

# Float

Nonfiction  
12th grade

In a battle against nature, there is nothing to do but surrender. I feel dead. Like rigor mortis is setting in. Chilled to the bone and painfully motionless. Movement feels like my damnation and salvation. The day that was once filled with adventure and youth now left the bitter taste of helplessness in every mouth. Air thick with second-guessing and unshed tears. Desperate prayers are sent up to the heavens. With the thought of death looming, all that there was left to do was float.

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With the wind blowing through my open windows and country music blasting through my car stereo, I feel my burdens being lifted. *Today I'm not gonna think of the future, I am just going to be in the now.* A smile splits my face at the thought. It feels weird to not analyze my life ten years from now and just live in the moment.

"When can I choose the next song?" My little brother's voice startles me from my thoughts. My smile transforms into a smirk as I prepare to put Aj in his place.

"When you have your own car," I said with a bit of sass. He responds with an eye roll. I take a moment to just look at him. He has grown up and I haven't even realized. He is going to be 13 soon, unbelievable. His voice has deepened, cheeks have thinned, and now he is the one looking down to meet my gaze. I don't know how he sprouted up so fast. He has taken to calling me "shorty" even though he only has an inch or two on my 5'7" frame. Annoyance glimmers in his navy blue eyes.

A car in the fast lane catches my attention. It's two of my best friends, Madi and Kadence. Though they are juniors and I am a senior, we became friends during their freshman year when they joined the swim team. As the driver, Madi proceeds to pass me. For the majority of the drive from Rock Springs to Green River, I have been the leader. They must have gotten tired of me driving the speed limit. Maybe I am being overly cautious but I have already gotten a speeding ticket, that's one too many.

"Come on Celeste, going two over won't kill ya," Aj said in exasperation.

"Not going to happen. It's not like they can leave without us anyways." I respond.

"Yeah, but I want to hurry and get out on the river," Aj said. I know that it is kind of unusual for someone to bring their younger siblings out with their friends. However, Aj has always excelled in the outdoors. So when

the idea of floating the Green River came to my friends and I one day after swim practice, it seemed like a no brainer to bring him along.

"We will get there when we get there," I said, making it obvious that I was done with the line of discussion.

"Whatever," Aj mumbled in surrender. The trip to Expedition Island in Green river was quick, at least from my point of view. This was the first stop of our grand adventure. I pulled down my car's visor to give myself a once over. My curly brown locks fall in abandon on my shoulders. I think about taming my hair with a ponytail but decide against it. My green-tinted brown eyes have a spark that has been missing since I began high school. A smile stretched my round face. Appeased that I don't look half bad, I place my keys in the glove compartment and get out of my car.

The plan is for Kadence, Madi, Aj and I to drive in Madi's car to the put-in location. The floating trip will end at Expedition Island, where my car is being left. We will use my car to go and retrieve Madi's before heading home.

"Celeste," I heard Madi call.

"Yeah," I respond.

"My parents ended up getting us all industrial tubes. They said that it would be better for floating the river." Madi said.

"Ok thanks. Maybe we could use one of the smaller tubes I brought for the cooler," I suggest.

"Yeah, I think that will work. Did you remember the life jackets?" Madi questions. I nod in response. Aj retrieves our snacks from my car and carries them to Madi's. We all work together to transfer the necessary items from my car to Madi's. I go to leave my phone in my car but decide against it. Then we all get into Madi's car, excited to start our adventure. Kadence takes the passenger seat, while Aj and I squish in the back with the tubes. Madi's car is usually quite spacious, however, the large black tubes monopolize the space.

Madi, Kadance, and I reminisce in memories from our three years of friendship. The car is full of laughter and stories. Kadance and Madi do their bickering thing, that leads strangers to believe they are sisters instead of friends. Both share light blonde hair, wear glasses, and a fair complexion. However, that is where the similarities end. Madi's facial features are more long and narrow compared to Kadance's soft and round. Kadance's cheeks are bare, while Madi's are sprinkled with freckles.

Madi follows her GPS. It takes us on the freeway toward Lyman. After about 10 minutes we turn off down an empty dirt road. Time seems to pass

slowly as the waiting continues. I don't know how much time passes before we get there but soon the GPS announces that we have arrived. A closed-down bridge is before us and the river flows under it. The sight is breath-taking. The water mirror the sky and land around it. The air is tranquil. Peace settles in me as I take a deep breath in. It's moments like this that I understand the phrase "God's country."

"Let's take a picture." I blurt out, disturbing the calm. We snap a quick selfie with all of us in it. I check the time and see that we are right on time, we wanted to be on the water by 11:20 am. It is currently, 11:10 am. I send the picture to my mom and then place my phone in Madi's glove compartment where Madi and Kadence's phones are. Next, I go to help prepare for the float. We start to lug our supplies to the edge of the water when I felt the first pinch. The sad part about being around natural water is that bugs aren't usually far away. More specifically, Mosquitoes are near.

"Dang it, I didn't bring any bug spray." Kadence voices my very thought.

"Me either," Madi, Aj, and I say in unison. Every set of shoulders slump a bit. I love to be outdoors but detest insects. I would go as far as calling them the bane of my existence. I look at Kadence and see her airing up one of the tubes I brought. It is blue and has rope handles around it. I help Madi place the drinks in the cooler and lay the ice on top.

"You guys should tie the snack sacks to the cooler handles to keep it all together," Aj says. Agreeing with the suggestion, Madi and I do just that. With the cooler made, I go back to the car and grab the life-jackets divvying them out.

The river was high, making the riverside level with the water. This made it an ideal put-in location. I was cringing as I walked down to the riverside. I loathe the feeling of mossy wet plant life touching my feet. Aj and I place the cooler in the blue tube by the water.

"I'll hold the cooler tube," Aj said bending over to grab the tube that is half in and half out of the water. His grip on the tube tightens resisting the current.

"Ok, I'll help you get in your tube," I directed my words toward Kadence. I held the tube steady as she gently sat on it. "Now grab Aj's other hand so that you don't float off." Kadence does as directed. I then do the same for Madi. Madi grasps Kadence's other hand. I moved Aj's tube behind him then sat in my tube without help. "I got your tube Aj. I'll hold it while you sit down," I said.

"Ok," Aj said and did as I directed. Once he was securely on his tube, I used my legs to push off the gassy shore. Everyone releases a yelp of excitement as the current begins to drag us downriver.

The water was warm and welcoming as I relaxed into it. I have always loved the water, so much so that my father used to call me his little mermaid. I sloshed my feet round enjoying the sensation. The river continuously curved in opposing directions, making the path windy. We held onto each other. Madi was elected to hold onto the cooler as well as our tube train. I took up the task of steering.

For the first 20 minutes of the trip, we wreaked havoc on our peaceful surroundings. Laughing obnoxiously and yelling many sentences that start with, "remember that one time when..." A sudden hush falls on us we relax into our environment. The sun is high in the clear blue sky, hinting at it being around noon. I revel in the sensation of the sun kissing my skin. As opposed to Madi and Kadence, Aj and I will tan and not burn. The quiet conversation of various forms of life is the only noise to be heard for a lengthy amount of time.

"OH LOOK," Aj shouted. My eyes followed in the direction his finger pointed as he said, "It's a hawk's nest." Just then I spotted the clattering of branches at the top of a wooden pole. I have seen a hawk's nest before but for some reason, it looked more spectacular at that moment. Maybe that is because we were on our very own adventure and I felt one with nature. A shadow passed over my head and I flinched, then I looked up to see the hawk return to its real estate.

"The hawk has something in its claws." Kadence pointed out.

"Oh no, it looks like a bunny," I said recognizing the snowball tail. We all watched in sadness while the hawk took the bunny carcass to its nest. Soon we floated further down and the mood lightened. From there on we had our eyes on the lookout for wildlife. We saw deer, various birds, and a skunk. Luckily, we saw the skunk from a safe distance. I even caught a glimpse of a river otter, though no one believed me.

One minute the sun was there, the next it wasn't. My heart rate accelerated. I looked up to see a large dark cloud encompassing the sun. Goosebumps break out over skin as the wind picks up. I watch as the Wyoming weather, being true to its reputation, becomes the polar opposite of what it was on a dime. The clear blue skies look heavy with moisture and the peaceful air is being shredded by the wind.

"Just great," Madi said sounding vexed.

"Got to love Wyoming," Kadence said her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"It's not that bad," I said, trying to be optimistic. I always like to try and see the bright side of things, even in moments like this. Everyone gave me a sideways glance, their doubt obvious. Feather-light water droplets began to fall on the water. The result was both mesmerizing and bone-chilling. The droplets disturbed the smoothness of the water. The sound and visual were aesthetic.

My body began to shiver as the warmth was stolen from my body. My companions were in a similar condition. Soon the storm moved on and the air was filled with the chorus of our chattering teeth. While the rain stopped the wind didn't. Our swimsuits did little to prevent the wind from attacking our bodies. The water seemed to have dropped several degrees as well. I looked around and there was still no familiar landmarks that hinted to us being close to town.

"Guy's, look at the sun," Madi said. The fear in her voice caused me to automatically obey. "It looks like it will set in a couple of hours." The site before me confirmed her assessment. The sun was on a speedy ascent. War rage in myself as I fought panic.

"We have to be close," I said with forced lightness.

"What if we passed Green River?" I could hear the anxiety in Kadance's voice. I immediately shook my head.

"Impossible, the river flows right through the town. There is no way we could have missed it." I abolish.

"Well, something went wrong. We have been on the water forever." Kadence said.

"We simply must have started farther out than we suspected," I state.

"What if we don't reach by dark?" Aj's eyes went wide at his epiphany.

"We will make it to the town by dark, it will be fine," I said soothingly. The fist in my gut contradicted my positive thoughts.

"My parents are going to kill me," Madi said in defeat. Kadence second that notion. *Mom is going to be so worried.* That thought caused guilt to fill me. The following hour was miserable. It rained again, three times. Each time let me so cold it was painful. From the grimaces of the others, I could tell they felt the same.

"My body hurts from sitting like this for so long," Madi complained. I nodded. I was feeling the same way. There was an ache in my lower back from stasis. I tried to flex my back but that only caused a sharp pain to shoot up my back. Each of us aired a couple of complaints about a but, it

felt good to voice them. We were all icy, stiff, and hungry. We had a few treats at the start of the trip, we consumed them all within the first hour. In our defense, we weren't anticipating being on the river this long.

We had just hit a white rapid current that sped us along around another corner. Just as we rounded the corner, I saw that the current was going to brush us along the riverside. A riverside that was littered with giant boulders and stray pieces of metal. My feet began to fight the current.

"Hold on to my tube," I quickly said to Aj. Once I saw that his hand was securely wrapped around my tube, I let go of his tube and my arms joined the effort to fight against the current. Just as we narrowly missed the bank, a white rapid kicked up under my tube tossing me from it. The water swallowed me and my whole being jumped at the onslaught of bitter water. My body was fatigued but I pushed it to aid my life-jacket in getting me to the surface. A relieved gasp left my lips as precious air flooded my lungs. I drag myself through the hole in my tube and collapse.

"Celeste! Are you ok?" Madi's voice drew my gaze to her. Her eyes were wide with panic. Her expression held concern and fear. The other's faces mirrored Madi's.

"Yea-Yeah I'm fine," My quivering lip caused me to stutter. I forced a smile seeing that they were not convinced. My uncontrollable shivering hindered my smile but they let it slide. All of us are shivering to some extent now, Aj is shivering more vigorously than I am. His hands are clasped rigidly in the part of his lap the is not wet. I try to touch his shoulder in a comforting fashion but he flinches away.

"Don't," Aj pleads. "Your hands are freezing," I nod in understanding. Silence fell over us as we were consumed by our thoughts. Guilt and worry filled me as I peer at Aj. *I should have never brought him.* I could see in his face that he was in pain and close to tears. He was shaking so violently that I worried he would accidentally knock himself off his tube.

"My mom didn't even want me to come today," Kadence said breaking the stillness. "We had just shed my uncle's ashes a couple of days ago, I thought she was just being overprotective." Sorrow weighed on her face.

"Wouldn't it be funny if we got off the tubes soon and come to find out only two hours have passed?" I joked, trying to lighten the mood. It somewhat works as Kadence and Madi smirk. The smirk was temporary and soon left their faces. "Hey, it's all going to be fine. Our parents have to be looking for us. They will either find us or we will be at Expedition Island

soon. We are going to be ok," I reassure trying to remove the defeated look on their faces.

"Maybe we should just get off the river and walk," Madi suggests.

"No we move fast on the water and our families will be looking for us on the river," I state. I look downriver and point, "You guys see that corner?" I wait till each of them nod before continuing. "That corner looks promising." Everyone's laughter broke the heaviness that surrounded us. With our spirits slightly lifted, we started chatting away about nothing in particular, to try and distract each other from the situation. Eventually, I managed to get back on my tube. Any time I saw the hope start to leave someone's face I would simply point to the next corner and say, "that corner looks promising."

"Guys look!" Kandace said with excitement. "Those trees up ahead look like the trees of the golf course on the outskirts of town." I focus on the trees and confirm that they do look familiar.

"Are you sure?" Madi asks.

"Yes! That is where we do the golf tournaments when we face Green River." her confirmation causes relief to wash over me. My eyes sting with tears of joy.

"I told you guys that corner looked promising." We all laughed and smiled as the hope that this nightmare would end returned. As we got closer to the alleged golf course, I felt a sinking feeling. It became apparent as we closed in on the distance between the trees and us, that it wasn't the golf course. I felt so crushed a tear slipped down my face. I quickly wiped it away before the others could detect it. The feeling of despair was so heavy, it threatened to drown us in the river.

The sound of sniffs caught my attention. Alligator tears were streaming down Aj's and Kadance's cheeks. I leaned over and hugged Aj. It wasn't the best hug but it was the best I could manage with a stiff body and being on a tube. Madi did the same for Kadence. I was struggling to keep it together. "That next corner looks promising," I said, struggling to keep the tears from my voice. Their once crushed faces contorted in anger.

"WHY DO YOU KEEP SAYING THAT?" Kadence yelled.

"BECAUSE IT'S THE ONLY THING I CAN DO!" I yell right back. My throat gets thick so I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. "We can't just give up and start thinking negatively. I need to stay positive, otherwise, my helplessness will cause me to wallow. So I am going to look at every corner and pray that Green River is on the other side because



that is all that I have left to do." I closed my eyes and my head dropped to the back of the tube.

"We are going to die out here," Kadence said unfeelingly like she was simply stating a fact. No one responded and we lapsed into silence again. We all suffered quietly but the tears were gone. I was constantly checking on Aj even though there was nothing for me to do. Twilight fell and I contemplated death. I didn't fear it or crave it. I knew Aj and I would go to heaven. I hated the fact that if death visited us not only would our futures be taken but our family's lives would be tainted by our loss. I worried about my friend's afterlife.

"You know if we are going to die, not that I'm saying we are," I cleared my throat before continuing. "You guys need to believe in Jesus in your hearts. He is the way, the truth, and the life. He loves you both. You need only to cling to him." My lecture was left hanging in the air. I prayed silently for Madi, Kadence, and our families. I prayed to be found because I had this feeling that I wasn't done in this world yet. I want to accomplish those dreams of being a doctor that I have been stressing about. I wanted Aj and I to be in each other's wedding and joke with each other when we are old surrounded by our families. *This can't be it, Lord.*

"There, a white car!" Aj announced, sitting up in his tube. I whipped my head around to where he was pointing. It looked like a white SUV. My shoulders sagged in relief. *Thank you, God.* Madi and Kadence let out and little cheer. I smile when I spot the spark of hope in Aj's eyes.

"It's a sheriff!" Kandace states, the happiness clear in her voice. The logo on the vehicle confirms her statement. The river took us right to the two Sheriffs waiting for us on the riverbank. Both are tall, slim, and smiling at us.

"You guys having fun floating?" One sheriff jokes. Our laughs were polluted with relieved tears.

"We are glad to see you, kiddos," the other said sounding genuine. They helped us off the tubes. It felt spectacular to be off the river but hurt to move. They hurried us into their vehicle and turned the heater on full blast. The sky went pitch black when we got in the car. Soon we were headed down a dirt road on our way to meet our families. The more distance we put between us and the river the more I relaxed.

After about 30 minutes, we arrived at Expedition Island. Our families were there waiting for us. Aj was out of the car like a bullet. He didn't stop until he was in my mother's arms, I could hear him sobbing as he clung to her. My older sister Caitlyn nearly knocked me to the ground as she

wrapped her arms around me. I melted into her embrace and felt my cheeks dampen with tears.

"We were so worried about you guys." Her voice was soothing to me. My family members took turns embracing Aj and I. I snuck away for a moment to get my phone from Madi's, which her parents retrieved from the put-in location. I also hugged and cried with Kadence and Madi.

On the drive home, my mom informed me that we put-in too far up the river. It would have taken us two days to reach Green River. Also, the sheriffs looked at some of the rapids we went through. He said with the water being so high and the current so rough, it's a miracle we didn't tip over and drowned. I knew that God's hand was over us, keeping us safe.

"I got your picture. I thought it was going to be the last picture of you all." My mom said, her voice cracking. I hugged her, trying to comfort her. Silently I thank God for keeping us safe because tomorrow looks very promising.



