberships and economic accolades mean nothing. We are on the river, my inquisitor was a schoolteacher, and he is certain I am a loud, arrogant wage slave pretending to be a business owner.

I feel uncomfortable around him for the rest of the trip. He just has to look my way and I feel a snowball right in the solar plexus. I want to have my business license, no my checking account balance, parachuted into the canyon so I could prove my worth.

We are only 24 on the river, a small group. We gather and socialize many times a day. While my stories of people in the business, or experiences in the world of computer services may have been interesting before, they fall flat at this teacher’s feet. I quickly



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reach the point of carefully editing out all talk about my employees, or current business experiences. When that is done there seems little for me to talk about.

But the river has washed most of the anxiety away. Days drifting, hiking, evenings camping, eating, singing, and sleeping the sleep of the dead take all of us out of the box and settles each rafter in a sort of reverie, patterned by big-time universal forces like the sun, wind and stars. We awake when the sun comes up and sleep after doing an inventory of the heavens and we eat three times in between. As we drift along our course, the rafters and guides stand out in higher relief, gaining greater contrast and complexity each day.

Sarah is the swamper. She rows a raft which holds much of the food and a large share of the equipment necessary for our expedition - including the portable toilet paraphernalia which emphasizes the maxim that we pack out everything we bring in, no matter what its form. She is also a schoolteacher living near Moab, Utah, which is to say in the middle of nowhere. She teaches Biology and General Science during the school year and spends her summers in the outdoors. This is her first year guiding on the river and so being a newbie, she has started as the swamper. The swamper's raft is the same size as the others and the rower is generally more of a steerer than a rower as the river current does the job of locomotion.

Sarah is strong and trim, with brown hair to her shoulders, and sad round hazel eyes. Like other guides, she socializes carefully. Most of her conversation is additive. I watch her outside of the main cluster as she listens to a story, watching the teller carefully, nodding understanding, shaking her head almost imperceptibly in disagreement. For most of the trip she is never the story teller or anywhere near the center of attention.

Were you to ask most Colorado rafters for the most exciting experience on the trip they would most likely to tell you about Lava Falls. After many days of travel there appears a great shunt, where all of the water on the river falls twenty-seven feet along a two-hundred-foot section, rushing over a great hole in the center of the course-way. This adds up to a roaring rush of falling water and a standing wave easily twenty feet high right in the center of your intended passage. There are several tricks to getting over this maelstrom. The first is to stay out of the giant hole of water in front of the monster wave. The second is to stay in the raft because no matter where you go through this bit of chaos, you will be thrown often and unpredictably.

“Hold on, no I mean hold on tight,” says Mat.

By the time we reached Lava Falls it is day four on the river. We are used to cheerful, fearless, funny guide behavior. Other than Sarah, who has grown quieter as we move down river, the “guys” are generally irrepressible, gaining in volume and vulgarity as the trip progresses.

But Lava Falls day starts like a storm cloud. Oh sure, Mat smiles, but his lips are tight and he breaks off eye contact quickly. Breakfast is a remarkably quiet affair and packing up the rafts is downright serious.



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“Tighten that rope and be sure to check all of the netting, tie downs and ore locks, and tell me when you are done so I can double check after you.”

Surprisingly the others do not complain at his mothering or his dark tone. Out on the river we are under a silent spell, broken only by the occasional “how long before we get there?” The answer is that we will be there around ten or so. That is the last thing said in our group, until about ten or so.

You can hear the roar of Lava Falls long before you can see anything. Taken minute by minute, much of the river passage passes in a special blessed silence. By Lava Falls day you are used to it, acclimated to quiet, reacting to each bird trill or hoof fall from somewhere above. Silence, real silence is the base point of perception and any interrupting vibration is clearly received and interpreted, purely rendered against the background of real quiet.

As one approaches from way, way up river, far from Lava Falls, the silence begins to fall away to a roar, like the sound of a deep-throated Buddhist chant pumped through a jet engine, far off. At first it just tickles away the quiet, then grows in volume in exact proportions to your movement on down the river. We look at each other unsmiling for the morning’s tone has taken effect. The roar builds past a point, a threshold of disbelief, and we all suddenly understand. Well before seeing a single splash, that sound is way too loud, almost crushing as we drift. As it grows, I am having some trouble breathing. I can feel my hands tighten around the ropes and I am looking for a place to plant my feet for the best purchase during the run.

“No need to synch up yet,” yells Mat. “We’re gonna pull over to the side and go take a look at the water before we all go through.”

“Oh,” I smile, and let out a big breath.

We tie up and walk about a half-mile towards the mist that occluded our view of the passage down river. By the time we stand abreast of Lava Falls, only shouted words can be heard. Just as advertised, there was the great hole of water right in the center of the shunt. On the other side of the giant standing wave were wildly roiling patches and further down, in the middle of this whole mess was a large rock (the Devil’s Anvil they call it) waiting to bash a poorly guided raft and its contents.

“Jesus Christ!” I shout. “Yes,” says Mat. I stand back, watching the shapes of our six guides point, shout, point, shake heads, stretch arms, crouch down, bring hands to chins and do it all over again. The whole scene is lit by the sun, which is defused in mist like a curtain right across the river’s full width. As they work the problem, Sarah stands off to one side, looking down river and to the right as if not seeing the conflagration at all. When it appears a consensus is reached on the best rout through, Mat goes over to Sarah, puts his arm around her, and shouts the plan into her ear. They then hug, holding each other for a long time, then separate to head back to the rafts.

It is like the safety lecture all over again, only we really, really listen. Mat is shouting,



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“The water volume is up, and Lava Falls is always huge. We have never lost anyone on this stretch, so don't be careless and screw up our record! Now, one last check of your raft.”

He waits while we scour for loose ropes, packs, buckles, and valves. Then he continues.

“We will go over the falls one raft at a time, about forty- five seconds to a minute apart. Once you get over look back for the following rafts in case we have a flip. Once we are over, it ain't over! The water stays huge, there are four more shunts before we are out of the really rough part so don't relax too much once you get past the big hole. Hold on for your life, and if your feet get tossed, hold on tighter. Now synch up your life preservers. I want to give you one last check before we put in for the run.”

So we push away from the shore, one after the other, a minute apart, drifting helplessly toward the roar. You can't see the rapids beyond, just clear green smooth water disappearing into a thundering curtain of mist. When the roar is almost unbearable, the edge of the green water turns to boiling white and green. Suddenly you can see through to the hole, surrounded by rocks and other smaller holes. We pull sideways, a little to the left of the great hole as we prepare to plunge down into the mess. The current grabs the raft, sucks it first down, around the edge of the great hole, and smashes us into the wave that has by now turned the sky green. That impact drives the bow up and punches the floor of the raft so violently that my whole body flies up and I am perpendicular, feet to the sky holding on to the rope and being pulled through the wave. My feet and Deborah's crash together way above the raft. We burst out of the top of the giant wave and over the back side for a heart-stopping drop that crashes us back into the boat on top of each other.

The raft is three quarters full of water and we are being bounced and crushed through hole and wave combinations unseen from above. The water is cold but it does not register. I shout. Deborah screams. The blows come from everywhere. Finally, an eternity later, we are through the worst of the first of four sections, drenched, but through. Startled, breathing hard, and shocked full of adrenaline, we look back to watch for the next raft.

Mat grunts and extends, pushing his feet hard on the rack, trying to row us over to the side of the river, out of the secondary current so he can watch the others. But there is too much water in the raft and this less violent shunt is as strong as many of the main rapids up river. He yells “bail, bail, bail goddamnit,” which is a signal to grab the bailers (bleach bottles, bottoms cut out) and bail.

We four rafters are flailing water from the raft, the adrenaline, fear, the fierceness of his shouting and the need to do something to help the cause makes for serious if disjointed and uncoordinated bailing. All hands acting frantically cannot displace enough water to help Mat with the still wild current. As I hurl another bottle full, the third raft goes over the top. We stop for a second to watch. Its glistening blue sides slide down the shunt. Scott the guide and four rafters completely disappear in an instant, with Scott's red billed cap being the last visual point. Then right over the top of the giant wave the raft is



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literally hurled, nose down, tail straight up. It goes flying over the top. A couple of orange-jacketed figures are tossed to the side and lost in the mist. We shout as the raft is flipped and thrown down the back side of the wave. Overturned, it begins to bounce and jolt its way through the second section.

By now, Mat has pulled us out of the worst of the current; we are near the bank where the water flows more slowly. His face freezes as I hit him in the shoulder and point to Scott's overturned raft as it moves towards us heading past and down river. He lunges against the oars, this time pushing us back into the current, shouting for us to keep bailing.

"We've got to catch up with that raft as quickly as we can." What he does not say is what we all know. Someone may be underneath.

We drift, buffeted by smaller rapids, Mat rowing. I look back and desperately count one, two (or perhaps three) red-jacketed rafters off in a side eddy below the falls. I squint, wishing to count five red dots but there are two for sure, that's all.

How long does it take us to catch up to the raft? It may be only five minutes, I'm not sure. As Mat hauls back on the oars, his butt jumps from the seat, body extending with each stroke. He pulls us along, closing the gap and we moved closer and closer to Scott's raft. It is glistening blue in the sun, upside down, and for some merciful reason moving slower than we are. Finally, I am able to reach out and grab a trailing rope in the water. I haul back and try to pull the two rafts together, but the water has a hold on both of us, and the rafts weigh too much for anything to move quickly. All I can think of is an image of life-preserver wrapped bodies underneath the water, trapped and dead.

We tie off the rope. Mat begins pulling for shore, and I jump in to look underneath. My life preserver works too well, it keeps me from submerging. I unsnap the harness, push myself under the raft, and see nothing but a blue blur, some rope ends under water. It is dark and the water is churned up as we are still in rough territory. I look three times, too afraid to try to swim under the raft itself for fear that I will be crushed by a passing rock. When we finally make it to the bank, released the heavy rack and righted the raft, there is nothing remaining but equipment, supplies, rope and netting. No one underneath.

That night we hash and rehash the flip. Scott and his four rafters were all thrown free, floating over the top of the giant standing wave and were washed off to one side or the other of the Devil's Anvil. Each rafter (now swimmer) worked into one eddy or backwater along the sides of churning the river. They were picked up by a group which came through Lava Falls after we did. This was a group with boats in which all of the rafters paddled, with the guide acting as helm. These boats are easier to maneuver and made for a very efficient rescue force, a welcome relief for our stranded swimmers.

In something like ninety minutes, our whole expedition is back together on the beach where we had finally stopped Scott's raft. Mat decides we have had more than enough for a day. We set up camp right then and there at about one in the afternoon and spend the rest of the day drying out, lifting, unpacking, and re-rigging the tossed raft. And as we do



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this, we talk, gathering more and more data from each point of view, reliving fear, relief, and gratefulness. Mat was right, this is not Disneyland.

Sarah, being the swamper, was the last to go over Lava Falls that day and unnoticed, because of the flip, she had broken an oar guiding her raft over the giant wave. Now breaking an oar on the river is considered an act of manhood (or womanhood in her case). Acts of man/womanhood cannot go unattended. So the oar breaker is expected to tell the story. In fact, the oar breaker is expected to entertain with the story. That night we eat in the dark, drink cowboy coffee and Sarah is called upon to give her account.

There is Sarah, on the other side of the fire from where I am sitting. She smiles and takes in the whole circle of us. “Well as some of you know, I’ve been dreading this day for the whole trip. After Mat gave me the approved route, I sat on the shore, my raft tethered to the bank, watching each of you push off, one by one. I don’t understand this but it felt like my heart was beating at about the same pace as you were all pushing off, about one beat per minute or so, its crazy sounding I know, but that is how I felt.”

The fire snaps and a splash of orange embers rises and falls in the dark. Sarah has a naturally soft voice. In the presence of an otherwise silent, windless evening, she speaks with the river, in a complicated but magnetic duet. Sarah by firelight is mesmerizing.

“So after you all had gone, I counted out a minute, hauled in the painter, planted my butt on the raft and shoved into the river.” The guides give a howling encouragement; we rafters join in, “all right,” “yeah!” “Amen sister Sarah,” and fall silent again.

“I knew I needed to get to the far side before going over the falls. Mat and the boys decided that the left side was the way through, so I pulled like hell to make sure I was over, well over on the left before I got to the rough water. I must have been pumped, cause before I knew it I was way too left. I’d almost rowed across the river and up on the other bank!”

The chorus howls again.

“Yeah, I was pumped. Well I rowed back towards the center, aimed for the line on the left, brought the nose directly in front of me, and waited, and waited, God that last ten feet just went on and on.” Sarah raised her right hand, arm full extended out in front of her, then she did the same with her left, she moved her hands in unison, down and toward her chest as if she were raising two great oars from the water, then lowering them ready to push forward. Her eyes twinkled with fire “And I pushed like hell,” she yelled out, “right down along the edge of that god-damn killer of a hole in hell!”

She pantomimes dipping the right oar in. “I dipped, and pulled, trying to keep the raft from corkscrewing to the left, maybe being sucked backwards into the hole - then hell! The oar snapped as I hit the back of that wave.”

She examines her right hand as if inspecting her fingernails continuing the pantomime. “There was nothing life but the damn handle, nothing! So I quickly pushed the left oar as



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hard as I could and went right over the top, now corkscrewing like a drunk over the top, through the shunt, just missed three big rocks and the right side of the Devil's Anvil."

"And so Sarah the swamper corkscrewed herself down through the first, the second, the third and the fourth shunt. And why not? I'd broken my first oar!"

She stops, facing the fire. Her hands by her side, body limp and bent a little as if she has just grown very old. "All for you Robert," she says.

The guides, who have started to cheer, stop abruptly. Sarah crumbles backwards, sitting, crying, and covering her face. Mat rises, skips close to the fire and settles in the sand next to her. He puts his arm around her shoulder and said "I think Sarah's done her job for tonight, it's time to get some sleep."

After a while you begin to wonder if there are any secrets on the river. No need to do psychoanalysis, just take a couple of trips down the Colorado where the sand and water will wash away all of your secrets, layer by layer, and like an ever-changing sandbar you will be cleaned and shaped and properly connected to the universe. The rafters had no idea what Sarah was talking about, other than the simple details of the broken oar.

Like water, questions flow in to fill all spaces, and Sarah's Robert was our deep empty space for the next twenty-four hours.

They had been rafters the year before, Sarah and Robert. Outside the Canyon, one would have labeled them an attractive, athletic thirty-something couple. He was very tall, something like six foot five, trim, gangly strong, a hiker and mountain biker who like Sarah, earned his keep as a science teacher. They had met during a conference of Utah science teachers in Salt Lake City and were independently connected. This meant that his home was in Park City and hers was in Moab, but connect they did, by phone and in person for weekends, school breaks and much of the summer. They were not the sort of people you would find at a mall.

Sarah and Robert lived apparently average lives, but in fact well on the fringe of society. Dressed for school, they looked mainstream, taught the kids, and acted mainstream. But the hours outside of class were for the other life, the real life of outdoors, or reading, crafting and in Robert's case drinking beer with his mates. Robert was a New Zealander who immigrated to the United States, and he spent quite a lot of time with his mates. Were they in love? There was no telling about Robert, other than he was pretty regular in his attention to Sarah, and put a lot of miles on his truck between Park City and Moab and back. The relationship was in its third year when they came down the Colorado as rafters.

Most of the reliable information came from Mat. He is that type of person, and he is a pal of the fellow who led Sarah and Robert's trip the previous year. Mat too spends a lot of time with his mates and so those of us who concentrated on him got most of the story, as straight as one could expect under the circumstances. The statistics are reliable. Something like four to ten people die in the Grand Canyon each year. Most of the deaths



are hiking and auto accidents. Remarkably, few occur on the river itself. In fact, the previous year there was only one death on the river, and as it so happened, it was at Lava Falls.

“I’ll tell you what I know about it if you promise to give Sarah space on this deal, in fact I don’t think she needs to do anything but work through it herself, so what do you say?”

We agree, of course.

“It was just one of those freak things, something that you would never guess could happen to a fellow like Robert, a grab ass kid maybe, an older person perhaps, the rocks can be treacherous, but Robert, of all people.”

As he tells the story, I realize I had probably stood on the exact spot where Robert had died. All of the rafts pull off the river before going over Lava Falls. The guides always reconnoiter the water. Robert was keen, deeply interested, and knowledgeable enough about the outdoors to be a grateful student. He went with the guides along the rocky bank to look at the falls just as I had. They stood on the rock pile parapet and talked about the water for a long time, longer than usual. The flow was hairy and high that day too, and the best route was neither obvious nor easy to assess. After about a half-hour of chewing and some arguing the route was chosen, a little used approach from the right side. Having reached an agreement did not seem to relieve any of the tension, however. Robert, sensing the edginess, said something like “I’ll just wait back over here while you all work this out, I don’t want to bother you.”

He then, apparently, he stepped back on a loose rock, slipped, yelled, and fell, hitting his head on a basketball sized boulder.

Mat lowers his voice to finish the story. “Thud, the back of his skull hit the rock and that was it. My friend was right there and turned when he heard Robert, so he saw the blow. Robert was out in an instant and dead within ten minutes.”

They choppered Robert and Sarah out of the Canyon. The remaining rafters continued down the river. Robert and Sarah were both so thin, and inseparable their fellow travelers dubbed them the Boneses. An evening of crying, sharing and drinking followed the episode. That night the party launched a small raft of twigs with lighted candles stuck on each corner – an offering for the Boneses, a vessel of prayers for God Speed and a safe passage. The rest of the trip was a dirge, but rafts put in at the top of the river and must to go all the way to Lake Meade to get out. That’s just the way it is.

I was fixated with Sarah all the next day. The broken oar leading to the story of Robert’s death settled her spirit right in the center of my psyche. Sarah in the rower’s position, pulling both oars, bony knees sunburned through a covering tan. Sarah scampering in dusty sandals up the trail well ahead of the rest of the party as we investigated an old Anastazi cave five hundred feet above on the canyon wall. Sarah lugging supplies to her raft, high knuckled hands pulling a rope tighter, and with one last jerk, synching the bundle to the aluminum frame. Sarah at dinner time, taking her meal on a plate and



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drifting away into the dark to settle just outside of our community and eat. Sarah at night, sitting alone on her raft, no light, an occasional cigarette (she never smoked in the daytime) part of her mouth and nose illuminated by the orange glow of each long intake. Sarah. All this attention and rumination made my image of Sarah clearer, but she was no more accessible than when we'd started the trip. Sarah had her work to do, and we weren't invited.

Day nine slips into place as easy as water flows downhill. We are blasted out of bed by the desert's bright sunrise, it is already hot by 6:00AM, more so because the canyon has melted away. There are still signs of where we have been, far off mesas and a touch of color here and there, but this is a different part and our trip down the Colorado was clearly ending.

We push away from the camp site at eight sharp, dishes washed, and sleeping bags stuffed for the last time. The rubber armada of seven rafts, Mat in the lead and Sarah bringing up the rear, all moving like atrophied water bugs, oars going through the motions. Above all there is the silence. There is little to anticipate except for the end. Buffeted by wind, addled by color, drenched in water, spun by the current, bathed in starlight and synchronized with the universe, one cannot quite imagine an end.

So we drift like condemned prisoners, headed for a memory only ten days old in "real time." At this point, the current hardly moves and the river really becomes a series of torpid lakes.

"You know I hate this day. Someone's going to say it and I just get so pissed, after all this time and work on the river," complained Mat. "Someone, and you watch it'll happen, someone is bound to say 'well, back to the real world.' It just kills me to think that after all the miles we've covered, they don't get it."

Above the water, acres of black asphalt tilt down, down, yellow-striped lines forming lanes for nonlinear boaters in a hurry for the Lake Mead experience. It's as if a giant freeway has slid into the lake by mistake, a scene from one of the later "Planet of the Apes" movies, after the world has gone nuts and the vestiges of civilization have all been trashed.

As we approach there is one large truck and an air-conditioned bus idling away, ready to portage us from out here to there, the first engines we'd heard for over a week, groaning an unwelcome welcome, a relentless noise to replace the sounds of water and the hairdryer wind.

The idling engines set me off. After nine days of paying attention, seeing, and listening against the wall of quiet, real time and these vehicles are calling me back to before the river, before Sarah, Lava Falls, and the Bright Angel.

For the first time in nine days I begin to feel angry, fearful, like an animal about to be caged, I want to go back and start again, more quiet, more drifting, more solitude, more me, but the diesel noise just grows louder. I want to shout, "Would you turn those



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I don't have the nerve to say anything. I am caught up in waves of rising panic, acid climbing up my throat. I turn my head away from the others and quietly tear up, looking down closely at the water, just staring until the raft scrapes its way onto the asphalt beach. We fall forward, off balance, ending our passage down the river.

The growling buss is parked, nose to the water, some yards up the ramp - a shining chrome monster with black windows glinting sunlight. The door opens with a swish and the driver steps out to survey his approaching cargo. A thin sixty-something body is stuffed into skin-tight blue polyester bell-bottom pants topped by the great shield of a cowboy belt buckle which, in another life, was a man hole cover or the heavy weight boxing prize.

I look harder at him and wonder how he is able to sit, since bending around that buckle looks out of the question. He reaches behind, pulls a comb from his back pocket and gives his full mound of curiously black hair a long swipe, front to back, front to back followed with a final flourish setting the forelock with an overhand twist, just so. Replacing the comb, he lights up and with arms folded, settles in to watch us as we pack up our lives and surrender to the cool interior of Starshine Enterprises' finest coach.

One last rafter's drill remains. We take all of our gear from the wet bags and repack for conventional car and airplane travel. We reluctantly line up like two hockey teams, guides on one side and guests on the other, and moving, hug as we shift from one to the other. Sarah is at the end of the line, and I give her an extra hug. She is indeed a Bonses, just like they said, but warm and surpassingly soft. We talk for a moment, hand in hand. The oars have toughened hers up. Feeling the roughness, I covet her struggle with life and the river. Clearly, her hands are ready for the rest of the contest. She smiles then looks away, stepping sideways to move on. Feeling her rough hand slide from mine is the last real contact I have with the river, and I hate to let go.

Stepping towards the bus, I pass the driver who is still just standing and watching the scene. "Well, I reckon its back to the real world for you folks," he says.

Sadly, all I can do is to look at him and say something inane like "real world my ass." That gives him a chuckle so I break it off and climb into "civilization" for the first time in nine days.

A friend of mine had a heart attack recently. He was treated, had some surgery, and now is recovered. His favorite mantra is "I can't tell you how happy I am to have had a heart attack"! It sounds daft, but I know he means it.

He is living a completely different life, eats well, exercises, is selling his business, and takes unseemly amounts of time for himself and his family. His job is just that, a job. He has started studying religion, and is considering being baptized into the Catholic faith.

Some men and women have heart attacks, others, cancer. Sometimes it is an auto accident. People may loose loved ones or go bankrupt. There are all sorts of ways for the



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universe to get our attention. What a charmed life I have lived indeed to have avoided the most fearful of these, except of course for the Colorado.

“Thank God for the Colorado” is what I say... to anyone who will listen.

