

## The Day the Sky Cracked Open

I woke up at sunrise on the second day of the 120 mile White River canoe race. The morning air was thick with mist and the lingering wet scent of fire from the night before. I peered through the mesh window of the tent out toward the river. The water was completely covered with a blanket of fog, save the two or three inches of suspended air between them. It was flowing at a steady pace against the rocky bank and with little interruption of the glassy surface. Every once in a while, I would see a stick cruise by barely floating above the surface, faintly outlined in the shape of the fabled Loch Ness monster. I let the crisp morning air fill my lungs as I laid my head back down on my Lumberjack camping pillow and tried to go back to sleep, while the far off sound of thunder made low grumbling noises like that of an angry dog.

At the race, the sky was almost as black as dusk and the mist on the water was still thick. The dark clouds were packed tightly like stones, ready to fall at any moment. Bolts of lightning would occasionally illuminate our faces as we stared up while our stomachs would nervously voice our concern. We will have the race, one of the officials announced. If the thunder comes less than five seconds apart pull your boat over and wait. With clenched fingers, we cautiously eased our boat into the ice cold water. We both stood up to our knees with the White filling ever crevice of our shoes, staring out at what we could see of the river before us, until we could no longer feel. The water seemed more brisk and there was a new wind out of the east that chapped our lips and found its way easily through the fabric of our T-shirts. Rain drops began to fall lightly around us. I watched them land on the gunwales of the boat and race each other to the pool forming in the bottom around my red Teva sandals.

Paddlers ready? 5,4,3,2,1, BANG! The starter pistol went off, muffling the shouts of the thunder for a moment. The flow of the river was disrupted by the sharp blades of our graphite paddles cutting just above the pebbled bottom. The smooth shaft of the paddle became slick in my grasp and rubbed blisters on my palms. As we turned the bend, the clouds cracked and expelled a torrent of freezing rain. I could feel the drops as they landed on the top of my head and trickled their way down between my strands of hair onto my scalp. The water flooded my eyes until everything was a misshapen blur. My throat was raw from shouting, and felt as if I had just swallowed sand paper. The paddle grew heavier and heavier with each stroke and made my muscles cry for relief. My arms were on fire, but my body was cold. An arctic breeze off the river shook me until my bones hurt. We are sinking, Ruth yelled through the unceasing din. I stared through miasma eyes at where my feet had been resting in the bottom of the boat. The frigid water had been slowly inching up my legs and was now level with my knees making the sides of the boat almost level with the water. The river began to invade our boat over the gunwales like the Huns into China. Tornado sirens stabbed at our ears like the aggravated groan of fighting cats. Then the sky began to stone us with hail as if we were biblical criminals. Each hit felt like bullets on my skin. I kept my head tucked low. The sky bellowed again as we rounded a swift turn.

Finally we spotted the iron bridge, a mere phantom in the mist. The world grew quiet, all I could hear was the violent pounding of my heart inside my head and the slow closed breaths I was taking through dry quivering lips