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Despite my fear of heights, I jumped off a huge rock into the river. After that, nothing scared me.



Turning Point

THE SPLENDOR OF THE GRAND CANYON AND THE CHALLENGE OF RAFTING THE RAPIDS HELPED ME LEAVE MY MARRIAGE—AND REINVENT MY FUTURE

They say that rafting the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon changes you. I don't know if it's the canyon or the river that does it; maybe it's both. But after 14 days of running rapids on 121 miles of river, staring up at stars as big as exploding cluster bombs and waking to the sound of bighorn sheep clacking horns, I realized my marriage was no longer working. The strange thing was that until then I hadn't realized how unhappy I was.

I was not supposed to go on this trip. My husband had been invited by a client, but had persuaded him to take me instead. I was thrilled. Eighteen of us would paddle three rubber rafts down the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon for seven days. At the halfway point, we'd hike out. Unlike trips on big, noisy motor craft, ours was do-it-yourself. We would blow up our own yellow rafts and use paddle power.

After we stowed our gear in rubber dry sacks and donned life preservers, our guide, Martha, explained the simple commands: forward paddle, back paddle, left side, right side. High side terrified me because it meant we were about to encounter a wave and needed to scramble to the high side to stop ourselves from swimming, the euphemism for going overboard.

"If you swim, get in the swimmer's position," Martha said. "Legs out in front, arms out for stability."

"What about the freezing water?" someone asked.

"Don't worry. You won't feel it, because you'll be more concerned with staying alive," Martha answered. Could I bail before we even started downriver? →

BY MARGIE GOLDSMITH

ILLUSTRATION: OKSANA BADRAK



Turning Point



But as we dipped our paddles into the silty water and began our journey, my fear melted into awe. Surrounding us were red cliff walls, billions of years old and rising thousands of feet into the sky. The rock walls sometimes resembled an ancient stone face; others looked like chiseled snakes or lions. The colors changed too. At first light, they were lavender and pink; by noon, plum and russet; and in late afternoon they formed a vermilion curtain. As the sun sank, they glowed burnished copper, and at night they were silver in the light of the moon.

The Colorado River has 161 rapids in the Grand Canyon. But there are long stretches of still water, and you have time to notice how the river has cut through and down to the depth of a mile, exposing ancient rock strata and creating the 277-mile-long Grand Canyon.

Often the only sound was our paddles dipping into the water. Most days we'd tie the boats to tamarisk trees and hike to side canyons. One day it was the Silver Grotto, where we swam to a hanging rope, pulled ourselves up, and walked among sunken pools.

Another day, we stopped at Vasey's Paradise, and I walked through a frigid waterfall. Then, despite my fear of heights, I jumped off a huge rock into the river. I even swam through rapids. After that, nothing scared me.

On smooth stretches of the river, we'd drift along, alone with our thoughts. Martha let us take turns being captain, but none of us understood the river and we'd inevitably end up trapped in a swirling eddy. We'd have to paddle till our arms ached to get back out into the current.

That's how I began to think of my marriage, like an eddy. We had been united against the world our first 10

years, but these last two, we had been paddling in different directions. He no longer told me about important things that happened at work; when we talked, we argued. Once proud of my successful video production company, he now made fun of my "cute little business." When had the negativity started?

I was lost in such thoughts when suddenly there was a roar in the distance, like a huge truck thundering down a gravel road. I heard the rapids long before I saw them, and the closer we got, the louder they sounded. I could barely hear Martha as

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she yelled, "Forward," and we shot through gray frothing waves, pounded and thrashed by thousands of tons of water. "Back paddle," she screamed, and we swirled backward through the racing water in the little raft, which bobbed helplessly like a rubber duck in a Jacuzzi. A spray of icy cold water slapped me in the face, and just when I was sure we were going to capsize, we bumped over the last big wave and back into still water, high-fiving one another by whacking our paddles together.

I'd done it! I relished this small victory, but I suddenly froze as I heard the sound of a freight train in a tunnel.

Moments later, giant water pushed us into the air and I could feel myself falling backward. "Lean forward," Martha yelled out, but it was too late. I started to slide into the roiling froth just as the paddler behind me latched onto my life jacket and yanked me back into the raft. I had no time to be frightened. This time, I dug my oar into the crest of the wave. The icy surf blinded me momentarily, but I kept stabbing at the turbulent water, leaning forward. I didn't fall out of the boat, and I felt totally in control. From then on, I was ravenous for the big water, and from my starboard bow perch, I speared the waves, empowered.

When we pulled into our campsite that afternoon, my hair and skin were covered in red silt, but I felt clean, purified by the water. As I watched the sun sparking diamonds on the water, I felt more peaceful and happier than I had in a long time. I knew I would never be able to share this with my husband. He would not like being wet and dirty, spending nights on the ground with no mattress, no hot water and no clean clothes.

To cool off at night, I'd jump into the river, naked in the darkness. Afterward, I couldn't sleep. I was mesmerized by the shooting stars and the moon rising above the cliffs and didn't want to miss any of it by closing my eyes. He just wouldn't have gotten it. He would never have understood the joy and freedom I felt from being outside and not living my life around his schedule.

When I married Jack, I had been attracted to his brilliance, his judgment and his generosity. We shared equally dysfunctional childhoods, an emotional glue that had held us together for those first 10 wonderful years. They ended when, after a power



Turning Point



struggle at his firm, he was made the managing director. I was thrilled for him except that with his new position, we no longer had time to go out with friends, only to endless dinners with his clients. I'd smile politely, listening to conversations about stock offerings, IPOs and takeovers. The few times I had a chance to open my mouth, no one cared.

I could have put up with boring evenings as long as he'd been his old loving self at home. But he'd become impatient and arrogant, not the man I'd married. I knew his attitude stemmed from the pressures of his job, but it was eroding our marriage, just as the river had cut through layers and layers of rock.

"Tell me if I begin to believe in my own press," he'd said. I told him he was, but he didn't want to hear it. He became harder, edgier, and I didn't know him anymore. I wanted to talk to him about it but couldn't because I knew I no longer loved him, and the only solution would have been to leave. The idea of being alone, giving up my comfortable life, having to start all over again as a single woman was terrifying to imagine. But here in the solitude and beauty of the Grand Canyon, I knew that what had seemed so important—social status, the ability to buy whatever I wanted, marriage to a successful man—no longer was. What made me happy was here, paddling the rapids, watching the sun cut a golden swath through the water, sleeping out under the stars, and daring myself to do things that had always terrified me. Suddenly our week on the Colorado was over. The next morning we would hike up and out of the canyon on the Bright Angel Trail, and a new group would hike in to do the rest of the river. We'd just done our last big rapid, Sockdolager, a roller coaster of

nine huge waves. We tied up the boats at Lower Cremation, a strange name for a beautiful campsite with a 360-degree view of the massive red cliffs. I couldn't bear the idea that this was the last night I'd sleep under the stars. Martha walked by, and I told her how I felt. "Why don't you stay?" she said. "The best rapids are in the lower half."

"I can't."

"Look, you're already dirty, and you're halfway through, so you might as well just stay and finish the river."

I didn't have any projects the following week, but there were two dinners with my husband's clients, one benefit and a cocktail party to attend. "I've got to go home," I said, believing it was imperative.

I woke up in the middle of the night. The moon was full and the sky filled with stars. I knew it would be a long time before I got back here again, if I ever did. I thought about what it would be like to be back home—all that tension. I pulled out my headlamp and wrote down my husband's cell phone number. One of my raft mates could call him tomorrow. I felt my heart pounding. I knew my life had come to the end of one rapid and was at the beginning of a new one.

Soon after my return, my husband and I separated. A year later, we divorced; now we're friends. I traded my Manolo Blahniks for hiking boots, running shoes, scuba fins and flip-flops. There's a new man in my life, Michael, with a similar selection of shoes and the same passion for sunrises and starry nights. Together, we hike through forests, bike past lakes, and navigate the unknown river of our lives. **M**

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