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*

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*

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The True Shape of Raindrops
Amanda Barusch

Raindrops are not shaped like tears. They start off perfectly round, their molecules hovering around tiny kernels of something else—dust or smoke—all nestled in the cloud.

“Come on! We’ll go together. I’ll be fun.” Alanna was cutting watermelon for a fruit salad. Her tummy strained against the t-shirt fabric, its belly button an unambiguous outie. As I reached for a banana she went on about kids we knew in high school “and I wonder whether Larry Winesap ever married…What was her name?”

“Yeah, she had that long blond hair”
“The boys were so hot for her.”

Not my lanky old Brad. He had no time for Debby. He was too busy figuring things out. Brad hadn’t changed in the fifteen years since high school. He still looked like Ichabod Crane and he was still driven, still loyal. I was lucky. So was Alanna. Dave had a good job at the lumber mill. Of course we would go to the reunion. We had to show off, especially Professor Brad, Community College, but still. Better than the rest of those shit kickers.

I complained that night, twiddling his thin blond hair, “Whoopie, I get to watch Alanna be pregnant.”
“You could learn something from her.” Brad sometimes wished aloud that I was more like Alanna. I did too, but never aloud.

So the next Saturday she and I went to the mall. I bought a little black tank dress. No point trying to accentuate curves I didn’t have. She chose a maternity frock with black and gold stripes. “You look like bumblebee!” I teased. She did—with her big round eyes, her short brown hair, and her bulging tummy.

That night, Motown roared through the Elks lodge to greet the Roseville High School Class of 1969. Alanna blazed the way and stabbed her fist in the air. “Let’s party!”

“Let’s party!” Dave’s curly red hair bounced above the crowd as he made his way to the dance floor. “I hope he’ll play the Rolling Stones. I love the Rolling Stones!” He would always love the Rolling Stones.

***

I turned up pregnant a month after Alanna gave birth to Kenny. She came to the hospital within hours of my daughter’s birth, with a bunch of sunflowers nodding over an old glass milk jar. She balanced the flowers on the window sill then turned to ease Anna out of Brad’s arms. She danced the baby around the room, “Aren’t you the bestest, most bootieous baby ever? Sandy, you are so lucky to have a girl, and look, she has her father’s eyes.”

Brad had to explain that babies always have blue eyes.

I sighed at him and worried, “I don’t think I have any milk. How am I going to breast feed her?”

“Of course you have milk!” Alanna reached under the hospital gown and squeezed my nipple, “See?”

When raindrops fall, the surface tension on the bottom of each drop is weakened by rushing air. They lose their perfect round shapes and look like hamburger buns.
While she waited for the bone marrow transplant, Alanna told me she was writing cards for each of Kenny’s birthdays. Each one would have advice appropriate to the age, from two (“Be nice to Daddy”) to twenty-one (“Don’t drink and drive”). She would leave them in the safe deposit box, and he’d have a card on his birthday “no matter what.” We agreed that she’d be opening the cards with him and laughing at her own advice.

We remembered the backpacking trip the four of us took before we had kids. “Going up Glen Pass with those huge packs. You and Dave looked like playing cards with legs.”

She groaned, “That was such a long trail. You guys were so skinny you just looked like sticks way up ahead of us. Oh man, it was so hot!”

“Yeah, but it rained the next day. We played cards in the tent, and Dave pitched a fit cuz he wanted to get going.”

“You always think of the things that go wrong.”

“I’m a little tight.”

We planned trips. Alanna clapped her hands, “I know! Let’s take the whole summer and hike the Muir trail, then I want to go to Alaska.”

“Let’s go to Antarctica. I want to see the penguins.”

We talked about the transplant, how dangerous it was, but without it there was no hope. “I need hope,” Alanna said.

The day before she went into the hospital, I complained that I had huge bags under my eyes because Anna was up all night teething. Alanna laughed and said, “They’ll go away.”

When she realized she was dying, she said, “I guess this means you’ll go backpacking without me.”

“Oh God.” Dave crumpled onto the bed. “I can’t do anything without you.”

As they fall to earth they sometimes collide with other raindrops. When this happens, they either join to become one big drop or, if they’re already too big, they break apart into smaller drops.

After we decided to get married, Brad took me to the high Sierra for my first backpacking trip. The first day was a tough uphill slog on a dusty trail. A few sorry pine trees punctured the granite slopes. Independence Creek rushed alongside. We dunked bandanas and tied them around our necks, water dripping down our t-shirts. Red-tailed hawks circled, their cries slitting the quiet breeze.

Brad taught me his uphill song: “The noble Duke of York, he had 10,000 men. He marched them up the hill one day then he marched them down again.” It didn’t help. My calves burned. I blamed that man walking ahead of me. “And when they were up were up were up and when they were down were down.” Going in from the East was his idea, “It’s steeper, but we’ll get to the high Sierra faster.” Did he have to go so fast? How could I marry this guy? I quit trying to keep up. Still, we huffed out the song, “When they were only halfway up they were neither up nor down.”

The sun was low when we summited Kearsarge Pass on blistering feet. For eons, rain clouds blowing in from the Pacific have dropped their moisture on the gentle western slope of the Sierra Nevada. We looked down on rolling wildflower meadows with clusters of pine trees and creeks rushing to fill the scattered lakes. We tramped down slowly, breathing the moist cool air. At the first lake we chose a camp site in a stand of pines. Relieved of its forty-pound pack, my body felt buoyant. Before soreness could set in, we loped down to the inlet to bathe our faces and splash each other with sparkling drops. Sun warmed my back, and I thought I could stay with Dave forever.

We talked about hanging the food. In bear country it is standard procedure to toss a rope over a high branch and use it to suspend a bag holding anything a bear might find attractive (food, tooth paste, lotion). The bear might be able to climb the tree trunk, so the trick is to get the food far out on a branch that won’t hold his
weight. Eventually we’d be experts at hanging food, but that night we were too tired. So Brad put some of the food in my pack and draped our dirty socks over it, assuring me that “bears don’t like the smell of humans.”

I woke in deepest night to a black bear sniffing outside our tent. When I elbowed Brad, he just groaned, “Go back to sleep.” The next morning we found my new backpack a few yards away. Ignoring our stinky socks, the bear had shredded the pack and smeared what food he didn’t eat all over my clothes. My pack reeked of bear breath. Brad’s pack was untouched. I have a photo of him sunbathing naked on a granite slab overlooking the lake, his backpack leaning against a boulder, and a huge smile on his face. That must have been after the make-up sex.

* * *

Our collection of backpacking stories grew over the years, and we shared most with Dave. Finally, without mentioning her name, the three of us decided to launch the adventure Alanna had dreamed up when we thought we had plenty of time. Alaska. We would raft down the Koyukuk River through the Gates of the Arctic.

I have a picture of us loading 2400 pounds of gear into the plane. There’s Dave in his flannel shirt, hauling the big grey inflatable raft; Brad, with a few splayed out paddles; Anna, with a heavy bucket of breakfast makings, and there’s me, lugging the small red raft. Kenny’s not in the picture. He was probably in the back seat of the pickup listening to his iPod.

Our first stop was National Park Headquarters for training with Ranger Seth. The greatest risk would be, not bears, but hypothermia. Warning us that “sleep is death,” Seth advised that in the worst case we take off our clothes and snuggle with someone else in a sleeping bag. This sounded fine to me, but it brought giggles from Kenny and Anna. Ignoring the teenagers, Seth droned on. “Running water is stronger than you are.” If we found ourselves in the river we should remember: “Stay calm, feet down, swim at 45 degrees to the current.” We must avoid sweepers and strainers—trees dangling from the river bank or heaving up in the middle of a stream. They make for unfriendly hydraulics.

Accustomed to the gentle black bears of the Sierra, we were nervous about grizzlies. Dave launched his favorite joke: “Hey, Brad, do you know how to tell a grizzly from a black bear? You know how when you go into the wilderness you’re advised to take mace and wear little bells on your ankles so the bears will know you’re coming? Well, when you find black bear scat, it smells like berries and has little nuts in it. When you find grizzly bear scat, it smells like mace and has little bells in it.”

Seth assured us there was only one bear per five hundred square miles. He explained how to handle the grizzly, “Speak in a firm voice.” “Make yourself look big.” “Let him know this is your territory.”

I raised my hand, “But I thought bears didn’t like the smell of humans.” Our teenagers chuckled. They knew that story by heart.

But Brad was not amused: “Seth is dead wrong. You may be able toward off a black bear with that territorial threat, but with a grizzly your only hope is to curl up and play dead. You remember that, OK? This is no joking matter, Sandra.”

Still, Dave and I rehearsed unlikely speeches to “Mr. Bear.” “Alaska belongs to me and you’d better just boogey on out of here, Mr. Bear.” “Mr. Black Bear, for you Brad.” It was always “Mr.” The prospect of a “Mrs.” Was too scary to contemplate. Even a firearm would be no use with a raging she-bear, especially one with cubs. Mothers will do anything to protect your young.

We entered the wilderness from Bettles, Alaska. Population forty-three, the guide book explained, and “perched near the former Hickel Highway that now connects to the Dalton Highway as a winter ice road only.” In summer the only way in is on little planes that land, when weather permits, on a 5190 ft. gravel airstrip built by the military. No paved roads. Just dirt and gravel. A tiny post office painted in a red and green Christmas motif and log cabins with sled dogs tied out back and interiors that feature fur, wood, and animal skulls. We slept in a one-room plywood shed with a moose skull over the door. The sink drained into a bucket, and the
bathhouse had composting toilets. Kenny thought up an ad for the place, “A gentle breeze to caress your bum...” We always get giddy before we go in.

The next morning, we ate all the cholesterol Bettles Lodge had to offer: eggs, sausages, biscuits with gravy. While others lingered over “the last breakfast,” I wandered down a muddy track to fetch my dry bag from the cabin. It was early summer and bits of melting snow huddled in the shade of evergreens. Bird calls sweetened the quiet. Lost in reflection, I nearly ran into Harvey, a large Inuit man who worked for our outfitter. He offered to carry my dry bag back to the lodge. “Thanks. No. I need to carry my own bag.”

Then we waited for the bush pilot—and waited—and waited.

During our weeks of planning we only spoke with Don once. His advice: “Bring gloves, be prepared for mosquitoes, and carry a firearm.” Mostly we talked with his wife, Sophie. A few days before we left she told us about the father and son who went in before us.

“Look, they went in too early. There was heavy runoff, and the river was just too fast. Then they took the wrong fork and slipped under an ice float. After drifting under the ice for a really long ways they found an air hole and crawled out. They lost everything: boats, cameras, food—everything. Luckily, the father smoked, so he had a butane lighter in his fanny pack. With it, they kept a fire going for five days. Finally a bush pilot spotted them and organized a rescue.” I tossed and turned for a few nights, then went out and bought butane lighters and fanny packs for everyone. With a lighter and a Swiss army knife I could handle anything.

Brad decided to rent a satellite phone, “just as a precaution.”

Sophie assured us that the bush pilot would come. “But it’s impossible to say when” The sun doesn’t set that time of year. Without darkness things can go on and on. Who knew? That pilot could be organizing a rescue, or having a beer, or taking a nap.

When we finally heard the distant hum Sophie revved the pickup, we jumped in the back, and we all roared off to the airstrip. The plane was a Beaver, which meant something to Dave, “Hardy little planes!” He gushed. Little was right. It took two flights to get us in. Brad, Kenny, and Anna went on the first flight and I was on the second with Dave. Bouncing in that little plane reminded me of riding a motorcycle with my old boyfriend.

After showing us how to work the earphones, the pilot said his name was Bob, and we felt more secure knowing we were in Bob’s hands. He didn’t care to know our names. Dave elbowed me and asked Bob, “When will cocktails be served?”

Bob told us to study the river. From the sky the Koyukuk was a braided strand winding along a bed of sand. There was no sign of humans: no roads, no wires, no trails. Just rolling evergreens. Near the horizon, a thin line of grey smoke drifted up to the clouds. “Lightening fire,” Bob explained. “It’s so wet it’ll go out on its own.” Near the end of the flight he pointed to the river, “That’s a dangerous place. See that sweeper?” “What sweeper?” All I saw was cloud. Then Bob steered the plane into a breath-taking swoop before landing on a gravel bar. The clouds withdrew to reveal two steep granite peaks in the distance: Gates of the Arctic.

We watched Bob fly away and found ourselves alone. Brad whispered “eight million acres of pure wilderness.”

I patted his head, “So how many bears does that hold?”

The river was higher and colder than we had expected, and the sky looked like rain. With a deep breath we turned to setting up camp: pitching tents, filtering water, assembling the stoves. Dinner was chili-dogs. Brad worried about indigestion, but Dave loved them, “These are the best chili-dogs I have ever eaten. Mmmm hmmm.” Next morning we breakfasted on eggs, then inflated and loaded the boats. Dave, Brad and Anna took the big gray raft with most of the gear, and Kenny and I set out in the little red inflatable canoe.

* * *

Dave and Kenny were at our house the day Alanna was diagnosed. Kenny and Anna splashed in the kiddie pool while Dave and Bob pored over trail maps for the summer trip. Alanna was supposed to come over later for
barbecue and a movie if we could get the kids to settle down. But she didn’t come. Instead, she called and told Dave to come home right away. He didn’t say anything. He just asked us to look after Kenny and left. I worried all night. The next morning he called. Leukemia.

Alanna’s boy was five when his mother died. The day after her memorial, Dave brought him round to our house. Kenny was a different child. He moved like he was 100 years old, and there were black circles around his eyes. He told me “Mommy has died.”

I twirled his hair, noticing that it was a shade darker than hers. “I know, Kenny, and I am so sorry. Do you want some macaroni and cheese?” Those may have been the last words we spoke about his mom. I kept meaning to bring her up, but talking about her made Dave so angry. He took to carrying a flask on the trail, and decades later her name could still make him wince and reach for a scotch. So I learned to talk to Alanna in private.

* * *

I was glad to hop in the red canoe behind Kenny. Maybe we’d have a chance to really talk. He could tell me about the new girlfriend whose picture he carried, and his job in a skateboard shop. I could tell him about his mom. I could ask whether Dave ever gave him those cards she’d left. But the rain-swollen river demanded my attention, and Kenny couldn’t seem to do anything but whine, “We aren’t going to make it!” Mostly, he was afraid of the sweepers. It was hard to steer around them, but when collision was inevitable I’d put out my feet in their high rubber boots and fend us off.

“Kenny, it’s going to be OK, but I need you to help row.”

Down drafts can increase the speed of a rain drop.

Finally, I gave up. Kenny wanted the comfort and stability of the big grey raft, and I wanted some distance from him. With all that whining and fear, Kenny was no help. He wasn’t the son Alanna would have raised. So Anna joined me in the canoe. My daughter knew how to row and with her on board the trip downstream was easy. We had a little more control, I felt a little more confident. The sun came out. The Koyukuk sparkled. “Ducks!” She spotted a pair of black-headed loons gliding on the river’s surface; stillness above, churning below. We weren’t worried when I lifted my feet to fend off from a sweeper. But as we’d moved downstream the week’s heavy rain had gushed into the river, giving it momentous speed. When we hit that sweeper the canoe didn’t pause. It just flipped.

Life jackets hauled us to the surface and we watched as the red canoe and our scattered gear bobbed away. Anna was thrown to the middle of the river. She looked three years old and very scared. “Swim to me, baby.” I just wanted her in my arms. Boots dragging, we held hands and kicked “at 45 degrees to the current.” When we reached the shore we turned around and I whispered, “Oh my God.”

Lodged against the sweeper, the raft was sinking as water surged over its sides. Kenny and Dave were in front, clinging to the tree and Brad was perched in the back. Yelling at Anna to take off her wet clothes, I ran to the tree and climbed on, thinking I’d pull out some gear and kick the raft free. With river snarling in my ears I began tossing things to shore: a sleeping bag, a tent, an oar. Then the raft shifted and Dave yelled at Kenny to let go. The raft and the two of them disappeared under the tree, leaving Brad half-swimming, half-crawling in the shallow eddy upstream.

I eased towards him with my back braced against the tree. With each step I buried my feet in the river bottom. No way was I going under that water. Brad grabbed my hand and clambered around me to shore. Then I slipped and found myself clinging to the tree while rushing water filled my ears and my boots dragged me down. One moment I was telling myself to let go, and the next, Dave was pulling me up onto the tree.
Anna and Kenny were shivering. Kenny huddled on the beached raft and my baby, wearing only her underwear, had buried herself in the warm mud. “Oh honey, what a good idea!” But Brad was shaking uncontrollably. His lips were turning blue. I found a rain suit in the stranded gear and he held onto my shoulder as I pulled the sticky rubber pants over his trembling legs.

We went into a couple-huddle. We had landed on an island with river on both sides. The grey raft was torn up and only the small red canoe was still floating. Brad wanted to camp on the island, “Come on, nobody wants to get back in the river.”

“I can’t sleep here. This place gives me the creeps.” The ground was muddy and willows blocked the breezes. It looked like mosquito heaven to me and I didn’t like the idea of camping on that soft mud. “I’m afraid we’ll sink into the mud in our sleep.”

With a deep sigh, Brad agreed to camp on higher ground. But he was tired, so Dave and I ferried everyone to the other shore, and set out to retrieve what food and gear had landed on shore. Fog blew in and time paused while we stomped through mud and sand. Our breaths mingled. Mosquitoes hovered, but they couldn’t bite through the mud layer coating our arms and legs. We wandered into a meadow full of moose pellets. I reminded Dave that you could start a fire with dry moose poop. “That could come in handy, but where there’s poop there’s moose, and you know moose can be more dangerous than bear.”

“Thanks, that helps not at all,” I smiled as we shoulder-bumped.

The mud turned to quick sand and I remembered something else, “So, did you hear about the tourist who roamed onto a soft beach in Alaska?”

“No, what happened?”

“He got stuck in the mud. When the tide came up he drowned.”

“Thanks babe. That helps not at all. I’m staying behind you.”

Babe.

He put a hand on my shoulder, “Lead on, Macduff!” I picked up a walking stick to probe the ground ahead.

We didn’t lose much, really. The grey raft was useless. The gas stove and frying pan were gone, along with plates and silverware. But we retrieved a lot of food. Then Anna spotted the satellite phone, its rugged yellow case snagged on a bush a few yards into the flooded river. When Dave waded out and snagged it with my walking stick we all cheered.

That night Dave lit a fire with my butane lighter. Anna and I cut up some of the chicken Sophie had packed and we cooked chicken-fajita-bobs on sticks over the fire. We ate the burned meat on tortillas with cheddar cheese. Dave said, “This has got to be the best chicken fajita I have ever eaten!”

When the clouds parted we realized the Koyukuk had planted us right between the Gates of the Arctic. Their peaks soared above us. “No wonder they named the park after them,” Dave whispered.

“No wonder!” Alanna’s voice echoed from the other shore. Get over here woman. I need help. I can’t do all this cooking alone and your husband just called me babe. Willows rustled in the breeze.

The hard part was deciding what to do. We hovered around the satellite phone and Brad studied the instructions until Dave told him to “Just order up a rescue!”

“Would you like some pepperoni with your rescue? Or will that be vegetarian,” Brad replied. His first attempts brought nothing but static. Eventually he got through to Sophie and calmly explained that we’d lost a boat and could use some help. She thought maybe Don could come get us and told Brad to call back later. Later we would learn that Don wanted to bring a motorboat in, drop off a raft, then motor back to Bettles. But Harvey mentioned the plan to Seth, who vetoed it. He wanted to bring in a helicopter. When Brad called back Sophie told us to choose between Seth’s helicopter and Don’s raft. We wrangled:

“I don’t ever want to go near that river again.”

“I never want to see Kenny go underwater again.”

“If we lighten the gear we can just keep going.”

“Look, I’m the one who went under that tree!”

“I want to go home and I want go to summer school.”
“But you hate summer school.”
“I want to go to bed.”
“We don’t have any beds.”
“I’m still hungry.”
“Would everyone PLEASE shut up!!”
Unwilling to stomach the humiliation of a helicopter rescue, Brad told Sophie to send Don with “a new raft, a stove, and some plates; no onions please.”
We retreated to our tents and our wet sleeping bags. Pulling off my socks, I realized that my feet had been sanded down by the grit in my boot. They were baby smooth, but very cold. As I rubbed them Alanna’s voice came from behind, “Would you look at that! Soft as a baby’s butt.” She chuckled and I growled.

The sun grazed the horizon. Eventually Brad and Anna slept. Lanna, I can’t do this. “Oh yes you can. We’ll be together. It’ll be fun!” The wind blew hard all night and the tent strained at its pegs. Sand rattled against its sides.

Surface tension is the skin that holds rain drops together. It is made of weak hydrogen bonds. Smaller drops have stronger surface tension than larger drops because less air flows around them.

I woke first the next day and snuck out of the tent to explore. A squirrel peeked out from a dried out log and scurried away. A wood chuck stood his ground and sounded warnings. Willows rustled. The river cavorted. Gates of the Arctic kept watch. Then I heard Kenny shout inside their tent, “Shit! Shit! Shit! My IPod’s dead!”
Dave murmured, “Maybe it’s the battery.”
“No. It must have gotten wet. It’s ruined!”
“Kenny, it’s just a toy.”
“It is NOT a toy!” He burst out of the tent and caught me listening. “Sheesh!” He stomped into the trees. By the time he got back the rest of us were draping wet clothes and sleeping bags over willows and boulders to dry.

As evening drew near Anna dug through a bucket and found some steaks. Our mouths watered as we cooked them on a driftwood grill over an open fire. When the grill finally burned up and collapsed the steaks fell in the coals. It felt like such defeat after all our work, but Dave gushed “This has to be the best steak I have ever eaten!”

I grinned, “Man, I do enjoy cooking for you!”
Later, huddled in our less-damp sleeping bags, Brad worried that Don might not show up for days. What if we ran out of food? Should we begin hiking downstream? But Don flew in that very night. He inflated his huge raft (later christened the “mother ship”), rowed down to our campsite, climbed into his little tube-tent and went to sleep. When I stepped out of our tent he was building a fire. To his cheery, “Good morning!” all I could come up with was “I haven’t brushed my teeth.” Then that stringy mountain man with his raggedy ponytail said, “You look good.” A salvaged mirror revealed baggy eyes, matted hair, dried blood and a fair amount of mud. “You look good.” Later he took to giving me wildflowers.
Brad took an instant dislike to the man, “Talk about creepy.”
But Alanna approved, “I think he’s sweet.”

After breakfast we bustled around folding tents, rolling up sleeping bags, stashing gear and tying it down. The mother ship was a huge inflatable, but it had oarlocks, which improved steering. With Don rowing, it was a perfect haven for worn out rafters. As youngest, Anna took the first turn in the mother ship with Don. But Kenny soon tired of rowing and insisted on trading places with her. I fumed as she took up her paddles, “So much for chivalry.”
The rain held off and as the river slowed its wildlife came out. Don taught the kids to do bird calls and fed us moose pepperoni he’d dried himself. I carried snacks in my backpack and passed them out whenever we took a break.

We camped that night on a sandbank dotted with willows. Anna and I walked a ways off to bathe in a clear stream. We sat on rocks in our swimsuits, dipped body parts in the cold water, and then soaped in the less-cold air before a quick rinse. Then we waded in knee-deep to shampoo our hair. After that shock we pranced back to the fire chanting “Clean! Clean! Clean!” Alanna laughed.

Next morning we launched into a sunny day. Curious beavers swam toward the boats then slapped their tails and dove. We spent happy hours scanning the river and shouting “beaver!” when a nose broke the surface. We followed groups of baby geese while their parents honked from shore. Anna wondered, “Why don’t the parents just come get them?”

“The parents can’t fly. They’re molting.” Don explained.

“Wow. They must be so worried.”

Kenny spotted the hind ends of a moose and her calf. But we didn’t see a single bear.

Rain threatened, so Don had us pitch tents in the shelter of an aspen grove. Seagulls begged for leftover macaroni and cheese while we sat in a circle and told tales. The kids recited the entire plot of Pari’s Labyrinth and Don told us about shooting moose. We remarked on the perversity of mosquitoes that devoured Don and Anna and ignored the rest of us. We compared the merits of boiled and filtered drinking water. Anna and Kenny ran barefoot in the warm sand circling tighter and tighter until they collapsed on their sides giggling.

We woke to what Don called, “More of an August rain.” cold and relentless. While I paddled hard to stay warm Alanna reminded me, “We’re going south. It has to get warmer.” Still, cold water kept trickling down my back. By mid-afternoon, Brad’s lips were turning blue and the rest of us were shivering. Don said he would build a fire to warm us up. I was skeptical. “But it’s raining. How are you going to get dry wood?”

“Watch and see.”

Don had us collect branches with pine needles and pile them up three feet high. Then we added logs and sticks to make an 8-foot pile of damp wood. He lit his Coleman stove and gently slid it underneath. In time the wood around the stove dried and caught. Don pulled out the stove and the smoky little flames grew into a raging bonfire. “Woo hoo!” We stood in a circle around the blaze, raincoats open to soak in heat like cormorants drying their wings in the sun. Steam drifted from our bodies. “Ahhhhhh.” We basked until the fire died. Then we launched our rafts. As we rowed, we treasured the lingering warmth. That night we lit another bonfire around the base of a dead tree and it shot up into the sky. Don said, “See, in this wilderness what pleasures you get you have to earn.”

On our last night in the wilderness my hands wouldn’t work. Knives kept slipping and I dropped food in the sand. Watching, Kenny said, “Hey, I’ll row all day tomorrow if that’s what it takes to get some good food!”

I erupted, “I want to see YOU row all day!” I retreated to the tent to nurse my frustration.

Brad came in to chew me out. “Kenny was traumatized when he and I went underwater. You need to cut him some slack.”

“But he has done nothing but piss and moan!”

“Sandra, you are the adult here. Or at least you’re supposed to be.”

I wondered why my sympathy for Kenny had evaporated. That night as I wallowed in shame Alanna kept saying, “They’ll go away. They’ll all go away.”

The tree held some of our fire in its roots so Don piled new wood on top for a morning bonfire. Brad fixed oatmeal and for once Kenny helped load the boats. The rain turned gentle and the river turned wide and slow. We quit rowing and drew our boats close, holding the ropes so we could lounge and gossip as we floated along. Don told us about his failed bid to be mayor of Bettles. We told every walks-in-a-bar joke we knew. From time to time someone declared a race. We’d pick a goal and paddle like hell until we were breathless.

Don offered to teach Anna to row the mother ship. I watched my little girl perched up on top of that pile of gear, her back straight, her sleeves rolled up, pushing those long oars. Kenny began to chant, “Are we there yet?”
Are we there yet?” Don said the river was so high nothing looked familiar. Kenny asked again. Don peered at his watch and said, “We’ll be there at 2:24 pm and 15 seconds.” It became a game. Kenny would ask and Don would invent a new arrival time. Then Don saw a landmark and said we were closer than he’d thought. There was only an hour left before Bettles. The teenagers rejoiced and I had an odd sinking feeling.

A man sitting on the bank asked Don how we were (as if we couldn’t hear). “Just tired,” he said. Sophie met us at the beach in her big truck. We loaded rafts and gear in the back and rode into town triumphant on top of the pile. We ate chicken noodle soup and watched The Bourne Conspiracy on Sophie’s TV. Kenny entertained us with movie plots and production details. Turns out he wanted to make films when he grew up. Turns out he could be charming when he wanted to. Turns out Alanna’s son grew up without her.

*Once a raindrop loses its surface tension it will break into smaller drops.*

I was on my own for the next week. Brad left for a conference and Anna went to a summer program in Denver. I took my water-logged camera to a photo shop and the man at the counter said they’d retrieve what they could. A small package of wavy images came back, vague faces in front of blurred rivers, mountains and sky—none of the times I most treasured, but I kept them. That afternoon I called Dave. He couldn’t come over for dinner, but we compared notes on the weather and he ranted about what “those damned Republicans” had been up to while we were away. We talked about our next great adventure and knew without saying that it had to be something Alanna would love.