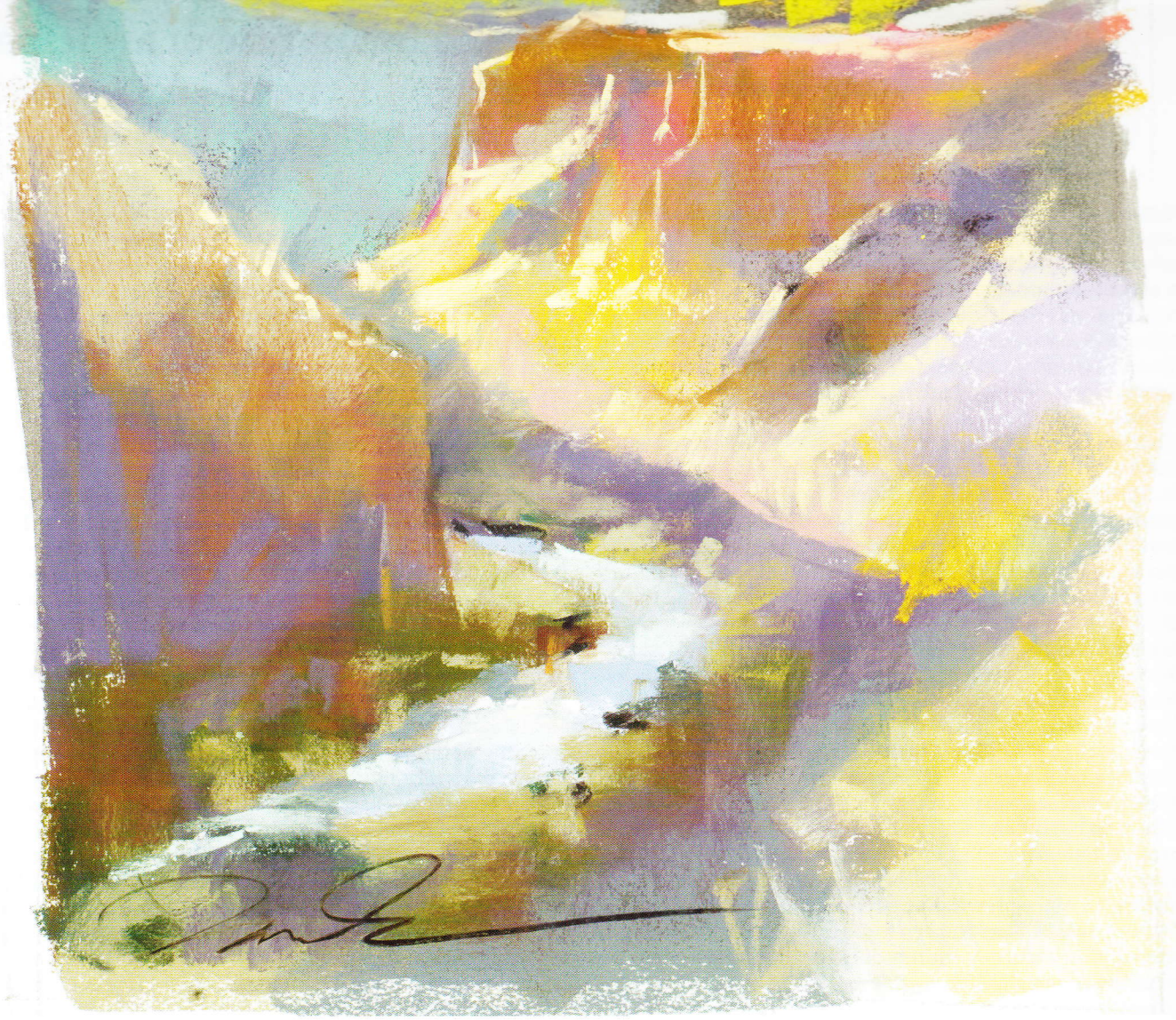

Dawn Emerson
Canyon Walls

PASSING THROUGH THE

Green Room

by **Kim Cooper Fwindling**

WE PUT ON THE SNAKE RIVER just below Hells Canyon Dam on a steamy July afternoon. To get there had meant months of fixing up an old NRS raft, weeks of planning and research, a day of grocery shopping and packing, five hours of driving across Oregon's desert, a night at my husband's mother's house, three more hours of driving windy roads into Idaho and an hour of loading and strapping down gear at the put-in. I questioned if all of this work would be worth the payoff of floating Hells Canyon. Within a few hours, I'd be convinced it wasn't.

Hells Canyon is stunning: Steep and rugged, defined by towering rimrock walls. The river at the put-in was a deep, pulsing blue. Rich, foamy swirls appeared in the midst of still places – little whirlpools hinted of a pressure born from unimaginable depth. After launching, I leaned my body against the blue rubber tube and watched the water tuck back on itself and roll under. I wondered if I touched the little vortex if it would suck at my finger.

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Karl told me that Hells is the deepest canyon in North America, deeper than the Grand Canyon. At first I didn't believe him. But the Forest Service pocket guide confirmed; the Grand is a mile wider, but Hells is an average of 2,000 feet deeper. And the Snake is one of the longest rivers in North America, winding through three states before getting to the section we floated, and passing through another before reaching its end. I gazed up at layers and layers of columnar basalt and the water behind us – water forced into this deep canyon cut after a very long journey.

I knew that the toughest rapids were the first two. When I asked my friend Mary if she and her husband, seasoned river runners, had done Hells, she had replied, "Yeah. We flipped. In the first rapid." She hadn't seemed disappointed that they had other plans when I asked her to join us on this trip. In truth, we wanted their expertise more than their company. I usually prefer that it be just us on vacations, but I knew this was different; that we were inexperienced, and that there would be safety in numbers. We'd floated our first river, the Grande Ronde, a Class II/III river, a couple of years before. We'd read our way through the rapids – experimenting, making errors and even going through some of the rapids backwards – but it was forgiving water.

I had been surprised when Karl obtained the permit via a cancellation on his first call three weeks before. I hadn't taken Karl's hope for a cancellation permit seriously. I'd dismissed it as one of those things that he'd like to do but didn't think would ever happen, like skiing the Alps or hunting in Africa. But there it was: A permit – permission to go but even more so for me, an obligation.

Karl had done all of the preparation, and I felt no guilt for not helping. After all, this trip hadn't been my idea. I was just following Karl as I often did, on a journey entirely of his design. As the oarsman, he would be responsible for my fate, but it had become my tendency over time to turn my emotional fate over to him as well. In our first years, he'd drive purposefully into what seemed the middle of nowhere and show me that, in fact, it was the center of everything. His definition of vacation was finite and compelling: Physical and rugged exploration, marked by a constant sense of momentum, in a spectacular and preferably remote place. Meeting these parameters fit with my yen to be a tough girl but always with a safety net of him.

A few miles down river from the put-in, Karl oared to shore to scout the rapid Wild Sheep, the first of our challenges. It looked intimidating; big waves and boulders marking what the guidebook proclaimed "the longest rapid on the river." Yet at the same time, the waterline through it seemed obvious. I didn't know anything about reading white water but looking into the rush and boil of rapid, I felt that the water moved in logical ways, around rocks and other objects that were in its way: Powerful, yes, and perhaps tricky to negotiate but purposeful and comprehensible. We discussed our line, agreed where we'd have to make necessary moves. As we pushed off, Karl was nervous. He was sweating and scared, but I felt comfortable. I trusted him. Later he told me he'd dipped an oar at the wrong time. But it hadn't mattered, we slid out the other end, jubilant and relieved at how easy it had been.

Karl was ecstatic then, suddenly confident in the way men can become at the slightest of triumphs. "Whoo Hoo! Baby! Gimme a beer!"

I, usually enthusiastic about beer, paused. I pointed out that the beer decision was a brisk one – were we going to run Granite next, or camp before? Before a decision, he popped the beer. We shared it, pulled out above Granite and walked downriver along the trail. We had to see what was next, no matter when next would be.

We studied Granite from a dusty trail above. A series of large alder trees made it difficult to get a clear view of the water. We could see that there was an enormous rock dead center, wide and smooth and big enough to make its own waterfall. There were two choices for a boat – river left or river right. Left looked rough, as there was another smaller rock to skirt after dropping to the left of the boulder. But river right, there was a boiler, a spot I saw just below the huge rock that seemed to catch and stop every drop, adding it to a mass of charcoal water, churning and churning. It scared me. We discussed both sides; we disagreed on which side to attempt. Ultimately, this was going to be Karl's job, and I backed down early, "It's your call, honey. Let's do it."

Setting off from shore this time, Karl didn't seem so nervous, but I felt a pulsing sense of alarm in my gut. The last one had been fine, I chided myself. This one would be, too. We headed right and dropped fast over the rock face and to the side of it, where we should be. But then, quickly, the boat was dropping nose down at an alarming speed, falling, and then the front tube folded up to meet my face. The blue rubber ricocheted away from me and I was flying. The two straps I'd been clutching weren't there anymore. I met water with incredible force and went down, down. I spun in the churn: My legs were sucked and whipped, my sandal was ripped from my foot with a solid jerk. Spinning, spinning; then up. I struggled for air, tried to breathe and found I couldn't – my lungs, filled with water. I couldn't see, though my eyes were wide open and then a thought: Downstream position! I got my feet up and in front of me with the current and tried to clear my lungs with useless, terrified coughs. As I desperately blinked to clear my vision, a huge wave hit me full in the face and filled my lungs further. When it passed I was frantic and gasping. Another wave and another, and then finally I heaved a hard primal grunt and my lungs cleared. I spun my eyes in their sockets until my contact lenses found their center again, and saw that I was floating at the end of the rapid's tongue.

I wish I could say that sometime before this point I'd thought of the boat or Karl. From behind me, he yelled, "Grab that oar!" I saw it ahead, yellow and bobbing. I swam for it, suddenly needing this purpose more than anything. As I reached it and grabbed hold, my toes rammed rocky bottom. Karl and 500 pounds of upside down boat swept past me in the main current. Only then did I consider his predicament. There was another rapid ahead. "I don't think I can make it to shore!" he yelled to me hoarsely. He was moving fast, and sounded desperate.

Karl is a paramedic and a firefighter as well as a seasoned outdoorsman. When we were first dating a friend described him to me as the most competent person she'd ever met. Karl is well accustomed to his own calm strength, to knowing exactly what to do in most situations and how to operate successfully under stress. In the course of our relationship, he has pulled me back from near loss of consciousness after a dip in a too-hot hot springs and given me the Heimlich after a too-big mouthful of nachos. He's handy to have around, reliable and always assured.

"You are so close!" I yelled even though it wasn't really true. He was just left of mid-current. I half-ran at river's edge, clutching the oar, stumbling on one sandaled foot and one naked, slipping on slimy rocks.

"You are so close! You are doing great, baby!" And then, somehow, he was at the shore. I caught up to him and there was no apologetic remorse or relieved embrace, no weepy rush of receding terror; instead he just started talking, telling me what was lost: The other oar and a blue dry bag. Then we quietly began moving around, doing what needed to be done. Oddly, next came for me a private elation.

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The adrenaline aftermath left me giddy, fighting giggles, bathed in a spiky joy at us barely being exactly where we were. Yet, the condition of the boat tempered me.

Karl tied two ropes to the far side of the capsized beast and we stood on the steep rocky shore and pulled. Barely a twitch. We pulled and braced and pulled some more. The rocks were big and sharp and slippery and it was hard to get traction with only one shoe. Karl said quietly, "You have to pull harder honey," and I knew that we were both trying hard to no avail. The elation of moments ago was swept away and replaced by panic, which was followed by a sudden wash of grief at what had just happened, at what was still happening. The sobs came up in my throat and I tried to hold them there. I knew I had to keep it together. There was work to be done and we were lucky to be doing it and that I was strong. Wasn't I?

"I can't!" I said, hating the words as they escaped. "It's not going to work!"

Karl got under the boat and we tried to push it over when he noticed that the top had come off of one of the ammo boxes he'd strapped to the frame. "My binoculars. The camera. The spotting scope. The GPS." Karl named the items he'd packed there just a few hours before. My stomach twisted. And the dry bag. Whose was it? And the river guidebook, which had been just tucked under a strap. I stared numbly at the water, then reached to fish out a floating black object. The spotting scope. I held it up for Karl to see, though neither of us registering much pleasure for its recovery.

We continued to try to right the boat as the sun dipped behind canyon walls, operating together as our base selves: Not lovers, not friends, just two human beings, working. Finally, in acknowledgement that we would not be able to flip it, Karl began unstrapping objects from under the boat, one by one, and handing them up to me.

We noted what we still possessed and what was lost to the river as we threw our belongings onto the lumpy shore. At least we had the truck keys. The tent. The sleeping bags. Was the food wet? We're alive. We're OK. We've got the water purifier. The raft repair kit lid blew off, but I found silicone and superglue floating in the water. It was Karl's things that were in the lost drybag. What exactly was in there? His shoes. His raincoat. Fleece. But when I opened my drybag, I found his thermal shirt and jacket. I'd tucked them in there earlier to make room for his shoes in his overstuffed bag. I knew that sooner or later I'd miss my Teva sandal, the remaining one made suddenly redundant by its solitude.

While Karl worked at the sloshing shore to remove our bags and water jugs one by one, I headed up river to try to spot the oar and the lost bag. The riverbank was steep and rocky, then got steeper. I struggled up the hill until I reached a plateau and found a trail, from which I could see the oar floating in an eddy just past the rapids. I didn't see the bag. I walked back down river and found a marginal place to put the tent for the night, then came back down the hillside through spider webs and cheat grass and poison ivy to the boat. We tried to tip it again, failed, and eventually removed the one remaining item still strapped to the raft: The cooler. As we hauled it onto the rocks, we realized that it alone weighed almost as much as me, and that we should have known from the start that we'd have to take it off.

Finally, we righted the boat. It had been two hours since we'd run Granite.

We agreed that I'd set up camp and Karl would go after the oar. "Be careful." I looked him in the eyes, even the simple task of taking the boat across the river seemed dangerous now. I watched him for a moment as he began to rope the empty raft up shore, picking his way slowly over and around rocks, before I turned and climbed up the hillside again, this time carrying tent and sleeping bags and mattresses. It felt good to climb, to carry awkward weight, to keep moving. Exhaustion, hunger and thirst anointed me with a consoling tough girl persona. But I knew under this odd flush of pride and momentum, I was unsteady, weary and scared about tomorrow.

Karl returned with the oar. We cooked and ate and hauled all of the gear away from the waterline and secured the boat, all of it ridiculously difficult because of the angle and rockiness of the shore. At dark, we crawled into the tent. My back and arms ached from tugging at gear. My knees and ankles were sore from leaping and balancing on rocks while carrying weight. Karl was asleep instantly: A blessed skill he'd gained from 16 years as a fireman. I lay there wishing for an off switch to my brain, which was endlessly tumbling the events of the day. I thought of bears and water and snakes and marriage and water and the nature of anticipation – how the worst fears exist in expectation. It is terrors imagined that grow like cancers of thought. You can't be scared in hindsight. Only looking ahead can scare you – only imagining what might go wrong.

Hours later, I was still awake when it started to rain. The sky had been cloudless at dark and we hadn't put up the rain fly. Karl was still asleep and I was glad that he was. I rose and tried to work quietly, but then he awoke confused. "Honey, the ..." His voice trailed off.

"Fly – I've got it." It rained hard and there was thunder and lightning and then a powerful wind that kicked up and whipped violently up the canyon. We'd laid our hats and T-shirts out to dry down by the shore. Certainly now they'd blown away. I weighed in my mind whether or not I cared, whether I would even care if the boat, which was tied to a tree but still loose in the river, blew away in the night. I would happily walk out.

In the morning, my whole body ached, shoulders and legs throbbing with their own private memories of roiling water and anchored stone. I had marvelous bruises, one as big as a grapefruit on my knee, my right foot black and blue, a robust blemish on my thigh. We worked, purposefully, for four hours, crawling up and down and over the rocks and into the river to reorganize and reload the gear on the boat. The skies were heavy gray with clouds, and then, soberly, we set off. I felt resigned – the fear kept at bay only by acknowledgment that being scared would only make what had to be accomplished harder. It was flat water for a few miles. I gazed at hillsides loaded with bunchgrass and chocolate and lichen cliffs. The numbness in my heart wouldn't allow me to appreciate the beauty around me.

We caught up to a large group of rafters, 10 boats carrying kids and adults and dogs. I observed them. They were laughing and jostling and joking: They weren't wearing life jackets. They held water guns and fishing poles loosely; they stood in their boats. I felt as if they couldn't be more foreign. They pulled over before the first rapids, and we followed suit and got out to scout. But they weren't scouting; they were just resting and playing. I heard a child begging her father for the right to paddle this rapid, negotiating in a pleading voice. I was abashed. That this was even a reasonable request – a girl paddling this water, this water that still had me gripped in cold and fear – was shocking.

Following Karl, doing still more jumping and dodging across a field of boulders to find a place where we could see the river, I welled up again, and felt wretched. I hated this – this part of myself I always met when faced with risk and challenge. Was I simply not cut out for the slightest dash of adventure? I caught up to Karl who looked at me square in the face, which broke in response. "I'm sorry," I blurted. "I don't want to be this way for you."

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He reached for my shoulder, and comforted me, "Baby, it's OK." I felt sick and shameful anyway. "Do you want to walk around?" The way he said it, I understood that he was nervous, too; that he was staying strong and calm for my sake, and for his own. I said no, I would not walk around, and turned and put one foot in front of the other until I got to the boat.

We followed the large group through the rapid, gliding around holes and rocks until then we were on the other end, safely. Upper and Lower Bernard, done. Waterspout and Rush to go. Yet bigger. I felt like I was checking off chores on a nasty to-do list. With each wave conquered came a tiny dose of relief, and I could feel Karl's confidence returning. The sun was out, and I felt some of the tension leave my body. I even let out little bursts of "Whoo! Whoo!" as we rollercoasted over easy waves.

All went well until a hidden rock in Waterspout, a Class IV. It caught our back end and I turned to see us slipping backwards into a hole. I felt an unwelcome familiarity of what would come next. "We're going back!" I yelled.

Karl yelled back, "I'm trying! Get forward!" I turned, let go of the straps and threw my body onto the front tube as he pressed on the oars; we popped out. I whirled round to be sure that the rock was departing.

"That one tried to keep you," the folks downstream smiled. "You nailed it." They meant that it was a mistake but a fine one, a fun one. I realized that I now possessed a new skill; when in trouble, toss my weight in the direction I wanted the boat to go.

We told our Granite story to a woman in a blue bikini oaring a boat with a blow-up plastic shark attached to the back. "Whoa," she said, staring. "How was the swim?" The swim, I thought. So that's what it was. "They call it the green room," she added. "Did it hold you long?"

"No." Long – what's long? "Just long enough to scare me."

"Was it your first big swim?" I nodded, thinking, first and last. "I've heard about people who've swum Granite," she continued. "They don't come out the same. It's like they've seen God."

At this Karl interjected, "I think my wife did." I smiled a little. "She's a believer now."

This seasoned acknowledgment of Granite's power made modest sanction of my state of mind. The fact that our yesterday was becoming a story took a slice of the ominous from it. I was grateful for this easy solace, this moment of simple connection. Then her face became urgent. "You know about Rush, right – coming up?"

Rush was the last IV: We were very aware. "We're going to scout it," said Karl.

"We don't," she said, shrugging. "It's no big deal. Just stay right. You *do not* want to be left." She added, "You're welcome to stay with us." Thanks, we said. We would. And without saying so aloud, we both agreed that we would not scout it.

We watched the boats ahead drop one by one, taking them out of sight. We studied our escort closely, scrutinizing the line she chose and her paddle strokes as she stood up, her bikinied behind tucked above her saddle, to see what was coming. Just at the drop, at what seemed like only the beginning of the rapid, her boat swung sideways and then rolled right over, upturning gracefully in what seemed like choreography. I swallowed. I turned to look at Karl, half expecting him to pull over.

"Well," he said calmly. "We don't want to do what she did."

Right, I thought, and turned, ready, gripping straps, my heart still as stone. We dipped, dipped again, passed her spot, bobbed over waves, and rocked past rocks. "We've got it!" he yelled.

We spit from the bottom, and caught up to our guide and her upside down boat. Her friends helped her right her raft in a process that happened mid-river and took two ropes, four people and five minutes. After she was righted, we left the group, headed for the next rapid, a III. We hit every rock, every hole, did everything wrong, but it was fine. The difference between a III and a IV is that, as with marriage, all but the gravest missteps are often quietly forgiven.

Shortly thereafter, we oared onto an idyllic white beach: The exact opposite of the rocky hell where we'd spent the night before. "Now *this*," I said, my heart lifting, "is what I signed up for."

We had done it. There were no more Class IV rapids ahead. The story was over. Danger had eased into accomplishment; the protagonists were invited to relax on a sandy beach with a cold beer. We tucked our toes into gritty earth; we ate; we slept gorgeously, carefully, wrapped round one another's bruised limbs: Spent, sated, reminded that toughness was simply one of the imperfect trinkets that we'd both always hoped we could barter for love.

The next morning, we put on the river early, tucking our gear away in now-familiar and well-secured order. As we pushed off, Karl asked me if I wanted to oar. I thought, yes. Yes. I sat on the high seat, studying the water ahead. The currents pulled and turned at the heavy boat, and the power of the river churned against my bare feet. Though the oars were heavy and my arms and back still ached, the pain felt like strength and the oars responded to my movements. I felt pleased as the boat canted and thrust downstream.

I yearned to become intimate with this water, to know it, to abide it. As we headed for a rapid, just a Class II, Karl said, "You want to do it?" and I did, and my heart raced. I was happy for its pumping, glad to take on this task. Karl guided me, named necessary strokes, pointed at obstacles, but I felt like I already knew. The river's tongue was a windy voice in my ear, and currents of truth trembled up the oars into my hands. Left, now. Oar in, make a turn. Watch that white spot, it's a rock. Respect me, pay attention, listen to your gut and everything will be fine. <HDJ>