

Tempting the River Gods

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OUTINGS WITH KRIS had a way of gravitating to the unpredictable extremes, either life threatening, as in running out of water in the Grand Canyon, or outrageous and bizarre, as with the canoe trip that ended with me standing on a boulder in the middle of the Rio Grande wearing nothing but a visor and a pair of weathered tennis shoes.

The setting is idyllic. Fall in northern New Mexico—desert-toned landscape under a dome of seamless blue, cottonwood trees rustling with yellow leaves; warmth that rekindles memories of summer but without the searing heat. A reminder that we've already slipped into accepting the inevitable coming of winter, a subtle slide toward attitudinal hibernation. A day to be out in.

It is one of the rare weekends when Kris and I get to share time. The curse of working as outdoor instructors in the same program is that we are often saddled with alternating rotations. Even though we live together, some months we see each other only on a handful of days.

Kris suggests a jaunt down the Rio Grande in the dented Grumman lake canoe I have borrowed from my parents while they are out of the country. Any other waterway within striking distance of Santa Fe is too low by October to be much fun. By autumn the rivers are ebbing toward their quiet winter pace; the Rio Grande is rippling through the canyons it charges down during the melt season, relaxed as a Sunday drive.

We pack up a lunch, and an hour later we have launched the canoe. Mostly we float along. A few families have responded to the fall day by driving down to the river to fish or picnic. We exchange greetings. Only minor fast water punctuates the steady tug of current; we proceed at a sedate pace into the deepening canyon. Basalt cliffs begin to rise higher above the river, constricting our view. Fewer roads penetrate as we approach the boundary of Bandelier National Monument. We are alone.

Once in a while we practice an eddy turn or another maneuver, but it feels good just to cruise, to watch the landscape. Ravens croak overhead, their outstretched shadows diving across the brown cliffs. A few rapids challenge us, but at this water level we handle them easily.

We pull over above the one formidable bit of whitewater along the run in order to scout it from shore. At higher water the constriction rapid is a fast, big-volume chute with huge waves. Even at this moderate level I feel the familiar tightening knot of anxiety and excitement. The canoe is by no means designed for whitewater, and I am still in the early part of the paddling learning curve. As a team our canoeing skills are only adequate. Across the river I can barely make out the aluminum glint of a submerged canoe pinned under a rock by the full brunt of current, a shiny warning against complacency.

We discuss strategy, focusing on the loud water before

us, and forget the spell of the day in the tension. Then, with life vests on, we are back in the boat, setting up, kneeling for stability. The river sucks us along more and more irresistibly. The waves are big enough to give us a rollicking ride. The canoe twists and plunges, taking some water over the bow. I feel an inch of cold river sloshing around my knees, but we are right where we want to be, our strokes solid and tight. I glimpse the battered underwater casualty again as we sweep past on the back of the river, and we're through.

It seems a good time to have lunch. A sunny sandbar offers itself. Content in the knowledge that we've passed the tricky part of the river, we soak up warmth and readjust ourselves to the desert surroundings. It gets hot, so Kris and I strip down for a dip in the cold, silty water and then let our skin dry under the friendly sun. When we get back in the canoe, we don't bother to put our clothes on but just toss them loosely into the bottom. It's that kind of day.

At the mouth of Frijoles Canyon, inside Bandelier National Monument, a final boulder-strewn riffle precedes the lengthy flatwater paddle that a downstream dam has inflicted on canoeists. The water level is much different from what it was the only other time I've run the rapid, a year earlier. That time I was with a group in a raft, but I remember the spot well.

"You think we should scout?" Kris calls back from the bow. I stand up, looking for the route I remember, and identify what appears to be a clean line. I resist going to shore again so soon.

"I think we're okay," I say. "Let's head for that top 'V'."

But as we approach, I see things I couldn't see from upstream. What I thought was a clean shot is littered with hidden obstacles. Instead of taking us through, the "V" actu-

ally feeds right into a rocky barrier. We should have scouted. By the time I see our error, it's too late to get to shore.

"Let's ferry left!" I shout, knowing it's not going to work. The ferry angle goes wrong. We're more broadside than we should be. The whitewater has us; the boulders loom close and large. Kris yells something that I don't hear. The boat is almost fully broadside, and our paddling harmony is gone.

Then, the shock of cold, green water. I hear myself spluttering. The boat is in front of me, gaping into the current, filling with river. Kris has disappeared. I flail toward the near end of the canoe, but as I reach it I, hear the dull thunk of hull against rock and the boat shudders to a stop, pinned across two boulders, a sickening crease in its hull. As the current adapts to the new obstacle in its path, the canoe fills with piles of water and settles.

I scramble to the top of a rounded volcanic rock and look anxiously downstream for Kris. She is only ten feet away, clinging to a tree root wedged down by the current. Her face has the universal expression worn by victims of natural calamity—astonishment, shock, personal affront.

"You okay?" I ask.

She nods. "I got sucked right under the boat." She begins hauling herself against the current toward her own midriver island of basalt.

My attention turns to the foundered boat. Damage has been done. I can tell that some of the rivets have popped out. An oblique crease dents the boat toward the stern, but by being pinned across two rocks the canoe has avoided being folded in two.

I am still berating myself for being too lazy and confident to stop and look at the run. The rapid is embarrassingly minor. With a brief scout we could have shot through and

been a mile downstream by now. Gingerly I work my way back into the river next to our craft and find that I can actually stand upstream of it to get leverage on the hull.

Initially it doesn't even occur to me that I might not be able to free the boat. But as I test different angles, even get my whole body underwater and heave up mightily, I begin to appreciate the power of the river. The canoe is immovable; it doesn't even wiggle.

Kris has made her way to the other rock the boat is lodged against. For twenty minutes or more we struggle against the current. Then, each standing on our tiny island, we appraise each other. Kris is wearing running shoes and a cap, nothing else. I sport tennis shoes and a visor. The rest is sunburned flesh. We chuckle at each other and then laugh out loud for a bit.

The humor doesn't last long because now we're going to have to walk two miles on a well-used trail to the park headquarters and then hitchhike to our car. I can tell that Kris is pondering the same conclusion. We laugh a little more, but now it's nervous laughter. I kneel over the boat and search through the roiling river water for bits of clothing. Nothing. The river has washed them away.

I imagine various all-too-possible vignettes—meeting young families along the trail; arriving at the busy parking lot; explaining to a receptionist at the visitor center why I need a towel; standing on the highway, offering our thumbs, and everything else, to passing recreational vehicles.

"Hey!" Kris interrupts my morose thoughts. "What about that stuff sack with my running clothes? Didn't we tie that to the seat?"

She's leaning out over the boat as she talks, feeling back to the stern seat. The current is strongest there, but she finds the string and the bag, bouncing and tugging in the river.

"Careful! Don't lose that stuff!" I walk across on the hull

of the canoe to help. It takes a full ten minutes to unhitch the knot, but then we hold the precious bag of garments, scanty as it is.

Kris peers inside and then pulls out the wet contents—one pair women's size medium running shorts and one women's size medium stretch leotard. I ponder momentarily how to wear the stuff sack, but the applications elude me.

Kris looks at me and then looks back at the clothes. "I guess I get the leotard, you get the shorts." We laugh again nervously.

I'm not a small man. Running shorts are diaphanous things, made to economize on weight and wind drag. Even though I'm quite motivated, it's a struggle to wiggle into Kris's shorts. The coverage about equals that of a small banana, and I am uncomfortably reminded of junior-high locker room pranks we called wedgies. Kris, in her skin tight, sleeveless leotard, looks oddly attired for hiking, but not nearly so outlandish as me. I decide to carry one of our paddles along as sort of an explanatory prop for the hikers we might meet.

We hop to shore across a string of rocks and start off, shoes squelching water, my gait visibly affected by the constricting garb. Now and again I hear Kris giggling softly behind me. I make menacing gestures with the paddle, which only goad her into hysterical laughter, so I ignore her.

Within a quarter mile the shorts are uncomfortable enough that I'm thinking about splitting them apart at the seam. That may happen anyway. About then the first hikers come upon us, a couple with two young children. The adults choose feigned nonchalance and an inner-city aversion of eyes. The kids gape. I mutter something that is supposed to be construed as a greeting.

Soon we start encountering lots of people. We grow

brazen and callous to our effect and stride past them, making no attempt to communicate; I use the paddle as a hiking staff. At least Kris isn't laughing anymore. Between groups of hikers I try to pluck the shorts out of my crotch.

Finally, we arrive at the busy parking lot. We shortcut to the exit road and start hitching. Kris is clearly the more presentable envoy, so she stands in front. I half hide behind her and extend my bare arm toward the roadway, wearing a benign expression, as if hitchhiking in a loincloth is normal weekend fare. A great many vehicles pass by, seeming to accelerate as they do. They are mostly station wagons, campers, and motor homes. Children turn around in their seats to gawk. Adults pretend we're invisible.

It's remarkable that anyone would stop and more remarkable still that the car that eventually does is a Mercedes-Benz driven by an older couple. They politely refrain from inquiry as we settle into the plush rear seat. Thinking the canoe paddle a little scruffy for the interior, I leave the window rolled down and hold it outside as we drive through Los Alamos toward our vehicle.

It is a quiet ride. In less than half an hour we're back to the car. We retrieve the keys we hid under the bumper and are on our way home. It isn't until we're halfway to Santa Fe that we discuss strategy.

"You know," Kris begins, "I don't think anyone knew we went paddling today."

Another mile slips by. "Maybe we could get some rope and carabiners and go back tomorrow. We could have the canoe sitting in the yard before anyone knows the difference."