

# THE CATARACT BIG DROPS

THE STORY OF A RAFT TRIP THROUGH  
CATARACT CANYON ON THE COLORADO RIVER  
CANYONLANDS NATIONAL PARK, UTAH  
MAY 1991

RICHARD BUNN, TRIP LEADER AND BOATMAN  
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TULSA, OKLAHOMA

# THE CATARACT BIG DROPS

CATARACT CANYON, COLORADO RIVER, CANYONLANDS NATIONAL PARK, MAY 1991  
THE TRUE STORY OF A PRIVATE RIVER TRIP  
LIVED AND WRITTEN BY RICHARD BUNN

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# THE CATARACT BIG DROPS

THE STORY OF A RIVER ADVENTURE BY RICHARD BUNN

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## THE CAMP

### CANYON DAWN

Dawn. Just a hint of light in the sky, the blue and white nylon fabric of the tent starting to glow slightly. Not the intense light of a high desert moon, but the soft, gentle glow of canyon dawn.

A raucous bird in the distance calling to something, and a dull roar in the distance. The dull roar was why we were here, the dull roar was why my body felt electrified at 5:00 A.M. Utah time. The dull roar was Big Drop 1 about a quarter mile downstream.

The lady beside me is stirring gently. "I have to go to the bathroom" she mumbles, obviously not awake yet.

### POTTY TRAINING

She squirms into her clothes and out the tent opening. Off to the wet sand to deal with morning urination. River trippers are real good about caring for the beaches and wilderness. They almost always pack out more trash than they bring in, the excess usually deposited by power boaters, picnickers and fisherman upstream. Not bad folks, just not sensitized to how ugly a piece of styrofoam is in a place as magnificent as this canyon. Solid human wastes are deposited in a homemade "porta-potty" that consists of an army surplus 20mm rocket can lined with a plastic bag. The plastic bag is packed out and disposed of at the take-out. A standard toilet seat mounted on the top of the box provides a stable support.

But liquid human waste present a logistical problem and the enormous volumes of water in the river quickly dilute any amounts that we can add. Lost in a torrent of silt, spring run-off and uncountable tons of leached urine from mountain goats, deer, various other wildlife and thousands of domestic cattle. It is high water on Cat, end of May, and the river is flowing about 32,000 CFS (cubic feet per second!) This is equivalent to the volume of two moderate sized homes floating by every second! Lots of water, lots of tension.

### A QUIET TIME

We are camped maybe 10 yards up from the boats, in about the exact middle of the length of a beach 75 yards long and 30 yards wide. The beach slopes up from the sandy water line to brush and rocks on the canyon side. Boats on the river side, other members of the party on the other 3 sides. But well spread out, 14 people in groups of 1 or 2 scattered across the beach. 12 people in what appeared to be blissful sleep, 1 person moving around dealing with the realities of nature and 1 person laying awake pondering the current state of affairs.

Footsteps shuffling in the sand signal the lady's return. A glimpse of her jacket is visible as it sweeps between the tent and a narrow sliver of a view of the canyon wall on the other side of the river. She crawls back into the tent, quietly zips up the door and slips under the sheet that she was covered with last night. That's the nice part of a raft trip, you can carry stuff. Lots of stuff, to make dining, and sleeping a more comfortable experience. We both laid back to enjoy the morning.

We've laid here for quite a while now. The sun is getting higher in the sky. Since waking, the inside of the tent has gone from a soft glow to a bright but not yet intense light. The canyon walls stretching up on river right (the west side) are bathed in sunlight. The beach, although still in the shade, is rapidly getting brighter.

What a place to wake up. Cataract Canyon on the Mighty Colorado River in Canyonlands National Park. 15 miles below the confluence of the Green and the Colorado. At spring run-off.

## THE PARTY

I don't even know what day this is, it seems like an eternity since we left the flatlands of Oklahoma to drive west to Moab and Canyonlands. I guess it was a week and a day ago that we left, 7 of us from Tulsa. Besides myself and my girlfriend Robyn, there was my 18 year old son, Greg, and his friend Randy. Diane, a friend of Robyns, had said she wanted to go and here she was. David, a progressive boater who has a solar powered cataraft and another Randy, a friend from the Sierra Club who was taking his kayak. A day after we left Tulsa, on Friday I think, we met up with Larry, a boating friend from Grand Junction. We drove from there to the Mineral

Bottom put-in in Canyonlands and met 3 more members of the party, Donna and Mindy from Idaho and Bryan from Montana. 2 more folks showed up later that evening, Tom and Shannon from California. The next day Bob, another California boater, showed up. A total of 14 folks and 6 rafts plus a kayak. Tom and Bob are professional river guides in California, Larry is an accomplished and experienced private river runner, and David has had some good experience on the Grand Canyon. Greg has rowed a number of decent runs including the Green through LaDore at 8,000 CFS and the Arkansas in Colorado at 3,500 CFS, both good water levels. Randy the kayaker has plenty of experience on smaller rivers but has never run anything comparable to what we know we will see on this trip. I have been boating since 1986 and have run plenty of water to qualify me for this trip, including a 1986 run down the same river at over twice the anticipated maximum flow. The boatmen are well prepared.

Robyn has been on a previous low water Cat trip. Diane and my son Greg's friend Randy have never been on a whitewater trip before.

## **THE FLATWATER**

Let's see, where have we been? A slow, scary switch-back road down to Mineral Bottom for the put-in. We missed Anderson Bottom camp the first night, full of canoers, had to go on down below Holeman Canyon and camp on a sand bar river left. Second night was at Turks Head, a beautiful ledge camp river right. Yeah, that was the afternoon we motored back upstream and hiked a bunch of Anasazi sites. Wow, what an experience. Boaters do real good, these sites were in great shape, obviously left alone by the floaters except for pictures.

And then the hikes up Jasper and Water Canyons, marvelous places rivaling anything the Grand Canyon has to offer. We missed the camps at Water Canyon, they were all occupied, went on down to a narrow, steep sand bar that I named "Cruel Joke". I named it for the location of the shitter, up 3 steep sand rises, through some trees then back down a steep slope. Private, yes. Convenient, no. And that was the night I got diarrhea and was needing it bad. Oh, well.

Then, Lower Spanish Bottom. Up the steep slope. All the gear, up the steep slope. And I'm sick as a dog, must have been the flu that Tom had when he arrived. And the sea of yellow and red flowers. Unbelievable. Glorious. Bright yellow, crimson red. Acres of color against a background of earth tones. Sandstone. Rising to meet the sky, and there, where the intense blue of the sky and the subdued grays and reds of the rock merge at a sharp, startling line, is the Doll House. Huge towers of rock the size of a high rise office building. But so much more magnificent. God's country. and done on a cosmic scale.

## **YESTERDAY**

### **BROWN BETTY**

We left Lower Spanish Bottom yesterday about 1:00 P.M. It was chilly and overcast, not good for the first day of rapids. Everything up to this point had been flatwater. Moving fast but flat. Now things were about to change. The river narrows up due to differences in the hardness of the surrounding rock and the pace picks up. We ran the first rapid, Brown Betty, with no problem except that Randy the kayaker went out of his kayak and was picked up quickly by Greg. No harm done. The water level was about 30,000 yesterday. At 57,000 CFS Brown Betty has chunks of water the size of a small house shooting straight up about 2-3 feet. But at 30,000 it was pretty benign. Nice waves, a good start but no threat.

### **RAPID #8. THE FIRST BIG HOLE**

#8 rapid was worth scouting but the lead boat, rowed by Larry, went right on by. I should have planned for this, Larry doesn't like to scout. So all of a sudden there it was, a huge, thundering hole on river left.

A "hole" is literally a depression in the river. The water, usually because of a submerged object such as a rock, drops down over the object and then, at the downstream end of the hole, there is a wave where the water that went down is coming back up. At certain conditions the wave can be pretty big and breaking back with enough force to stop a raft and hold it in the hole. If you don't get out soon you may go sideways, the wave will get under the downstream side of the boat and, quicker than you can holler "Oh Shit!", you are upside down.

A shallow hole without a large reversal wave is called a pour-over and a big hole is nearly a waterfall. A person can get caught in a hole and re-circulated. Recirculation in a hole is a terrifying experience.

### **UP AND DOWN, LIGHT AND DARK**

First you go into the water, for one reason or another. The dropping water hits you and crashes over you with more power than you can

imagine. You are pummeled, thrashed, turned end-over-end and forced deeper under the water in the hole. The water drags you unmercifully down with it, until it eventually turns horizontal along the bottom and continues on downstream. Now, unless you are a complete fool, you have a lifejacket on and that jacket starts to float you toward the surface. As you proceed upward toward the surface you leave the water that is going downstream and you encounter the surface water in the hole, which is moving upstream. It carries you upstream and suddenly **BOOM!** you are back in the dropping water where you were first dragged under and the whole procedure starts again. On a pleasure scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being good sex and 1 representing falling in fresh, warm doggy doo while yawning, being recirculated in a hole is well below zero. It is a horrifying experience. Up and down, light and dark. If it goes on for very long you begin to think that this is all you are going to be doing for the rest of your life.

But, fortunately, most holes will spit you out in time. Most holes, not all holes. Warm Springs on the Yampa is a killer and so is Skull on Westwater, just south of Cisco, Utah. Low water dams are almost always killers. Cataract Canyon has a good record. Due in part to the excellent permitting and inspection performed by the Canyonlands National Park Service river unit in Moab, but also because Cataract is big water. Lots of pad between you and the rocks. And the holes will (almost) always spit you out in plenty of time to give you a good scare and a great story but nothing more.

This is the intellectual approach to river risk management. You have the right gear, you have the right skills, you know what to expect and you know how to react in an emergency.

### YAHOO! WHAT FUN!!

But, all of a sudden, slightly unexpectedly, there it is. #8, the one we were going to scout. A huge, thundering hole that could swallow a tractor-trailer. The top of the hole was not too steep, but the wave was huge, breaking back upstream, reaching its white tentacles back toward the boat. And there at the bottom of the hole, below the tentacles, nearly hidden from view by the grabbing, clawing wave was a mouth. A mouth that yawned open and invited us in.

Line the boat up quick, hit it straight, we dropped down into #8 then, suddenly the bow of the 16', fully loaded Avon explodes. 1500 pounds of boat, people and gear pointing straight to the sky. The 2 women in the bow of the boat are convinced we have stumbled upon the worlds greatest water park, they look around laughing and giggling, I smile and whoop. But inside my mind the words "Oh, Shit!" are bouncing off all sides of my skull. That was a big wave. And I know the holes in Cat are fairly benign, I know (I am fairly sure) that my passengers and I will get washed out of the hole, but still, my stomach feels it, even when #8 is behind us.

We continued on down river, the plan was to scout "Mile Long" the name given to rapids #13-#20. At high water these are a fairly continuous set of rapids with short pools between them making rescue difficult. Water level makes all the difference in how difficult or threatening a rapid is. Some rapids get "washed out" at high water, i.e., they disappear, while some otherwise modest rapids get big and pushy and mean. So you scout even when you've run the stretch before.

### SCOUTING "MILE-LONG"

We stopped yesterday to scout Mile Long. We stopped above #15, took off our wet suits and hiked down to scout it. #15 is called "Capsize" due to some unfortunate experiences of early river travelers. Capsize looked OK, we hiked on down further to see the bottom of Mile Long. The canyon walls on both sides get very steep here, it is nearly impossible to look at anything past #16 and even that is a ways downstream.

We planned to form up again below #17 and scout lower Mile Long, there appeared to be an eddy, a slack water area near the shore, just below #17 on river right. Downstream we went without incident. I was just pulling into the eddy below #17 when we saw Randy the kayaker go by, out of his boat, "swimming" is the term. I tried to pull back into the main stream but I was already quite a ways down the eddy. I could see what looked like a large pour-over next to the shore on river right just below the bottom of the eddy, I tried to clear it but it became quickly evident that we were in trouble. "Hey, ladies, this doesn't look too good!" I tried to warn them but they were still in a water park mode.

### REALITY SETS IN

The boat crested the top of the pour-over and plunged straight into the hole on the downstream side of the pour-over. The water dropping over the rock was falling probably 6-8 feet and when the boat settled in the hole the falling water poured into the stern of the boat and pulled it down. I was hit by the full force of the dropping water and washed over the side. A stupid mistake, not paying attention, getting distracted but there we were. I was out of the boat and still clinging to my oar. I have 10' wooden oars that were leashed to the rowing frame with nylon rope about 1.5' long. I was holding onto the oar handle, the oar was in the water and held only by the nylon leash, my

hand was at least 9' under water and my body was being washed straight down below that. And I still couldn't hold on.

I finally lost my grip and was washed underwater for a short distance downstream. I popped up next to an eddy about 20 yards downstream and to the right of the boat. I glanced back and the boat was still in the eddy below the pour-over. Not in any danger, just not going anywhere. The women didn't even know I was missing yet.

The eddy was full of typical high water trash, mostly forest debris. After I swam into it I was washed upstream in a fairly heavy current. Straight toward a substantial twig, branch and log jam. Not something I wanted to become intimate with, I swam hard for the shore and pulled myself out onto a rock. The water was cold, but I was OK and not hypothermic. Hypothermia is the greatest danger on a high water run. Most of the water in the river was snow just a few days ago and it can be quite cold. The further we traveled downstream the warmer the water got, but the prospect of a long swim was still not attractive. We had removed our wet suits when we scouted Capsize, just a few minutes ago.

### THE RESCUE

My boat had finally floated free of the eddy below the pour-over and the women were on their way downstream. I think they had finally figured out that this was not a magnificent water park. This was a magnificent river canyon at peak spring run-off...the real thing. Safety talks seldom sink in properly.

After my boat, with the no longer giggling ladies in it, had floated free of the eddy Greg had jumped from his boat, swam a short distance to their boat, hoisted himself over the side (no small feat), and taken the oars. In doing so he left his first-time river trip friend Randy sitting in a boat with no boatman, in a small eddy.

As soon as Greg had grabbed the oars, the boat started running a series of absolutely huge holes in the river. 15' further left and there would have been no holes to hit, but the power of a river is enormous and you go where it wants you to go. You can make suggestions, but where you are determines where you will be. You go with the flow, like it or not. They went through the holes. But he kept the boat straight and, except that it was full of water clear to the top of the tubes, everyone was OK. He eddied out river right about 1/4 mile below where I had blown out and they tied up to a rock.

### HITCHING A RIDE

Meanwhile, his friend Randy was drifting out of the eddy. Greg hollered out "Grab the oars and pull back into the eddy, you're drifting out!". Well, this was a first time river tripper, never had a pair of oars in his hands. So he jumps in the boatman's seat, grabs the oars and pulls...the wrong direction. The boat, a 14' self-bailer, jumped into the current and started downstream. Toward a series of 3 of the biggest rapids around. At peak spring run-off.

Bob picked me up shortly after I pulled myself out on the rock in the log-jam eddy. He ran the left side of the bad stuff that Greg had hit with my boat. As we went by the big holes I was appalled. Holy Cow! These things were **HUGE!** Or maybe my swim had taken a toll on my nerve. No, these things were just enormous.

I glanced back once and caught sight of Bob at the oars. Total concentration. You could see it in his face. I was glad Bob was along, he was a good hand in high water.

We eddied out next to Greg and the ladies on the shore where they had pulled out. I jumped onto the rocky shore and Bob pulled out into the current and headed downstream...to try and catch up with Randy the first-time boatman who was drifting toward the Big Drops.

### NO BAIL BUCKET!

The women were terrified. They had not known I was gone for some time. They had turned around, enjoying the action of running the pour-over and, horror-of-horrors!, there was no boatman! I had warned them that this was one of the possible outcomes of running Cat at high water. They hadn't really listened.

Suddenly there was a new crisis. "Where is the bail bucket?" I asked them. "We lost it!" they replied. Uh-Oh. Not good! You gotta' have a bail bucket if you don't have a self-bailer. We had started out with 2, now we didn't have any. This boat was full of water to the top of the tubes, the floor had sagged, as is normal, and the total boat, gear and water probably weighed in at somewhere over 7,000 pounds! Not a very maneuverable vessel when all you have are oars, especially in the middle of the lower part of Mile Long where the current is strong and things happen fast.

I looked up, hoping to catch the ear of the folks in Bob's boat who were moving downstream ahead of us, but to no avail. The roar of the rapids, the power of the water, drowned out the sounds. We could barely hear each other there on the shore.

Suddenly, as I looked out across the river, I saw Tom and Shannon going downstream. They were on the bottom of their boat! They had obviously flipped and crawled up on the bottom to get out of the water, a good move. I guessed right away that it would do no good to ask them if they had an extra bail bucket, they looked totally occupied. We waved, they waved...and on downstream they went, toward the Big Drops...upside down. I should have gotten excited but I didn't. These are just things you have to deal with, getting excited doesn't help.

I jumped into our boat and was immediately submerged nearly to my chest. The floor was sagging that much. I had no idea what I was going to do but I knew that we would very likely run the Big Drops this evening, a day earlier than planned, if we didn't get the water out of the boat. I was looking around for something, **anything!**, to bail with when I felt a bump on my leg. I reached down under the water and, what luck! it was the bail bucket!! There was so much water in the forward compartment of the boat that these women had completely lost a 5-gallon bucket! I was elated, we had been in big trouble and it had suddenly evaporated!

I bailed for a good while, Greg took over and did a stint. Bailing is back-breaking work, it will sap you quickly if there is much of it to do and we had more than our share. We finally got the boat dry enough to shove off. I rowed it out of the eddy and we headed downstream. The big concern now was what had become of Randy the first time boater. There were 2 capable boatmen with self-bailers in front of Tom and Shannon and their flipped boat, but we didn't know if there were any boats in front of the other derelict.

### ON THE ROAD AGAIN

We wound our way past a few small holes, it looked like the worst was over. We sighted Larry hiking upstream on river left, looking for us. We eddied out and picked him up. He quickly confirmed that all was well. Randy had managed to figure out the rudiments of rowing very quickly and, with a little coaching from Larry, had managed to pull his craft out at the camp.

Larry is a funny guy. He is a very capable boatman, even if he doesn't like to scout. I think he doesn't like to scout 'cause he doesn't like to think too long about the possibilities. And about 3 days into a trip Larry is overcome with something and he gets real moody. Then it passes and he's himself again. And Larry is great in a place like this. When your butt is on the line there is nobody that I would rather be with than Larry. And so off we went toward camp, everything had gone OK despite ample opportunity to do otherwise.

### LEGENDS OF MILE-LONG

Bob had tied onto Tom and Shannon and pulled them into a big eddy and Dave had picked up Randy the kayaker. Everybody was safe, the risk management plan had worked, no one was worse for the wear. Except that the ladies in my boat were now terrified of whitewater. "You never told us it would be like that!" they screeched, BULLPUCKY!, "Don't you remember the picture of the 23' J-rig standing on it's rear end in the wave at Big Drop 2? Remember the wave extended past the top (front) end of the boat?" I mumbled back, "Yes. but I didn't think it would be like that!" their reply. Oh, well. Ya' buy 'em books and buy 'em books and all they do is eat the covers. But now they knew, now when the safety talks were going on they would listen, they were sensitized, they were experienced boaters. The old saying goes "There are only 2 kinds of boatmen, those who have (flipped) and those who will (flip)." "Shit Happens" must have been coined on a river.

### BEAUTY IN DIM LIGHT

I looked at BD 1 last night, just to be sure we were in the correct camp, just above the Big Drops. I had seen it, it had looked OK. And on the way back I had seen the most beautiful white flower in the middle of the trail. Glorious, almost fluorescent white petals with dark, thick leaves. Brilliant against the dimly lit sand and pebbles of the trail in the failing light of canyon twilight. Incredible, an absolutely wondrous place. Edward Abbey had his stuff together about this place, it is truly a marvel of nature and a monument. A monument of cosmic scale, to the tenacity of life.

### A JOB WELL DONE

Dinner was excellent last night, shish kabob. You eat well on a river trip, it is a point of honor to do a good job on your turn at cooking and everybody usually goes all out. Because of all the excitement of the day it had been fairly late when we finally got into camp and dinner was done by the light of propane lanterns. The stories of what happened during the day were told and retold from different perspectives. It was great. Everybody was OK, the gear was in good shape, the food was good and the Big Drops were just ahead, just around that little bend to the left about a 1/4 mile ahead.



The vivid memories of yesterday drifted through my brain as we lay there. The sun continued to climb. The canyon wall across the river was now intensely illuminated by the morning sun, the shade line was hitting the river. It wouldn't be long before the sun was hitting the beach. Pleasantly warm at first. Then, not knowing when to stop, becoming a broiling spotlight, sucking the vital fluids from our bodies.

What a place to wake up. Cataract Canyon at spring run-off. Now, still laying here, my thoughts drift toward the day ahead, running the Big Drops.

## **RECOLLECTIONS OF THE BIG DROPS**

The Big Drops are 3 separate rapids. Big Drop 1 is #21 on the USGS map. It is a compression wave that gets absolutely immense at high water. This time Big Drop 1 is a substantial but not threatening rapid. Almost any rapid can flip a boat, but the probability of a successful run (shiny side up, no flip) can drop dramatically if the rapid is especially mean, if the wave breaks back over or if there are large holes above or below the rapid. Big Drop 1 was no problem today. But just a few hundred yards below the tail waves of 1 was the entry to Big Drop 2.

Big Drop 2 can be an easy, mildly technical run at low water. At high water it turns into an immense, river wide obstacle. Able to flip a boat end over end. Or let it go through.

And then, as soon as you get past BD 2, the fun begins. At high water the tail waves of BD 2 continue on to the entry of Big Drop 3, "Satan's Gut".

The real namesake of BD 3, "Satan's Gut" is the far left side run, a really nasty place. At low water there is a narrow slot of water down the left side of the river, just to the right of the "Gut", at high water the "Gut" is a terrifying place but there is a run down the middle and the right side.

I had hiked down to BD 1 last evening, and on past BD1 far enough to positively identify BD 2. But I couldn't get a very good look in the fading light and BD 3 was out of sight. I didn't know what to expect, but I knew it would be exciting.

These are the thoughts traveling through my brain as I lay here. Comfortable in the pleasant morning light inside the tent, but feeling the anxiety building. Contemplating the possible outcomes of the events that lay ahead.

## **A RETURN TO THE SCENE OF THE CRIME**

### **CLEANLINESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS**

Other people are stirring in the camp. The sun is hitting the beach, ignoring it is becoming impossible, it is time to get up.

A trip to the potty, wash my hands and back to the kitchen area for some coffee. Hygiene is important on a long wilderness trip. Intestinal problems brought on by ingesting unfamiliar bugs can take all the fun out of a wilderness adventure. Soap and water laced with chlorine bleach were the solution.

### **FEMALE CONSPIRATORS**

There is a little clutch of women sitting on a log a short distance from the table, they are talking in soft voices. I can't make out what they are saying, but it looks serious. When a bunch of women get together and look like they are serious it is truly a time to beware. "We are going to hike the Big Drops" one of them announces, why doesn't this surprise me? "No problem", I'm not about to encourage someone to run the Big Drops, it's just got too much obvious risk. If they don't feel comfortable with boating it then, no problem, hike it. Even though the actual risk of physical injury is greater in hiking over the boulder fields to get below the Big Drops than it would be to boat it. But, after yesterday, and after looking at BD 1 it wouldn't be easy to get that concept across so why try!

### **WARMING UP**

David and Brian are planning to hike up to see the holes we ran yesterday. I am sort of interested in getting a view of the pour-over I ran, although I know it's quite a distance back upstream. There is a trail up the bank a ways, probably an animal track. Diane and Robyn are interested in taking a look at the scene of yesterday's mayhem, so we plan to go. David and Brian take off. After a few trips back for water bottles and such the girls are ready to go, the 3 of us strike out. It is getting on toward 10:00 A.M., the sun is bathing the entire canyon in a hot, baking, intensely bright light. The heat is beginning to reflect off the walls and rocks of the canyon and turn the place

into an inferno.

Robyn is having trouble keeping up, she is way behind. Diane finally decides to go back, the animal trail has quickly disappeared and the rest of the hike is boulder hopping, a tough way to take a hike. I have been carrying Robyn's water bottle for her, Diane takes it back to Robyn and I head on upstream to catch David and Brian.

### YOU HAD TO BE THERE

We are camped at about mile 203 and rapid #18 is just about mile 204, so we had only about a mile to hike up. But it is hot, it is getting on toward 11:00 A.M. now and we have the Big Drops to run. David and Brian stop to rest, I catch up with them. They are just opposite a fairly big hole in the center of the river. We look upstream and downstream and don't really see another hole any bigger than this one. This must have been the biggest anybody hit yesterday. But it didn't look so big. Not with canyon walls reaching 600-700 feet above the river bank and not with the sun looking almost straight down on the river. It is disappointing. But we know. We know how big these things really were, how huge they looked as you would skirt them or, if you were not set up just right, as you ran the center of them. They were huge. But the river is clever and the river will not reveal her secrets until you give yourself over to her, until you are within her grasp. And then she will show you the truth, then she will show you how big these holes are. But not now, not from the safety of the bank, not with a warm sun beating down on us.

We start back, disappointed but not unhappy. It is a rough hike back, getting hotter all the time. We arrive back at camp about noon. David and Brian find some shade and water and relax awhile. Larry, Bob, Mindy, Randy and Tom have gone on up to scout BD 1, 2 and 3. The current plan is to run BD 1, then eddy out on river left just above BD 2 to set up for pictures and scout BD 2 and 3.

### THE SCOUT

#### ANOTHER LOOK AT 1

I scouted Big Drop 1 yesterday, in the fading light of the canyon evening. And the glorious white flower in the trail was all I could think of. But today, in the midday glare, only thoughts of Big Drop 1 prevail and I think I'll have another look, it won't hurt.

There is no failing light now, we are in the middle of a blast furnace. I am tired from the hike upstream but BD 1 is only about 1/4 mile downstream, good trail all the way. It won't be that big a deal to hike down and take another look. I take off my hiking shoes and put on a pair of Tevas, fine for hiking on trails. Not something I would choose for an extended boulder hopping event, but the trail to BD1 is good. My water bottle has a little left in it, I'll be gone only a little while, I set off for BD 1.

#### A CHANGE OF PLANS

About half-way to BD 1 I meet the folks who have hiked down to BD 3. "Looks pretty bad", Larry says as I approach them, I am not surprised. "Everybody should scout before we run BD 1 in case they have to swim." He's right, scouting for the swim is part of the risk management of boating. "We should probably run all the drops in one shot, not eddy out above 2, just go on through". Larry's right again, the eddy above 2 is a convenient and traditional place to scout 2 and 3 but getting back into the current and set up for BD 2 is not without its drawbacks. "OK, take my water bottle back, have Greg and Randy fill it and bring it on up with them, I'll start on." Fatigue doesn't really prevent good thinking, it just alters the relative weight of the options. Should I wear hiking shoes for the trip to BD 3? Sure, but then I would have to hike back and get them. Not far, but too far considering how tired I am already. And how tired I would be when I got back from BD 3. The hike upstream to see the site of yesterday's events was not looking like such a good idea right now.

I take off, and within 10 minutes I can tell that I have made a mistake. I am thirsty. And it is getting hotter, the canyon walls reflecting the heat, concentrating it on me, focusing its power. The trail runs out and it is back to boulder hopping.

#### A SANDAL BLOWOUT

2 J-rigs, large inflatable commercial motor boats made from army surplus bridge pontoons, had gone by earlier and as I round a slight left bend in the canyon I see them pulled out on the left just above BD 2. I am thirsty, it is really hot. And about 100 yards short of where the J-rigs are pulled out, my left sandal blows out. The strap that runs across the forward part of the foot has pulled loose from the sole of the sandal, allowing the sandal to slide sideways on my foot. Not really optimal for hopping across large, sharp rocks.

I reach down and tighten the ankle strap. But the sandal still tends to slide sideways off my foot. I limp up to a tree with maybe 12-15 German folks enjoying the shade, passengers from the J-rigs. I nod as I pass, they nod and continue to chatter in German. Like we'd just met on the main street of some town instead of the bottom of Cataract Canyon. I can tell they are hot but happy, the boatmen on the

commercial trip are doing a good job.

The commercial boatmen are standing on a large rock overlooking BD 2. I climb up with them, they are quite young, probably college students, this is their summer job. They are very pleasant, we look out over the rapid. It looks very nasty.

### A VIEW OF BIG DROP 2

At low water you can see the topography of the bottom of the river at Big Drop 2. House sized rocks on the right side of the river create a huge 1/3 river wide hole known as "Little Niagara". A truly nasty hole with the potential to recirculate a swimmer for an uncomfortably long time.

Another house sized rock in the middle of the river but 30 yards upstream from Little Niagara creates a handy little marker hole at high water, a good place to use as a mid river locator on the run into BD 2. A large, breaking compression wave on the left side effectively seals off the remainder of the river so the run is between the left corner of Little Niagara and just to the right of the marker hole.

The big wave on the left is particularly mean looking today, lots of unpredictable opportunities for a major foul up, plus you are then perfectly set up to run the Gut, not good. A large log floats by, I mentally mark the position of its passage point between the canyon walls as it approaches BD 2. It just skirts the edge of Little Niagara, floats almost free of any big waves and continues on through the middle of BD 3, barely clearing the Gut.

### FOOLISH PRIDE

I stare at BD 2 for quite a while, it is truly an awesome experience. The waves are curling and breaking. Rising and falling, coming and going. With a force and energy that overwhelms the ability to comprehend. Huge chunks of liquid being hurled through the air, crashing down in a mist of white spray. Accompanied by a sound like a jet engine being run up at the end of a runway prior to takeoff. I don't want to look too long, I say adios to the boatmen and head toward BD 3. I am thirsty but too embarrassed to ask for water. Only a fool would hike down the canyon without water and I imagine the explanation that "I've got a full bottle on the way" will sound a little weak. I am hot and very dry, the thirst is sapping my strength. And only a fool would let his pride prevent him from asking for water in the desert. Oh, well.

I stumble on down the boulder field. The loss of energy from dehydration combined with the unsure footing provided by my blown out sandal is creating a hazard for me. I'm carrying a camera, so one hand is occupied. The other one I use to catch myself when jumping between boulders or sliding down steep boulder faces. Some of these rocks are the size of a small shed.

### SCOUTING BIG DROP 3

#### **NO PLACE TO HIDE**

I am slipping lots more than usual, I can tell I am losing coordination. It is becoming worrisome however stopping is not attractive since there is no shade until I get clear to the BD 3 overlook, and the heat itself is taking its toll. Finally, there it is. Evil incarnate. I can see why someone would name it "Satan's Gut". It looks nasty.

#### **SATAN'S GUT**

The actual artifact, "Satan's Gut", is a ledge drop on the far left side of the river that is seriously nasty, not a place where any sane person would plan to go. Mayhem, utter mayhem. Havoc, violent destruction. White, boiling, churning water falling over sharp, rocky ledges. Very bad. And this is where the river exposes its perverse sense of humor. Most of the water running through BD 2 goes to the left, straight toward the Gut, turning only at the last moment to run through the center of the river. Turning late enough that a boat that has not made a major effort to pull back to the right will almost certainly run the Gut. This is certainly not one of the places on the river where the excellent statistics regarding the extremely low incidence of injuries and deaths on Cat give you a warm feeling of comfort. Surely the statistics are what they are because no one goes through the Gut...certainly not on purpose.

#### **THE EASY WAY OUT**

If you are not depressed enough to want to run the Gut you have 2 alternates, 1) run the middle of the river which is the most likely result of a good run through BD 2, or 2) you can get fancy and cut the run past Little Niagara really thin, just hitting the far left edge of the hole. Then you pull into the eddy on the right below BD 2 and set-up to run a 2-lane road wide slot of water that runs between a big, nasty flipper hole against the right bank and a partially exposed rock about 30 yards off the right bank. This second alternate is the

smoothest but first you have to make the cut below Little Niagara and then you have to manage to miss the flipper hole coming off the right bank.

The mid-river run is not as smooth...not by a long shot.

## **THE MIDDLE SLOT**

The bulk of the river turns just ahead of Satan's Gut and flows to the right. The water is flowing so fast, with so much force at this point that the river actually slopes noticeably down toward the center like a little valley in the middle of the river. And the entry is as smooth as glass, truly a "slick". It looks like a mirror. And then, on the right of the entry is a beautiful, smooth curling wave about 5 feet high. Fingers of water curl up and bend back over to produce a tunnel. A sinister looking tunnel that beckons you in with its beauty, but with the power to grab the bow of your boat, swing it around and then, when you are sideways to the wave, to lift the upstream side of your boat and hurl it over your head, throwing you into the churning maelstrom of the river.

If that one doesn't get you, there is another one on the left side of the run, if the right one doesn't get you it will surely surf you over to the left to give it's companion a shot at you. The second smooth wave, comparable in size and intensity to the first will try to flip you but, if unsuccessful, will simply turn you over to the next obstacle, a huge, churning, unconsolidated wave that ebbs and flows, seemingly alive. It bursts from the river on the right, below the first smooth wave but stretching almost perpendicular to the current, stretching across the river, allowing no passage except through it's boiling, churning center. And it is big, easily 6-7 feet high, sometimes presenting a vertical face to the approaching boater, sometimes breaking back over. If you hit it when it is breaking strongly or is vertical you will probably go on through. If it's breaking strongly the boat will fill with water and punch on through, if it's vertical when you hit it, the inertia of the boat will carry it into the wave and it will probably go on through. But if your boat runs up on the wave just as it starts to crest and come back over, if you hit it at the wrong time, if the river wills it, you will go over. And you will swim the tail waves of BD 3.

## **THE TAIL WAVES OF 3**

The tail waves are big and nasty. If you make it through the first 3 obstacles, and if your arms have any strength left, the tail waves are negotiable. But there are lots of them, and if you let them, any one of them can flip a boat. So you don't get to relax much. And to complicate matters Lake Powell is about 80' below normal this May. Usually the lake comes up to the tail waves of BD 3, but not this year. Usually if you foul up in the Big Drops you will eddy out just below in the slower waters of the lake to recover people and gear. But not this year. This year if you foul up you may swim Imperial Rapid, a rapid that has not been seen for years because of being flooded by the lake waters. Just a little something extra to add to the experience. Yes, the old saying is correct, "Whitewater boating is a game of skill and luck". Indeed.

## ACTING MY AGE

I wait under a thin veil of shade offered by a scrawny little tree growing out between a couple of rocks, wondering why I have subjected myself to this experience. I gaze out over the rapid and watch the water move through. Pretty much a mystical experience, watching the waves jump and play in the river, waves that you know can grab your boat and throw it, toss it into the air.

Greg and Randy show up with my water, it is much appreciated. We watch a while longer, and discuss the run. The run on the right, between the lateral hole on the bank and the rock would be the most attractive run with the middle a second choice if you can't pull into the right side eddy below BD 2. The Gut is not a voluntary option, only a mistake will make the Gut a place to be. And we all know that a mistake is possible...a missed stroke, a bad hit on a wave, getting surfed left in the tail waves of BD 2, any of these things could make the Gut your destination. A short, violent trip through a watery hell.

We start to hike back. I stumble and fall a number of times. My hands are bleeding from catching myself on rocks. "Dad, you're really getting old, I've never seen you fall so much". "I'm tired Greg, I shouldn't have hiked upstream to see the holes we ran yesterday." And that was correct, I shouldn't have.

The water is no longer helping restore my strength. Usually it would have pepped me up, but this time I am so far gone on dehydration, fatigue and anxiety that nothing is working. It is hot and we have a long way to go over no trail/bad trail.

Finally, mercifully, we are back in camp. It is getting on toward 2:00 P.M., marginally enough time to get rigged up and going. Dusk falls early in the canyon because of the high walls. And when the sun goes, when the broiling, baking, burning sun drops behind the cliffs it's not easy to get warm after a long swim. And a long swim was definitely a possibility today.

## RIGGING FOR A FLIP

### BEING A "BOATMAN"

The kitchen and the personal gear ("PG") for my boat are stacked on the beach. The other boats are for the most part rigged. Tom, Larry and Bob were "Fucking With Their Shit", a somewhat rude phrase for focusing complete attention on rigging.

Being "A Boatman" requires a multitude of skills. You obviously have to know how to handle a boat. You also have to know how to cook, how to handle emergencies, how to repair your boat and numerous other minor activities. But most of all, more important than rowing, just as important as knowing how to handle emergencies, is knowing how to rig your boat. For a couple of reasons. First, and most obvious, you don't want to lose all your "Shit" if your boat goes over. So whenever you are running rapids you "Rig For A Flip", i.e., you rig tight enough that you won't lose anything if you end up "shiny side down". Beer is hard to come by on the river and you don't want it floating on downstream without you. But second, and really most important, you don't want your "Shit" to be flailing around under a capsized boat, acting as a trap for an unsuspecting swimmer under the boat.

When the boat goes over you will almost always end up under it for a while. There is air, but there is very little if any light. It's real dark. And the normal person, even a person who has experienced a flip, will not be as relaxed as he or she might otherwise be. So panic is a real factor. And panic is increased when tendrils of rope or straps wrap themselves around your leg or arm. Or a lawn chair or cooler hits you on the head and renders you unconscious. Either of these scenarios can and do happen during river emergencies if the boat comes unrigged, and a good boatman knows this. So, for whatever reason, enlightened self-interest or concern for the passengers, a good boatman rigs his boat so that everything stays in place. No loose, flopping gear, no pieces of rope or strap long enough to wrap around an ankle or wrist. Everything neat and tidy and hell for tight.

### A FAILURE OF WILL

So here we are. Tom and Bob and Larry "Fucking With Their Shit". Tom is quiet, his flip from yesterday may be praying on his mind, I wouldn't be surprised. David rigging his boat for the Big Drops. But he hasn't scouted so he isn't as "AMPED" as Bob would say, i.e., not as wound up. Greg and Randy are quietly rigging their boat with a little assistance from Bob and Larry. There isn't much talking on the beach. I am so hot and tired I just want to jump in and "jacket" the Drops, that is, just float through in a life jacket. Not as insane as it sounds, people have run Cat in jackets before, and a few years 2 guys jacketed the entire length of the Grand Canyon. I am about to convince myself that I am too tired to row.

### LARRY KNOWS

The rigging continues. We load my boat with the gear and I proceed to tie it down. "You gonna' put your drift wood on?" Larry says to me, referring to a particularly attractive piece of driftwood that I had retrieved and had planned to take back with me. I glance over at it, "No, too much trouble." Fatigue changes the relative weight of things. "Can I have it then?" Larry says, "Sure, go ahead" is my quick reply. The piece of driftwood was really special but I was glad it was dealt with. Larry gets the driftwood, then selects a nice piece of rope from his rigging bag. Moving to my boat with the wood and rope cradled in his arms he says "Hey, would you please rig this on your boat for me? I don't have any room left.". He is grinning from ear to ear. Larry knows, he knows how I feel. My heart falls, I try to hide my exhaustion with a snappy reply. "Hey, man, if I carry it through the Big Drops it's goin' home with me!", I tie it on, it's the last thing.

### ANOTHER CHANCE

Except for a sun shower. It had been filled a few days before and Shannon had given it to Robyn and Diane. They hadn't used it and now it was hot and not rigged on. Seeing the shower instantly gives me an idea and hope. "Here, give it to me, I'll take care of it", I take the shower. It feels hot. Fumbling slightly in my haste, I quickly open the fill nozzle, raise the bag above my head and dump the contents over me. For an instant it is unpleasantly warm, but only for an instant. Then the warmth starts to heal me, to relax me, to give me back some strength. Suddenly I have the heart to row the boat again, to give the river another shot at me through the Big Drops. In 1986, at 57,000 CFS I had been ejected from the boat by a big wave crashing over us in Big Drop 2. I didn't want to repeat the performance today, but until I drenched myself with the hot water it looked to be inevitable.

### "LET'S GO!"

So, finally, we're ready. Shannon, Robyn and Diane are going to hike, boulder hopping most of 2 miles. Donna is riding with Tom and Mindy is in Bob's boat. Brian is riding with Larry. Greg and Randy are together and Randy the kayaker is in my boat. Everyone else has a self-bailer, my boat is the only one that really needs a passenger, to bail water out. David is by himself in his 12' cataraft. "Let's

go!", my voice sounds surprisingly strong, belying my inner feelings. I'm nervous, feel weak and somewhat uncertain. But we're here, above the Big Drops and I'm sure not going to back off now. No matter how I feel, I'm in. We row out of the eddy, Larry first, Bob, David, me, Greg and then Tom running sweep. We are going to run all 3 Big Drops consecutively then camp about a mile below BD 3 at Imperial rapid. We have 2 miles to go today, that's all. Just 2 miles.

## RUNNING THE BIG DROPS

### REDUCING OVERHEAD

I feel like puking. Not really right in my throat, just an unsettled stomach, a nervous stomach. I have gotten some strength back and feel somewhat relaxed thanks to the hot water. But I can feel myself starting to run on nerves, I can feel my brain and conscious mind shutting down to concentrate on the river. I am high, high on adrenaline. Not paralyzed with fear but totally, completely focused on the job at hand. And yet, because of the intense feelings, I feel almost detached from the situation. Almost as if I am watching someone else do this, watching someone else row the boat through the Big Drops. And not feeling what they feel. Just watching in a detached way. With no thought of the consequences of their (my!) making a mistake. Just wanting to get done with it, finish what we are surely going to do now, no matter what. It is an eerie feeling, one I have had before. At this very spot in 1986 at 57,000 CFS.

### AN EASY RUN

Randy ran his kayak through BD 1 earlier, his plan is to come back upstream and get it after we are all through. Here we go, through BD 1, right down the center, no problems, hardly took on any water. Within 2 minutes of pulling away from the beach at camp we are through BD 1. The pool below the first drop gives me a chance to review BD 2 in my mind. I see the log going through earlier today. I turn my head toward the intense blue of the sky, looking up both sides of the canyon. A nearly sheer cliff on river right and a talus slope on river left where we had been hiking earlier today. There, off to the left! The tree where the German's had been sitting! We are getting close! Ahead, sparkling in the sun, is the slight rise in the river that identifies the marker hole. And below that, on both sides, are the regular flecks of spray from the water crashing over the horizon line on the river. BD 2 is getting close, very close.

### CALM WATER

Our line between the canyon walls looks good. I watch the bubble lines, just floating flecks of foam really, moving toward the rapid, hypnotized for a moment by their serenity. They are a good indication of where the water is going, of where we will be in another 30 or 40 or 50 yards. I am planning a run through the slot between Little Niagara and the marker hole, just hitting the right edge of the marker hole with the bow of the boat, then pulling hard toward river right to get out of the tail waves of 2 as quickly as possible to set up for 3. The bubble lines say things are still going according to plan. In the silence of this calm water I can feel my heart pounding in anticipation.

I don't know how long it has really been, it seems to have gone by very quickly, maybe 2 more minutes since the bottom of BD 1. But now, there it is. Glaring in the afternoon canyon sun, flashing, sparkling, glowing. It looks like a jewel, a massive piece of natural beauty with uncountable, moving facets. I can hear Little Niagara now, it is loud.

### THE BEST LAID PLANS

I set up at a diagonal to the current, the bow of the boat toward Little Niagara. Now we have it! For sure we will miss Little Niagara! A quick pull on the left oar and the bow swings smartly back left to face the marker hole at a diagonal. Pulling on the oars is by far the most powerful stroke, the old saying is "Face the Danger and Pull Away", that's what I am doing, setting the boat up so that if I am too close I can adjust the position and miss the obstacles. I am too close to the marker hole, we are getting sucked into the edge of the eddy downstream of the rock. No immediate danger, just not a good set-up if we go clear into the eddy. A hard pull on both oars stops our going into the eddy, but the bow catches and the stern of the boat swings around until, instead of being diagonal with the bow downstream and river left as planned, we are pointing upstream and river left. As we swing around I am muttering "Shit!", the only word a boatman can remember in a situation like this. There, we're past it! Just barely behind us, there are 2 other boats. Greg and Tom, nearly on one another and nearly on me! Out of the corner of my eye I catch a glimpse of Little Niagara roaring into it's monster hole. No time to turn my head and stare, but my mind makes a quick display in my brain for me to view, in a distracted way. "I'm sure glad we're not in there!" the display says. Yep, that's right, a sure flip and a bad swim. I guess all my intellectual functions haven't really shut down, they're just staying out of the way.

There, now off to my right, a peripheral view of the big wave on the left of the marker hole. A sideways entry into that wave will be a major mistake. A hard pull on the right oar, a strong push on the left one and the boat comes around. The big wave looms in front of us, I catch the right edge of it, no harm done, past it we go, into the tail waves. 2 major landmarks behind us, but no time for elation, no time

to celebrate.

### A ROWING MACHINE

The tail waves are meaner than they were the last time I was here, at high water in '86. But of course I was swimming that time and didn't have as good a view of them as I do now. This time they are nasty medium to large breakers, curling back over upstream, making threatening gestures. There is barely room between them to get in a couple of quick strokes, then swing around to greet the next one head on, then swing around to ferry right across current with another couple of quick strokes, then swing into the next wave then back to the ferry stroke to avoid Satan's Gut. Oh, lord, how I want to avoid Satan's Gut!

I am a machine. I don't know where we are, I don't see the canyon walls, I don't see the shore. I just see the waves, the troughs and the crests. The spray and the water coming over the bow. I just row. I pull as hard as I think I can and I see the Gut looming ahead. And we are going right for it! And it seems there is no more that I can do than what I am doing. And still I pull harder, and we are still going for it and I pull and pull and, suddenly, as if by magic, as if we have been transported from the entry of a watery hell to paradise (relatively) we are out of danger of running the Gut. The tail waves of BD 2 are gone, behind us.

We are on a slick now, ahead of the center of BD 3. We are moving with the current at a good angle toward river right, away from the Gut but with no chance of hitting the eddy on the far right side. The river has decided, we are going to run the center section.

### THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

A gentle pull on the right oar and the boat swings around. A short break, a chance to "ship" the oars, to pull them out of the water and partly into the boat, to collect my thoughts. And there ahead of us, directly ahead of us, is a beautiful little curler wave about 5 feet high. And to our left is its companion, and further on is a huge, crashing, foaming, snarling monster stretching across the river. And the water ahead and around the boat is flat, smooth, mirror like. Serene. With the sun reflecting off it in streaks. Eerily serene. And the canyon walls ahead are draped in shadows. And it is beautiful. But it is like rowing into hell. I watch a while, I don't know how long, probably only a few seconds. It seems like minutes. Then, as we approach the first wave, I put the oars back into the water, swing the boat to hit the first wave straight and wait. Maybe another minute has gone by since passing Little Niagara, I don't know.

### IN WE GO

I am almost numb at this point, I am almost without feeling. Randy is doing a good job up front, we haven't taken on lots of water yet and there is really no time to bail anyway, so into the waves we go. Hit the first wave, swing into the second, then line up for the big one. Just seconds since the tranquility of the slick at the entry, through the 2 hydras that beckon us into their arms and then we encounter the third wave. Towering over the bow of the boat it reaches over us and slams down on top of us.

We're drenched by the third wave, full to the top of the tubes. Then over the crest and into the tail waves. "Bail, Randy, bail!" My arms are getting tired, very tired. And the tail waves are not so insignificant that they can be ignored.

### "SWIMMER!"

"Swimmer!" Randy yells, I glance over my left shoulder and, sure enough, there is a person in the water. In the slack water below the Gut! Someone, one of our party, has gone over the Gut. I am pulling for an eddy on river left. I am fighting the tail waves and the muscles in my arms are beginning to burn. "Bail, Randy, bail!". Randy was trying, there was just a lot of water in the boat. "Get the throw bag ready in case we get close enough", Randy unclips the throw bag, a rescue device consisting of a small nylon bag full of rope. When the bag is thrown the rope uncoils from inside the bag and allows for very accurate throws to about 20 yards or further. "Bail, Randy, Bail", my voice has a note of desperation in it, my arms are burning, the pain is getting intense.

I miss the first target eddy, we run another modest rapid, at least modest compared to what we have already run. It is still pretty big in it's own right. The throw bag disappears, bailed out of the boat by accident. I continue to negotiate with the waves while moving left in the river to catch the next large eddy.

### HEADING FOR SHORE

The eddy lines are fairly intense. They are wide and it isn't easy to pull into them unless you have plenty of momentum. I hit the eddy line on a particularly big, powerful eddy but the boat is still being pulled downstream, I haven't gotten clear in. I don't want to miss this eddy. My arms are intensely painful, I don't know how much more of this I can take.

More hard pulls on the oars. Finally, just at the bottom end of the eddy where we would have drifted back into the main current the boat starts to head into the shore. We've done it! We've run the Big Drops shiny side up! And we're about to get back on shore to recover! It feels really good. Intellectually. But physically my arms are still on fire. From my wrist through my elbow and up to my shoulder they are on fire. My fingers are wrapped around the grip on the oar, I have to pry them off. Intense, searing pain that feels like it will engulf my entire body. Cramps. Unable to relax my muscles, the pain fails to dissipate. Then, slowly, without regard to my efforts to shake my arms for relief, the pain starts to dribble away. Slowly. But it is going in the right direction and I am feeling better.

## **THE AFTERMATH**

### **REGROUP**

The eddy we are in is a "Forever" eddy, that is, anything that gets in here stays in here, it is full of trash. And my throw bag, and an oar from another boat. But there's a problem upstream and we need to get on up there to see what's happening. We tie the boat off and start hiking up, jackets still on in case we should lose our footing and end up in the river.

In the first eddy upstream we find Greg and Randy, they have come through OK. The next eddy upstream has Larry and Bob in it. David has flipped in the big wave in BD 3 and Bob found him in an eddy, on the bottom of his boat, peacefully going around in circles, only slightly worse for the experience and physically fine.

### **EVERYTHING WILL BE OK**

Donna has not done quite so well. Tom flipped in the top of BD 2 and Donna swam the tail waves and went over the Gut clear up against the canyon wall on river left. We hurry on upstream to meet her, knowing that she will be emotionally shaken by the experience even if she is unharmed physically.

We meet Shannon, Diane and Robyn hiking downstream, they are all OK, although they don't look really happy. I'm not surprised, it's a grueling hike. A short way on up we meet Donna. She is not a happy camper, however she seems lucid and there is no blood on her head wound. While not a good indicator of the severity of the injury it at least provides some small comfort that it could have been worse. Donna looks OK, although she has injured her ankle as well. However she is walking without much difficulty and is quite alert. No sign of impaired mental function or drowsiness in this tough woman, just anger at being subjected to the indignity of the swim.

We hike back to where Larry and Bob are pulled out. Randy the kayaker has gone back for his boat which he had stashed just below BD 1. He started out by himself. The light is fading fast, it seems prudent to send someone with him. Larry says he will go and Brian volunteers to go as well. So we aren't sending out a lone hiker to find a lone hiker. Many accidents on the river happen late in the afternoon, when everyone is tired and their guard is down. We had done really well so far, now was no time to let up.

### **HEADING FOR CAMP**

The rest of us head downstream, Mindy and Donna in Bob's boat, the girls and me hiking down to our boat. We planned to find the first available camp, Mindy has the map and is going to do the navigating.

A short hike, into the boat, then out of the eddy. On downstream to Ten Cent camp on river left just above Imperial. It's my dinner night, what a mistake, taking the dinner after the Big Drops! I try to trade with someone else, however since this is the last night on the river I'm not surprised that I have no takers. Bob volunteers to assist, we are having dutch oven lasagna, salad and black spotted garlic bread. Bob gathers wood for a signal fire. It seems prudent to be prepared if Larry, Brian and Randy don't get back before the rapidly approaching dark set in.

But very quickly, quicker than anyone expected, here comes Larry around the upstream bend in the river. All parties are in good shape. Randy must have run up and back with his kayak for them all to get back to camp so soon.

## **MIXED EMOTIONS**

So here we are. Below the Big Drops. Safe and, for the most part, sound. Donna is still, understandably, a bit unhappy. The water hit her so hard when she went over the Gut that it pulled her hiking shorts off. Fortunately she had a bathing suit on under them. We were certain her body would heal if not her pride.

But it is sad, in a way. Because the Big Drops are behind us. 5 days on the river to get to them, a day to scout them and 10 minutes to run them. And they are gone, behind us.



I set up the table and start working on dinner, but I can't help looking upstream, my eyes seem drawn upstream. Looking at the canyon wall that is still visible in the faint and still fading light. Looking at the canyon wall that overlooks the Big Drops. If I was on that canyon wall I could see the Big Drops. So I look back at the canyon wall and think what a kick ass place this is, and how exciting it has been. And wondering who has gone here before us. Not for a vacation from the inverted logic and twisted values of late 20<sup>th</sup> century life. But to live, to get back to their families or to explore unknown places, to follow the game migrations. Not just the European explorers like D. Julien and John Wesley Powell and Stanton. But the nameless native Americans who may have accidently run this rapid and survived.

And so we have a victory toast. To Cataract! And to the spirits of all those who have gone before!

And may God help us if we ever again drown such a holy place just so we can light the night for humans.

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