

NATE MCKEEN

Wild Kingdom

Do woodland beavers attack? I wondered. I never saw anything about it on *Wild Kingdom*. And although the thought came to me in a calm, disembodied voice, it was at the center of a rising panic: it was black night. The current pulled hard; I was struggling to keep my head above the water. My lower leg was wedged between two logs beneath the surface. And everywhere, out of the darkness, were circling beavers, slapping their tails unseen within inches of my head.

The sound painfully compressed my eardrums. I worried about their claws. My arm hit one in the side as I tried to tread water. I'd seen beavers here before, no shit, that must've been sixty or eighty pounds. The moon was new, and that meant the only light was the pale shimmer of starlight on the water, and the beavers would appear and leave silky centers of ripples that I could hear more than see. Their swimming sound was shadowy. Then a hard flat attack of the black surface, smashing the reflected stars. I could feel the water churning with the current of their swimming. It was their power in the water that scared me, and the slick sheen of where they had just been. And I was going to have to go under to free my leg. *People die in the current like this. With beavers. Who knew?*

We had parked Kara's truck at the gate across the trail. We were meeting Jeff and Bill over at the campground, but they weren't there yet, so we thought we might as well hike out to the old point. It was a county park, along the Cedar River, with the obligatory weeping willows and close-cropped blankets of lawns curled around streams and snarls of bramble and woods. The flood plain is what we have to work with for public land around here. North of the park, just past the shooting range, was the old jeep trail. A quarter mile down this trail, and another quarter mile through the woods, there was a point at the crux of the Y of the river, split to the north by a big, uninhabited island.

We ducked under the gate, bullet-riddled signs reading "Public Hunting" and "No Motor Vehicles Beyond this Point," and crunched

down the gravel of the old road, past the washout from the flood in '93 that the county had decided not to repair.

We were both in shorts and T-shirts, me, tennis shoes, she, moccasins. I was impatient to get down to the river for sunset, and walking ahead. "I left the flashlight in the truck," she hollered ahead to me. "It's too late to turn back now!" I shrugged, the truck still in sight over her shoulder. We laughed and entered the woods.

These woods had changed. There was no longer any remnant of the walking trail, wide and carpeted with wood chips, that used to be here, and the narrow old foot trail that led down the river to the point was gone in a tangle of thorns. Deeper into the woods a giant downed cottonwood used to rest on a rise, but that rise was now a dry streambed, drifted in with sand. The river had cut through here to the washout, piled logs in stobby snarls ten feet high.

We found the old point, though, the place we all used to come to in high school to watch the river flow. It used to be beach but now was cutbank, a sand cliff of exposed roots. The main channel of the river now ran to the left of the island we faced, instead of the right, like I remembered. What used to be a little beach and an eddy now was a froth of current.

We left the point and wandered through a maze of dead cedar trees, spiny and shaded out by the fast growing maple suckers. We hopped across to a sandbar, crossed the river to the island, and, walking in the long grass beneath the cottonwoods, we disturbed a group of nesting herons; they dropped silently from the trees above us to the meadow before us, and then in a flutter and squawking, storked off down the river. Kara's hair glowed golden in the slanting sun. It occurred to me that this was almost a date.

Aware of the time, we made it back across the river and to the sandy point. There we sat on a thick slab of bark and wood, the length and shape of a park bench or a surfboard. The sun bled pink and orange into the river, the sky giving way to blue with starry black fringes as the river still burned toward us. We held hands for just a bit, and swatted mosquitoes.

Standing, stretching, we turned from the river as the horizon lost its last blue. And the woods we turned to face were dark, dark, dark. Go figure. The woods get dark when the sun goes down.

So what, dark woods, I've been running around these woods since I was ten. Kara too. Fifteen feet in, and our arms were out in front

of us. We headed south, south should be easy, just follow the river downstream to the trail. But somehow we lost the river and found ourselves tangled in deadfall. I did the hand in front of my face thing, and nope, couldn't see it. Couldn't feel a way in any direction that wasn't thorny or stobby or stinging with nettles. Kara and I kept in touch with raised voices, hounded by whining mosquitoes, until we both crashed through a pile of deadfall, nearly dropping into some sort of sinkhole beneath a rooty tree. I tore my shin. She cursed like a foundry worker, the side of her thigh invisibly knotted by a bruising log. When I helped her from the hole, she thought she might be seriously hurt. It felt like a baseball on her leg, just above the knee. She could put weight on it, though. "Don't worry, if your femur was broken you couldn't stand."

"I know it's not fucking *broken*."

We tried to fight back to the river—its location was a feeling of lightness, openness, off over there—and before we knew where we were, we tripped over the slab of wood, on the bank where we had watched the sun set. It was impossible to follow a straight line, through that dark, through that thick-snarled, scratching, bruising, stinging mess. We did not hold hands.

We made two or three more forays into the woods—another attempt to follow the river, another attempt to find the washout and trudge the sandy bank to the washed-out road. Just when I would think we were making progress, we'd trip over that benchslab of bark. We sat on that surfboard until our cigarettes were gone. The stars shined on. At one point we thought we saw the flickering of a flashlight from behind us, but it turned out it was the strobelight of a plane overhead. We remarked at length on the light sensitivity of our eyes in such dark. And we sat some more.

After three hours, I decided to swim the river, and return with the flashlight.

Eventually the beavers disappeared, but I had really twisted my ankle up good trying to yank it free. I had only been in the water for maybe five minutes before being knocked off my feet by the flow of the main channel, slammed into a series of submerged trees. Seems like beavers like to burrow beneath these overhanging banks in the fall. Seems they stockpile saplings and whole collapsed trees in a snag just beneath the surface.

My foot was snared. I was having trouble treading water fast enough to keep my head up. My right hand was locked around the keychain, the key to Kara's truck. I really didn't want to dip my head beneath the water.¹ But I had to go under three times, into the swirling loud blackness three times before I was able to wrench my foot free, tumbling downstream and into another tangle of submerged trees. *Damn trees.* Whenever I began swimming out into the main channel to avoid them, the current would launch me down the river, in the deep channel, the fast current, and I would struggle like hell back to water standing depth.

I knew full well that I was an idiot. I had been backpacking in the West, rafted the Rio, jumped off cliffs in Jamaica. I had surprised a giant bighorn sheep once, watched it cock its head at me, staring out of one eye and snorting, on Wild Horse Island in Flathead Lake, Montana. I had seen bear in Glacier National Park, woke to a thousand rutting elk around my tent in the Rocky Mountains. I knew about wilderness safety, unnecessary risks. Damn strong river currents in the damn dark. I knew this river like I knew my own face.

The river didn't go where I thought it did. I tumbled into the current, away from the trees, and struggled back to the bank, panic rising and ebbing and exhausted—and this went on for what I later figured was close to two miles. I could see no horizon between water and night, just the stars up, and half-gravity blackness all around. Where was the park? Where was the road? Where the lights of the city? Was I drifting in a different channel of the river? Was that a voice? I hollered hellos, and later helps, but there weren't really voices in the trees. The wind rose and clouds whipped in, the trees rustled wildly, and I floated, hoping for light around each bend, and around each bend blackness. And there came a moment when I quit fighting it; something turned off, something left on, like sleeping and breathing. What must be done. Follow the river. Deal.

1. This river, the Cedar, carries more tons of pollutants annually than the Hudson, than the Cuyahoga River in Ohio, which actually caught fire in the '70s. Not only does it carry animal feces (hogs shit three to five times more shit than humans, yet theirs is not processed as sewage), but measurable levels of Prozac, acetaminophen, estrogen, ibuprofen, caffeine, nerve reactant pesticides, organophosphates—it's common knowledge, never news.

When I saw the lone night watchman light in the distance on the left, I fought like hell to get to the bank as fast as I could. I hadn't realized, was astounded, at how tired I was getting until this new surge of energy. Nietzsche writes about a similar idea, but I didn't give a shit.

The last few steps to the bank were through thick silt and sludge, until I tripped and fell onto a sandbar beach in the blackness. There were deer drinking there, and I startled them, flopping my river-pruned ass up on the sand. They scared the shit out of me when they bolted away, loud in the dark. We never saw each other. *Damn deer.*

It took me a minute to get my legs under me. I staggered up the bank and across the lawn to the light, immediately recognizing the picnic shelter and the archery range. I had fought nearly a mile downstream from the truck and began the walk back, now worried about Kara, relieved too, and now quick with anger. *Damn river.*

I calmly weathered a blizzard beneath violent firs in the high country of Poudre Canyon. I fought altitude sickness and dehydration on the descent of Fremont Peak in the Winds, in Wyoming. I was careful in the wild, an old hand at catharsis. I knew about the "other." Hell, I even owned books of Gary Snyder poems. But the other was always somewhere else, in wilderness, and the wilderness *was not here.*

I'd spent years idealizing it, taking and quitting a series of jobs to tour it, and yet the last four hours it had been kicking the shit out of me right in my own backyard. "Fuck you!" I yelled at a heron squawking over me as I slogged, shoes full of mud and crusted with river, bloodied and limping, down the road to Kara's truck. "Fuck you!" I yelled at the heron, even though it was probably just a crow.