

Act Your Age

After the first day of rafting the Colorado River, Georgia knew she had nothing to fear. Every time a six-foot wall of water reared up and crashed down on her, she ducked her head, clutched the line alongside the raft in a death grip, and laughed out loud. The sun was so hot, getting soaked was pure pleasure. And when the waves calmed down, she had the Grand Canyon, mile after mile of red and orange and blue and shiny black cliffs, towering above her. Big horn sheep leaped from ledge to ledge; lazy blue herons swam the skies. And the boulders? They were hidden too deep in the wide waters of the Grand Canyon to crack the skull of old ladies.

For that was what she was. Seventy years old and riding the rapids. It wasn't as foolhardy as it sounds. Georgia kept herself in shape; it was her only vanity. She swam and hiked and bicycled, which meant that her scrawny legs still had a few lumpy muscles, her face was a patchwork of cracks from the open air, and her white hair reflected a faint yellow from the sun.

And the training had worked. She had hiked the seven-and-a-half-mile Bright Angel trail from the canyon's rim to the river with only a skinned knee, a bruised toe, and soaking wet hiking boots. Toward the end though, her friend Julie, who was thirty-five years younger, begged her to slow down. Her knees were beginning to tremble from the steep downhill trek, the straps of her thirty-pound pack dug into her shoulders, and more than once she stumbled on the loose red pebbles that covered the path.

"You need a rest," Julie insisted as Georgia wobbled from rock to rock across the streams that feed the Colorado.

"No," she said and kept on wobbling.

Suddenly a lean, sunbaked man wearing faded blue nylon bathing trunks, worn Texas, sunglasses, and a battered canvas hat appeared on the far side of a stream.

"Nicely done," he said as Julie leapt easily over the rocks toward him. Georgia noticed the deep lines in his forehead and the sad eyes. Mid-fifties at least, she thought.

Julie grinned then turned to Georgia who was beginning a slow, deliberate transverse of the rocky stream.

The man winked at Julie. "He who hesitates is lost."

Georgia swung out her leg to jump for the nearest rock. Of course,

with both of them watching, she splashed knee deep into the water. Julie quickly skipped over the rocks to reach her. But the man in the blue trunks was faster.

"Good try," he said, steadying her. "You'll need that sort of spirit if you're going to raft the Colorado." He caught Georgia's arm and started propelling her across the stream. "You can do it. And you're going to love it."

Georgia shook off the man's hand and proceeded alone on waterlogged boots, her wet jeans clinging to her legs. Condescending asshole, she thought.

Back on dry land, the man took off his hat, revealing thinning gray-brown hair, and smiled at Julie. "I'm Raymond. Your river guide. Welcome to the Colorado."

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"One for me; one for you," Raymond said to Lonnie when he returned to the raft. Lonnie, at sixty, had been on the river, rafting solo and guiding tours for 40 years.

He squinted out from under the bill of his faded green baseball cap at the two women, the last of the 18-member rafting party to descend from Bright Angel.

"I take it the pretty one's mine?" he asked.

Raymond laughed. "Hell no. You get grandma,"

"She up to it?"

"Sure. All she has to do is sit and hang on," Raymond said.

"You're captain this run. You get to keep an eye on her."

"Not so fast. I'm delegating that job to you. My eye's on the other one."

Raymond looked over at Julie unloading her backpack, stuffing her clothes into a large waterproof bag. He liked watching her long slender legs as she carried the bags to the raft.

He didn't look at Georgia. Older folks, women especially, made him uneasy. He didn't want any heart attacks or nasty falls from canyon hiking. No helicopter rescues on his watch.

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Several nights later the two guides, in white shorts and fresh T-shirts, were stretched out in Lonnie's raft, drinking beer.

"She's even better than I thought," Raymond said.

"Who?"

"You know who, asshole. Fearless Julie. You should have seen her this afternoon. Scrambling up the canyon wall to the boulder. Led the pack."

"She married?" Lonnie asked.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"You going to fuck her?"

Nancy Bourne

"Jesus, man, watch yourself." But Raymond laughed. "You never know. I suggested we might try a climb, just the two of us, sometime, and she gave me a look."

"Well, like they say. Danger's a mighty aphrodisiac."

"I think that was Kissinger and he was talking about power."

"Same thing."

They sat silent a few minutes. "Everything okay on your hike?" Raymond asked.

"Well, we didn't lose anybody, if that's what you mean."

"You came close?"

"At one point Georgia looked like she froze," Lonnie said.

Raymond sat up. "You mean I shouldn't have let her go up on that ridge in the first place?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Come on. That was an easy hike."

"You're the boss."

"Go to hell."

"You might tell Georgia..." But before Lonnie could finish, Raymond had pulled himself to his feet and leapt out of the rocking raft.

"Time to mingle," he said as he joined the cluster of beer drinking passengers.

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Georgia was in love with the Grand Canyon. The cliffs varied from hour to hour, depending on the angle of the sun and the cloud cover. Shiny quartz changed to granite, then to iron-red sandstone, then to black volcanic cliffs that had spilled over in red-hot sheets of lava some time in prehistory and frozen into pock-marked waves. With binoculars tucked into her waterproof shell, Georgia searched for herons, canyon wrens, dippers, red-tailed hawks, peregrine falcons.

She wasn't lonely. She had Julie, whose face had begun to shine a permanent golden-red from an excess of sun and excitement. Occasionally Julie scaled the canyon heights and jumped from waterfalls without her. But most of the time, her friend stuck close, sitting next to her in the raft, setting up a campsite each evening, sharing bottles of wine.

And so when Raymond encouraged her and Julie to take a swim in the river on the sixth evening out, she was game. Until that day, he had stressed that they were never, *never* to swim in the Colorado, even with life jackets. Occasionally, in calm water, they were permitted to slip over the side of the raft and enjoy a cold bath in the mud-colored water, while tightly gripping the line that bound the outside of the raft. And several times in really strong rapids, people were thrown into the turbulent water, where they madly waved arms and legs un-

til they were rescued. But no one could just take a swim. The current in the Colorado was too swift and unpredictable. But this was different. Raymond had been talking about it all afternoon as Julie and Georgia crouched on the floor of his raft, running the rapids, soaking up sun. Raymond sat high above them, scowling into the glare, his lean brown arms pulling first one oar, then the other.

The river god, Georgia thought.

He was talking excitedly, "See, there's this eddy in the river just by the campsite. You catch the current at the shore, and it carries you out into the river and then circles you back home. All you have to do is lie on your belly and ride it."

"Lie on your belly?" Julie asked.

"Here's the deal. Those white foam pads you sleep on? Well, you ride 'em like surf boards."

"What about life vests?" Georgia asked.

"What do you think?" he asked without looking at her.

"It's really safe?" Julie asked.

"Come on. Would I tell you to do something dangerous?" He grinned at Julie. "Look, it's not about strength, it's about adventure. We wouldn't let you drown. Too much paper work."

And he laughed as he turned his face to the river and plowed ahead.

* * *

Once they reached the campsite, Julie and Georgia quickly spread out their sleeping bags and headed for the water, white foam pads in hand. The guides lounged in their rafts close by, sipping gin and tonics. The other passengers busied themselves setting up tents.

"Tell us again how we are supposed to do this," Julie asked Raymond.

"OK. Pretend your white pad is a surfboard. Climb up on it, jump into the water, and swim upstream toward that rock." He pointed to a black volcanic boulder looming out of the water about twenty yards upstream from camp. "Then ride the eddy back to camp."

Julie waded into the water.

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As Julie boarded her makeshift surfboard and pushed off, Lonnie kept his eyes on Raymond.

"What?" Raymond sounded defensive.

"You check the eddy?" Lonnie asked.

"I *know* the eddy."

"Then you know eddies change."

"Not this one. I been here five, six times. Always the same."

"Still."

"When did you get to be such an old lady?"

Nancy Bourne

"It's the old lady I'm thinking about."

Raymond sneered. "What do you want me to do? Tell her she's too old?"

"Do what you got to do. You're the boss."

"Look at that water. It's a bathtub out there."

Lonnie was silent. They both watched Georgia wade timidly into the river.

"She a good swimmer?" Lonnie asked.

"She doesn't need to be. She's got the jacket. Plus it's an easy ride."

"It doesn't look like it," Lonnie said. They watched Georgia struggle with her foam pad. Every time she tried to board it, it slipped out from under her.

Lonnie stood up, his eyes on Georgia.

Raymond was laughing. "Oh my god, look at her. She's riding the thing like a water bug with wings."

* * *

It wasn't a bad description. Minutes before, Georgia had stood knee deep in the water watching Julie plunge into the current, her body full length on the white pad. Using her arms to paddle, Julie had made a beeline for the black rock. It looked easy. But Georgia wasn't quite ready to abandon herself to the river. Wading carefully, she eased herself onto the pad. She was floating. But just to feel safe, she stretched her foot as deep as the white pad would allow and discovered she could no longer touch bottom. The river had made a choice. As the current picked up speed, she found she couldn't keep her foam surfboard in place. It kept slipping out from under her. Frustrated, she finally gave up and rode the pad crosswise, her arms and legs dangling in the water and the white ends of the pad flapping up on either side of her life vest. She concentrated on heading upstream in the direction of the rock, but no matter how hard she paddled, she couldn't make progress. The current was pulling her away from shore, out toward the middle of the river. Suddenly Julie swept past, several feet in front of her, riding the current downstream. She didn't look happy. But Georgia was too busy paddling and kicking and trying to get back to shore to question her. It was no use. The strong pull of the current sucked her out to the middle of the mud-red Colorado. Georgia told herself not to panic. Raymond had promised that the eddy would bring her back to camp; so she clung to the foam pad and waited for the river to save her.

But the river refused. Instead it rushed her downstream, past the rafts where the guides were sitting. She got a glimpse of Julie, at the edge of the shore, water dripping from her hair, staring in her direction, her mouth moving without sound. The guides sat motionless, staring in her direction.

“Help!” she squeaked. “Help!” Her voice sounded tinny. As the river swept her downstream, the scene on shore passed before her like a movie, freeze-framed and silent. Four white, stricken faces stared at the river. The bodies attached to the faces stood stiff on the narrow shore, their arms hanging limp at their sides.

“Help!” she cried again.

But she was past the camp now and moving with the current. No one could hear her. A large pile of rocks rose before her, constricting the flow of water. As the river narrowed, its surface broke into a brown and white froth. The turmoil wasn't fierce enough to be a rapid; even in her frightened state she knew that. But the water was flowing swiftly and, even worse, she couldn't see what was beyond the rocks. Her mind shut down. She didn't think about her husband or her children. It wasn't real. She couldn't be drowning.

The white pad slipped out from under her. She grabbed it with her right hand and paddled with her left; rushing water filled her mouth. Nothing to do but let go the pad. It shot down the river out of sight.

Buoyed by her life jacket, she swept past the rocks and was spit out into a wider, calmer stretch of the river, a piece of flotsam isolated in the Colorado, completely alone.

This isn't happening, she thought.

She started swimming toward shore with all the strength in her body. And suddenly the soundless film she had been watching exploded with noise and color. Lonnie was racing down the shore, a rope in his hand, his long hair flying. Julie was close on his heels.

“Swim,” someone yelled. She did her best, her arms and legs flailing like straws against the current, but the shore only receded and she felt herself swimming backward. She struggled to catch her breath.

A rope danced in the air above her. She reached up to grab it, but it disappeared.

She heard someone yell, “Wait for the rope.” But the rope was gone, and when she looked toward shore, she saw only piles of granite. No camp. No people. She turned to face downstream. Boulders framed both sides of the narrowing river; waves were building. The water rushed her toward the rocks. Too exhausted to swim, she focused on keeping her head out of the water.

And then she was falling, through foam, through waves, through a wall of water.

* * *

It was Raymond who pulled her out. She was floating in her orange vest in the calm water below the rapid, blood trickling from her head.

“God, don't let her be dead,” he kept muttering. “Please God.”

He had jumped into the nearest raft soon after Georgia swept past, yelling to one of the younger guides to man the oars. They had to wait until she had cleared the rapids before crashing down behind her.

"Oh my god," he whispered, as the white head bobbed in and out of the heaving waves. Then down the rapid they plunged.

As he pulled her into the raft, Raymond thought she was so light. She doesn't weigh anything. He dragged the inert body over to the plank seat of the raft and stretched it out on its back. Forgetting everything he had learned about CPR, he began to pump on the chest. He had practiced this more times than he could count, but never on a real victim. Nothing happened. He felt awkward, inept. I'm going to be sick, he thought, as he leaned over the chalk-white face, but he forced himself to breathe into the slack lips. When he looked up, he saw Lonnie on the fast approaching shore, teeth clamped tight together, eyes narrowed. He had his arms around Julie, trying to hold her back, but she pushed away from him, screaming, her skin still streaked red from the river mud.

Then Lonnie was towering above him, pulling him off the body. "Stop. She's breathing. She's out cold, but she's alive." Lonnie placed a sleeping bag over Georgia and began to rub her arms and legs under the cover.

Raymond straightened up. For the first time, he took in the circle of guides and passengers crowding around the raft, staring at him, silent.

Once on the raft, Lonnie turned Georgia's head, feeling for the cut, which was bleeding more profusely now that she was out of the cold water.

"Poor old girl," he said. "We'll get you out of here." He pressed his fingers on the wound to stop the bleeding. His fingers quickly colored red.

"We've radioed for the chopper," he told Raymond. "She might wake up before it gets here, but in any case, she has to be evacuated."

The sun had begun to set. The crowd on shore was moving around now, talking in low tones. Raymond sat in the raft, chilled in his wet bathing suit, scanning the skies for the helicopter. He caught a glimpse of Julie and quickly looked away. Her face had turned an ugly shade of white; her short dark hair stood in wet peaks from her swim.

"She's going to be okay," Lonnie said. "She's breathing."

Julie looked over at the motionless body. "She's not okay, you motherfucker," she hissed. "She's unconscious. What do you know?"

Raymond kept his eyes on Georgia, willing her to wake up, watching for each breath, straining to hear the chopping of the helicopter. He didn't notice when someone draped a jacket around his shoulders;

it didn't stop the shivering.

* * *

The first thing she saw was Lonnie's face, close to her—too close. She felt awkward and embarrassed, like she had done something stupid. She raised herself on one elbow.

"Just lie still," a voice said. "You're okay, but you need to stay put. Are you warm enough?"

She could feel her body trembling. "I don't know," she said.

She looked around. Julie was holding her hand, squeezing it so hard it hurt.

"What's going on?" she whispered.

"You swam the rapids; that's all, but thank God you're okay. I was so scared." Julie kept squeezing her hand and laughing or crying, she couldn't tell which.

Georgia heard something that sounded like a motor, humming louder and louder. Once again she raised herself up on an elbow. Strong hands pushed her back.

"It's the helicopter," Julie said. "They're evacuating you."

"Oh God, I feel like a fool." She struggled to get up. "I'm okay. Really."

"Good." A young woman in a hospital-green shirt was checking Georgia's pulse and heartbeat. She then wrapped her in a cocoon of blankets. Georgia lay back and let the warmth take over. She closed her eyes. That felt better.

"Scissors, gauze, tape." she heard the young woman say. Was she bleeding?

She felt a sting in the back of her head and looked at Julie.

"You must have cut your head on a rock. It's not bleeding much. Don't worry."

The young woman asked her questions: Did her head hurt? Was she hot? Cold? Georgia kept insisting she was fine, everything worked.

"We have to take her out," the woman said. "Do a complete physical and mental. Make sure she's okay. But from what I can see, she's none the worse for wear."

As she was being carried to the helicopter, she heard someone say, "Think of the story you have to tell your grandchildren."

Go to hell, she thought.

And then she thought she had screwed up big time and she wanted to go home.

* * *

Even after the whirring of the helicopter had faded, Raymond remained slumped in the raft, his face in his hands. Lonnie sat down beside him and whispered, "Look, she's okay. Get a grip."

But then someone was pulling at him, lifting him to his feet.

Nancy Bourne

"Hey man, you saved her. You're a fucking hero." The passengers were swarming around, giving him high-fives.

He tried to protest, but their noisy congratulations drowned him out.

"What was she trying to do anyway? Jesus, a woman that age, swimming this river, it's crazy," one of the men said.

"What gave her the idea to ride the foam pad that way? I saw Julie. She knew what she was doing."

"Didn't I see her with a beer earlier?"

Raymond looked around for Julie. She was nowhere in sight. He started to explain, to confess his role in the near disaster, but stopped himself. Why make it worse? Georgia was okay. What was the harm if they thought he had saved her? He caught Lonnie's eye and raised his eyebrows, in silent question. But Lonnie just shrugged his shoulders and looked away.

Dinner that night was almost festive. Georgia was safe, they were all safe, a disaster had been averted. They drank Raymond's health until he became slightly dizzy with too much red wine. He was feeling better. There would be the report, of course, and he would have to explain what Georgia was doing in the water. A helicopter save was a black mark. But he already had his answer. The eddy was safe; Julie had ridden it. Georgia hadn't... hadn't what? Followed his advice? No, that wouldn't do. He'd have to work on it.

* * *

After dinner he wandered up a small hill overlooking the campsite, breathing in the dank river air, naming constellations, trying to block out what had happened. The night was dense black against stars so bright you could almost see by them. But he didn't see Julie sitting on the hill until he nearly stumbled over her. Good, he thought. Get it over with.

He sat down next to her and studied her profile, barely visible in the starlight. The sharp lines of her high cheekbones and pointed nose were blurred, soft even. He suddenly wanted to touch her, to lean against her in the darkness.

"Look, I'm really sorry," he began. He could hear the need in his voice. When Julie said nothing, he continued.

"I should have gotten into the water myself and shown her how to ride that pad." Still no response. "It seemed so simple. I mean, you had no problem; you rode that sucker like a pro."

They sat in silence for as long as Raymond could stand it. He finally blurted out, "Say something."

"Do you know why I'm up here?" Her voice was ice. "I came to see the eddy. Before it got dark, you could see it clearly in the water from up here. And guess what?"

He ducked his head. He didn't want to hear it.

"The fucking eddy doesn't come back to the camp like you said. It goes out to the middle of the river and straight toward the rocks. You didn't check it, did you? You know, I almost didn't make it. I was a college swimmer, and I almost got washed away. That river's a killer. I made it back, just barely, but I was too late to stop Georgia. If anything is wrong with her, I'll never forgive myself."

He reached out automatically to touch her. "It's not your fault," he said lamely.

She knocked his hand away. "No. It's your fault," she said. "Yours."

He tried to think of something to say.

"If you'd been acting your fucking age and paying attention to your job, this wouldn't have happened." Julie's voice cut through him.

He felt the wine churning in his belly and he was afraid he would be sick. Scrambling to his feet, he mumbled, "I'm sorry."

But Julie wasn't finished. "You know what I mean, don't you? I don't have to spell it out. I wouldn't have told you this if you hadn't nearly killed Georgia. I'd have let you keep on making a fool of yourself, with me and the next half decent looking woman who came along. But I'm not worrying about your feelings now. I'm telling you straight out. Act your age." She was sobbing now.

* * *

He found Lonnie alone in the dark on his raft.

"What she say?" Lonnie asked.

It was too painful to repeat the words.

"That bad, huh?"

"The truth."

"She told you the truth?"

"Yeah."

"About the eddy?"

"I'm old."

"Yeah? She said that?" Lonnie laughed. "You'll get used to it."

Raymond suddenly pictured Georgia's inert body, her slack lips and scrawny, wrinkled arms. He shuddered.

"Never," he said.