

RISK

A Memoir of
a Life Saved
by the River

SUSAN NORMAN



SHE WRITES PRESS

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Published 2025

Printed in the United States of America

Print ISBN: 978-1-64742-924-9

E-ISBN: 978-1-64742-925-6

Library of Congress Control Number: [LOCCN]

For information, address:

She Writes Press

1569 Solano Ave #546

Berkeley, CA 94707

Interior design and typeset by Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

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**Names and identifying characteristics have been changed
to protect the privacy of certain individuals.**

This memoir is dedicated to
my mother, Bette Norman;
my river sister, Kelley Kalafatich;
my father, Dean Norman;
and my son, Seth.

“Joy is the holy fire that keeps our purpose warm
and our intelligence aglow. Resolve to keep happy,
and your joy and you shall form an invincible
host against difficulty.”

—HELEN KELLER

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Chapter 1

Seth (2014)

The blue line on the MapQuest app indicates my destination is the squat, dark building coming up on the left. I squint at the phone again to make sure. It seems an unlikely edifice for the Paradise Preschool. Tiny windows located high on one side of the building are covered in black metal bars. There are no windows on the sooty red brick wall facing the road. However, a small sign with whimsical lettering in bright primary colors confirms this is indeed the place.

I pull into the parking lot, next to which sits a basketball court-size compound enclosed in a chain-link fence with a locked gate. Inside the compound, a toddler playground set constructed of green, blue, red, and yellow plastic sits on the hot black asphalt, next to a square of artificial turf.

Apparently, this is the exercise yard.

I park and make my way to the front entrance. A sign on the solid steel door instructs me to press the button on the adjacent intercom to seek entry. I wonder, perhaps unfairly, just how many pervs reside in the surrounding seedy neighborhood. Is the prison-like security to keep the little animals in or the big animals out? Maybe both.

Feeling like I'm on a first date, I nervously push the button.

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I flew to Cleveland from my home in Lake Tahoe, California, yesterday. In my suitcase, I brought with me a one-way ticket for my four-year-old nephew to fly back with me in six days.

This is day one of less than one full week of me getting to know Seth before whisking him away from everything he has known in his short life.

A cheerful, plump Black woman brings Seth up out of the clamoring horde of toddlers inside, the only white face among dozens of children.

He looks so unhealthy compared to his schoolmates. His light brown hair is greasy and unkempt. His pasty complexion only highlights the purplish-blue shadows under his eyes. Bright pink welts splotch his face, neck, and arms.

My brother, David, warned me about the welts. Bed bugs.

I quickly sign the check-out sheet and crouch down to meet Seth at eye level.

“Hey buddy, are you ready to go have some fun today?”

With wide, solemn eyes, he slowly nods his head. Is he scared?

From our brief encounter yesterday evening, I know he does not remember me from previous visits. But when I reach out my hand, he slips his impossibly tiny fingers into mine.

“So, buddy, here is our plan. The first thing we’re going to do is go to Grandpa’s house to get a bath and breakfast. They will have a lot of yummy things to choose from, so I hope you are hungry. After that, you and I are going to a really fun playground by the lake for a couple of hours. Then we’re going to come back to Grandpa’s house for lunch.”

I glance in the rearview mirror to see if Seth is expressing any reaction. He is still looking out the window with his wide-eyed stare. I keep talking.

“Now, after lunch, we’ll go to the park to take Sasha for a walk with Grandpa and Grandma. Sasha’s a cool dog, don’t you think?”

Seth (2014)

It's going to be fun to play with her. Then later, your dad will come over to Grandpa's, and we're all going to have dinner together. After dinner, your dad will take you home, and tomorrow I will pick you up at the preschool again so we can have more fun!"

Again, I look in the mirror. This time I catch Seth staring back. He's still not smiling, but he doesn't seem upset. I take that as a positive sign.

For the rest of the fifteen-minute trip to my dad's house, I talk about things I see on the drive: a pretty tree in bloom, a cool-looking car, a cat scurrying across the road. I hope it is comforting in some way to hear me prattling on about innocuous things. That I'm assuring him, on a gut level at least, he is safe with this total stranger he is stuck with for the day.

After a brief greeting to Dad and his wife, Maureen, I lead Seth straight to the bathroom. Once the tub is full, I have him strip out of his clothes and shoes, which I secure tightly in a garbage bag Maureen surreptitiously slipped to me in the hallway.

"Go ahead and get in," I tell him, ushering him into the warm water, and handing him the ducky and shark bathtub toys Maureen has thoughtfully provided. "I'll be right back."

As quickly as I can, I carry the bag outside. I bring it all the way to the far end of the driveway, far enough away, I hope, to deter any errant bed bugs from making a run for Dad's house—just one of the many fears I have about the next few days—and then return inside.

Back in the bathroom, I help Seth wash his hair. The dime-size pink welts are everywhere. Not a single part of his body has been spared. I make a note to myself to buy aloe vera gel.

After the bath, I help him get dressed in the clothes Maureen purchased for him last week. The new wardrobe is part of our prearranged plan to ward off infestation.

Silently but willingly, Seth follows me everywhere for the rest of the day. He plays, he runs, he eats like a horse. He is curious

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and engaged. At the playground, he actively seeks out other kids to play with. He just doesn't talk.

Today, day two, we go through a similar routine, except I start telling Seth how exciting it will be to leave for California at the end of the week. This is not a surprise to him. Ever since David and I made this plan about four months ago, he's been talking to Seth about their move to California and all the wonderful things that are going to happen there.

Seth knows he's going to California with his dad's sister on an airplane, and then his dad will drive out in his car to join us. The extended details around those two facts are not yet clear to me, so I do not try to elaborate. When exactly will David get to California? How long will he and Seth live with me? Where will they eventually end up?

Who knows? We are all stepping into the void.

Before Seth entered my life, I had enjoyed a prolonged period of comfortable stability. I was proud of the fact I was a self-made woman who'd successfully taken on all major life hurdles. I had overcome my own broken childhood and poverty to obtain an advanced degree, leading to a rewarding career and financial stability. I was in a relationship with a compatible life partner, Lisa. With the defeat of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in the Supreme Court, we'd even been able to get married, making it possible for me to add Lisa to my sweet federal employee health insurance plan. I owned a home, almost paid off, in the outdoor wonderland of Lake Tahoe.

My leisure time was filled with adult cultural and outdoor adventures in both my beautiful backyard and exotic locations around the world. When catastrophic events had happened to some of those I was close to, I'd had the emotional strength and capacity to provide support rather than shy away from my friends' hard times.

Seth (2014)

I had foolishly lulled myself into believing that whatever future difficulties fate might throw my way, my accumulated skill set and accomplishments had created a solid foundation for navigating all challenges.

And then Seth happened.

It began before he was even born. I was on one of my typical water sport-based outdoor escapes—in this case, an outrigger canoe training camp in Hawaii with a dozen other friends from our club in Lake Tahoe. We'd planned this spring getaway to jump-start our paddling season, which was too cold to enjoy for another month or two in our High Sierra mountain town.

One evening, after enjoying a post-workout feast of fresh fish tacos, sweet papayas with lime, and potent margaritas, I was annoyed to see my brother's name pop up on my cell phone. David typically only called when he needed money, and I had recently decided I'd reached my limit in providing financial support; in fact, I'd intended to send him a letter after this trip explaining my tough-love decision.

I decided to take the call. I got up from the lanai and moved into the house, preparing myself to be vague in response to whatever financial crisis he was currently in and defer follow-up until I had time to prepare my sibling version of a "Dear John" letter.

"Hey David, what's up?" I asked, bracing myself.

"Well, I have some great news," he announced cheerfully. "I'm going to be a daddy!"

This concept did not immediately penetrate my brain. For a variety of reasons, my fifty-two-year-old twin brother had never been in a romantic relationship for more than a few short periods in his life. But here he was on the phone, with a twenty-year-old woman named Gesicyah, both of them giddily exclaiming how excited they were to have found each other and to be producing progeny together.

Somehow, I verbalized tepid responses of congratulations and

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fake joy at their news. On the inside, my brain screamed: *This must be a mistake—dear God, let it be a mistake!*

After the paternity test (which I paid for) provided proof that David was indeed the father, I knew I would no longer be able to send him that “Dear John” letter.

I was about to be an aunt; my allegiance now belonged to my unborn niece or nephew.

I made my first visit to Cleveland to meet Seth when he was about fourteen months old. When I first laid eyes on him, I immediately and viscerally fell head over heels in love. When he sat on my lap for the first time, a warm, aching glow emanated from my chest and spread throughout my body. I struggled to hold back tears. I stared at his face, in awe of this perfection created by two exceedingly imperfect people. His wide-set, almond-shaped brown eyes were framed with lush black lashes. His features were delicate and perfectly proportioned in the smooth, symmetrical oval of his face, which created an aura of impossible innocence.

Before this moment, I had never found children to be particularly cute or engaging and had experienced nary a twinge of maternal instincts. With Seth, I certainly could not have experienced the complex chemical stimuli new mothers are flooded with after childbirth, which biologically predispose most women to form an intense bond with their newborns. So how to explain the feelings that this little human produced in me?

Maureen thinks the phenomenon I experienced could be explained by subliminal primal recognition. Seth looked a lot like David, my twin, did when he was little. Twins begin bonding while they are still in the womb. Although I no longer felt close to my brother in many ways, it did not change the powerful attachment we’d had when we were toddlers. Maybe when I saw Seth that first time some unconscious part of my brain said, “Well, hello again! Where have you been? I’ve missed you.”

Seth (2014)

Gesicyah parted ways with David before Seth was born. During my twice-a-year visits to Cleveland, I helped each of them clean their filthy homes and took Seth and his half-brother, Dale, to the park to play. I quietly listened to David and Gesi as they both recounted their delusional plans for finally getting their lives in order. I sent modest amounts of money to both to help with various financial crises, knowing I would not get paid back. I desperately wanted them to succeed, but none of the signs pointed in that direction.

The shit hit the fan when Seth was three years old: Gesi went to jail, and there was a real possibility she was going to be incarcerated for a long time.

From prison, Gesi prepared a one-year power of attorney for a couple who had become pseudo grandparents to Seth. This family was kind and well-meaning, but they also planned to move out of state in two months for a job prospect. David was beside himself. We both knew child custody laws became very difficult to navigate once parents and children resided in different states.

I spent many sleepless nights fretting over what was the best option for Seth. I knew the family taking care of him was doing a better job of parenting than either David or Gesi were ever likely to manage. But I also knew if Seth went to Wisconsin with his current caregivers, the likelihood of his ever returning to Ohio was very slim.

So, in a decision I still sometimes question was the right one, I committed myself to helping David keep Seth.

After the court decision awarding David temporary custody in 2013, I immediately got on a plane to Cleveland to help him prepare his home for long-term habitation with a toddler. David was a hoarder. It had been troubling enough to imagine Seth visiting him on the weekends; the idea of permanent residence was downright horrifying.

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When I arrived, David's 700-square-foot house was filled with a variety of incomplete electronic fix-up projects and items he compulsively acquired from yard sales and thrift stores. Partially dismembered television sets, stereo components, VCRs, and old laptops were stacked in teetering towers atop unstable tables and shelves along the walls. Most of the floor and the few rickety chairs he owned were covered in dirty clothes and stacks of old papers and magazines; piles of dirty dishes covered every surface in the kitchen. A large cardboard box next to a murky fish tank appeared to contain only unopened bills. There was so much stuff crammed inside the sunroom that the door into it could not be opened wide enough to step through. David wouldn't let me open the door to his bedroom, so I could only imagine the horror hidden within.

Overflowing cans of cigarette butts were scattered throughout the house. Every surface was covered in a patina of dust, cigarette ashes, and birdseed with a little poop and feathers thrown in. A small cage with two softly peeping finches hung from the ceiling next to the one visible window in the living room. Two cats could be found curled up somewhere within the piles of dirty laundry.

I spent a week loading two dump truck containers with stuff to be hauled to the landfill while David was at work at his temp agency day labor jobs. In cleaning and furnishing Seth's bedroom, I strived to create a little island of relatively safe and sanitary conditions so he would not be sickened or maimed by its contents.

Two days after Seth moved in, just to keep David honest, I called Child Protective Services.

Over the next nine months, David kept his home and life in order just enough to maintain custody of Seth, but the situation was tenuous. CPS visited about twice a month, and I regularly called to get updates.

During one of my calls, the social worker spoke frankly: "Now, I'm not sayin' he is keeping his house the way you and I might like it . . . but it is safe."

Seth (2014)

David kept working at the day labor gigs his temp agency gave him—the only source of income he'd had for a decade—but the amount of financial support he required kept increasing. In addition to paying his property taxes and homeowners insurance premium, I was now paying all the utility bills.

I agonized over how involved I should get in both David and Seth's lives. I did not want to disrupt my harmonious, balanced life, but I also did not want to wait until something happened that could put Seth in foster care, or worse. I worried a few more years of bad parenting could create irreparable harm during his formative development, virtually ensuring he would follow in his parents' footsteps and become a permanent fixture in the social welfare state.

Finally in December of 2013, I called David with an offer. Knowing it would change my life but never imagining the whirlpool I was about to be sucked into, I invited him and Seth to move to California.

At the end of the week, David drives Seth and me to the airport hotel. My previously half-filled suitcase is now stuffed to capacity with Seth's new wardrobe from Grandma Maureen.

Seth clutches a small stuffed black Labrador puppy from Grandpa Dean. At this point in our one-week relationship, he still doesn't talk to me in sentences. But he will sometimes say "yes" or "no" instead of nodding or shaking his head. He also puts his arms up for me to pick him up when he is tired or has skinned his knee. And he looks into my eyes when I talk to him.

Seth hugs his dad goodbye as David tells him how much he loves him and will miss him, promising he will see him soon in California.

I am both relieved that Seth is not crying and worried by it.

What is going on in his head? How many times has this little guy had to hear these fraught goodbyes from his adult caregivers?

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How often have his people just disappeared? Is he going to totally freak out on me at some point after David leaves?

Instilling confidence in my tone that I do not feel, I say, “Okay, Dave, we’ll see you in a few weeks.” I hope that stating a timeline aloud, however imprecise, will reinforce the imminence of David’s reappearance for Seth. A four-year-old who has already experienced separation from his mother, two half-siblings, a step-father, and one set of quasi grandparents.

I give David a hug, both fearing him leaving and wanting him to go. Then, hands shaking and stomach churning, I turn to Seth and, as cheerfully as I can, say, “Hey, let’s go in so we can watch cartoons before we go to bed, okay, buddy?”

Silently, Seth slips his tiny hand into mine, and we walk through the door.

Chapter 2

The Great Missouri River Wreck (1968)

Standing in the shallow muddy water along the shore of the Missouri River and holding the bow rope of our canoe, I felt the knot in my stomach ease. We were about to head out on a two-week expedition. The soft, burbling sounds of the river were calming and familiar, and the peaceful movement of current disappearing around the first bend portended adventure.

Dad, happier than I had seen him in months, softly hummed a tune as he tightened the last straps on our gear bags. David stood on shore, handing Dad the final few small pieces of gear, which Dad expertly fit in an orderly and geometrically efficient fashion to fill every space in our eighteen-foot Grumman aluminum canoe.

At the start of this river trip in June of 1968, David and I were ten years old. A few weeks before our launch, my mother had permanently left our family to live with my grandparents and receive the full-time care her illness from acute multiple sclerosis required.

Dad had given away most of our belongings when we moved out of our house in Cleveland, Ohio. He'd told us we were spending the summer out West and would bring only the essentials: our canoe, a bag of clothes each, camping gear, a file cabinet full

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of Dad's writing and cartooning work, drawing supplies, a typewriter, and our yellow Labrador, Fawn.

Driving away from Cleveland, I'd felt both sad and relieved. At least I wouldn't have to see Mommy's empty room anymore. But it was going to be two months before we could see her again, and we had no home to return to. Dad was unclear about what was going to happen after our western adventure and had chosen to focus primarily on plans for our trip.

I had no choice but to trust he would figure it out, despite clear evidence that his ability to keep his shit together had been severely compromised.

As Fawn raced around the canoe, barking at ducks, Dad put the last piece of gear in its proper place. "Time to go!"

Fawn leapt into the canoe beside us as we pushed off into the Missouri River, ready to escape into adventure. Our recent trauma was put aside as the current carried us into the flow of the river, replacing our anxieties with anticipation.

Approaching the first bend, the river forcefully pulled us out of the past and firmly into the now, the ideal place for us to be.

Dad was clearly surprised when, a mile from our launch point at the base of the Fort Peck Dam in Montana, we saw a small but distinct horizon line stretching all the way across the river, broken only by intermittent pulses of white spray. My pulse quickened as I recognized the telltale signs of whitewater.

None of Dad's research had informed him of any rapids of consequence on our route. This was before guidebooks or the internet; he was relying on topographic maps, the eighteenth-century journals of the explorers Lewis and Clark, and the limited word-of-mouth information he'd gleaned from modern-day paddlers to plot our canoe expedition through the Missouri River Breaks.

"Draw to the left, Susan," Dad called to me in the bow as

The Great Missouri River Wreck (1968)

he placed a hard rudder stroke from the stern to angle the canoe toward shore.

Our heavily loaded canoe lumbered into the eddy, and David leapt out of his seat in the middle of the canoe onto a small sand beach to grab the bowline.

After securing the bowline to a tree, Dad said, “You guys wait here while I go scout the rapid.”

I watched him boulder-hop along the shore for only about thirty feet before Fawn suddenly erupted into manic barking and began lunging wildly up and down among the rocks.

Dad yelled frantically, “Fawn, no! Fawn, stop. Come, Fawn, come!”

Even over his yelling and Fawn’s barking I heard the loud, menacing buzz. *Rattlesnake!* I realized with a chill. *And it must be big.*

A few moments later, Dad snagged Fawn by the collar and dragged her back to the canoe. Urgently, he instructed, “David, you get in the canoe and hold on to Fawn; Susan, untie the bowline. We are going to paddle down along the shore to the next eddy.”

Unfortunately, within seconds after pulling out of the first eddy, we encountered our first little wave—and our canoe filled with half a foot of water. With the added weight, the canoe lurched and swayed, now impossible to maneuver. The next wave swamped us completely, the following tipped the boat over, and in seconds the swift currents pulled us from shore into the middle of the river.

Clinging desperately to the gunnel of the upside-down canoe next to David, I choked and gasped for air.

“Don’t let go of the canoe, kids!” Dad yelled as he swam to the back to keep the boat pointed downstream so it wouldn’t breach broadside on a rock. Known as a “wrap” in river-running jargon, I knew such a breach could destroy our canoe and leave all our gear stranded in the middle of the river.

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Kicking with his legs, Dad struggled to keep the canoe straight as the river swept us over barely submerged rocks and through two- to three-foot-high breaking waves.

After each wave, I blinked the water from my eyes and strained to see signs of flatwater downstream, but the end of the rapids was nowhere in sight. The shore was close enough for my father to swim to, but too far for David and me.

“Goddamn it, God, what the hell did I do to deserve this! Jesus fucking Christ get us the hell out of here! Oh, shit, not another one!” Dad exclaimed as—WHAM—another breaking wave crashed over our heads.

Hearing this barrage of profanity from our gentle and mild-mannered father, I whimpered in terror. Clearly, we were in real trouble.

The whitewater was relentless. Gasping for air as waves repeatedly crashed over my head, I struggled to maintain my tenuous grasp on the gunnel of the upside-down Grumman. It felt like I was drowning, even in my life jacket.

Dad continued to plead with and curse the Almighty.

“C’mon! This is enough, goddamn it! Fuck you, God, you asshole! This is bullshit! Aaagh! Damn it!” he yelped as his shins got bashed on another rock. Then, his voice rising to a higher octave, he cried out, “Oh Christ, hang on kids!” just before we plunged over a three-foot drop into a monstrous boil of white foam.

My fingers were ripped off the canoe as my body was sucked down toward the bottom of the river. With my eyes open underwater, I desperately clawed my way back toward the light. My head broke the surface, and as I sputtered for a breath I saw the canoe ten feet to my left. I thrashed my limbs in a frenetic dog paddle to get back to it. Despite being practically raised on canoe trips, my brother and I were terrible swimmers.

When I made it back to the canoe, I looked around until I

The Great Missouri River Wreck (1968)

located David and Dad. They were still several feet away from the canoe. David was choking and flailing, barely able to keep his head above the water; Dad was wrestling him into a lifesaver hold.

Later, Dad discovered that David's life jacket had not been wholly inflated. If Dad hadn't saved him, he almost certainly would have drowned.

After Dad dragged David back to the boat and we were all clinging to the sides again, Fawn decided she was tired of swimming and tried to climb up David's back.

David screamed in terror, desperate to not get pushed under water again. Dad quickly yanked Fawn off by her collar, grabbed the back of David's pants, and yelled, "Reach for the keel and pull yourself up!" He shoved David and then me on top of the canoe, where we clung spread-eagled over its underbelly like limpets.

"Please, God, this just isn't fair, goddamn it! Just give me a fucking break!" Dad continued to plead, his voice breaking in anguish. Hearing his anger turning to what sounded like crying made me feel even more terrified.

For what seemed an eternity, David and I rode the bucking canoe over waves and hydraulics. It was uncomfortable and frightening, but at least we could breathe.

I heard barking and there was Fawn, running along the bank—followed, I was relieved to see, by two fishermen who were frantically scrambling over rocks and bushes, trying to keep up with our canoe.

Up until now I had whined quietly in my fear, not wanting to interrupt Dad's monologue with the Almighty. But now, seeing that there were able-bodied witnesses to our plight, I succumbed to an overwhelming impulse to give full voice to my terror.

"Help us, help us!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, with David soon joining in.

Finally, the waves began to diminish, and at last our canoe,

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with its wretched cargo, floated into a calm pool. With his last reserves of strength, Dad swam the boat close enough to shore for the two fishermen to wade in and pull us out.

David and I stepped onto the beach and plopped down on the nearest rocks. I sat mute, shivering uncontrollably. At some point, it had begun to rain.

One of the fishermen helped Dad empty the water out of the canoe and flip it back upright as the other quickly started a fire. Dad untied our clothing bags, all still securely attached inside the boat, and got me and David into dry clothes and rain gear before changing out of his own sopping clothes. Then, with his hands still shaking from the cold, he pulled out our camp stove and made hot chocolate.

I can still taste that sweet, creamy elixir. My shivering slowed with each exquisite gulp until, finally, every muscle in my body relaxed into a state of total exhaustion.

One of the fishermen, probably seeing my eyes start to droop, said worriedly, “Well, I’m not sure how to get your gear out, but the trail to our car is about three miles away.”

Not getting a response from Dad, he continued, “So . . . we should probably get going if we want to get these kids out of the canyon before dark.”

“Oh . . . thank you for all your help . . . but we don’t need to hike out,” Dad replied. He pointed to a grassy terrace on the other side of the river. “I think we will just paddle across the river over there and make camp.”

The fishermen gaped at Dad in disbelief. They had just witnessed our horrific whitewater swim and had seen the condition David and I were in when they plucked us out of the river. They must have thought Dad was insane.

They spent a few more minutes trying to convince him that he should consider abandoning the trip, but he held firm.

For Dad, things were back “in control.” Nobody was injured.

The Great Missouri River Wreck (1968)

We still had all our essential gear because of the expert job he had done tying everything in. We had only lost a couple of paddles and our cowboy hats. Why would we abort our adventure now?

And as for David and me? Well, having been raised on the river since we were two, this was certainly not our first rodeo. It seemed scarier to leave all our stuff at the river than to continue on. After all, our canoe held almost everything we owned in the world.

We helped Dad untie our spare paddles and loaded up. As we waved goodbye to the fishermen, they tentatively waved back, their faces grim, probably wondering if they were soon going to hear some tragic story about us on the evening news.

The rain had stopped, and we set up camp in a sunlit, grassy field filled with patches of yellow and purple wildflowers.

Sitting down to dinner for our first night on the river, I felt happy. My body glowed, reveling in the warmth of our fire and hot spoonfuls of tuna and rice. In the distance, a brilliant rainbow streamed across the big Montana sky. Everything seemed so beautiful, so vivid. I felt like there was nowhere I would rather be.

Although my brother and I had experienced many whitewater swims during previous family canoe trips, this one was the worst. At ten years old, I had my first experience of a phenomenon I would come to welcome throughout my life: the euphoric endorphin release that occurs in the aftermath of surviving physically challenging and/or terrifying experiences relatively unscathed.

I would also eventually learn that this potent cocktail of chemicals which the brain produces in response to overcoming extreme challenges and fear can allow our minds to reset. It's a sort of control/alt/delete mental reboot that—for a while, anyway—pushes aside the deeper emotional terrors lurking inside our psyches.

With repeated successful outcomes, this reboot can also help prepare one to face fear and sometimes even welcome it.

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That horrific swim remains one of my most vivid childhood memories, and even at ten, I knew that it meant something. I had an awareness that this day was a benchmark; we'd been tested, and we'd survived. I had gained a perspective in a way I could not yet fully understand.

It was only much later that I realized that this day, along with many other days on the river, created an intricate web of experiences that would shape my life and my ability to manage risk and uncertainty. Like the geomorphology of the river, my family and I sought a state of dynamic equilibrium, continually maintaining balance in response to the forces of nature and disturbances of man.

Curling up in my slightly damp sleeping bag that night, Fawn already snoring quietly as she pressed against my side, I listened to the river's quiet burble and babble. Surrounded by my family in our cozy A-frame tent, I felt a contentment I had not experienced for a while.

For the moment, at least, I felt safe.

We lounged around camp the following day to dry out our damp gear and allow Dad's bruised legs to heal. The next morning, before we packed up, Dad walked upstream to study the rapid in which we had taken the swim of our lives. Using his map, he calculated that the total length of our ordeal was a little over three miles of consistent Class II and III whitewater (out of a difficulty scale from Class I to VI). We all felt the capsizing had lasted a long time, but until Dad did the calculation, he thought it was mostly a matter of perception. Realizing the magnitude of the length of the rapid was sobering. He must have felt we were lucky to have all survived.

However, satisfied that this rapid was an anomaly, Dad said he now understood why the few people he had talked to about this trip had launched at the town of Fort Bend, located twenty or so miles downstream of the dam. Rested and refreshed from

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our layover day, he was ready to launch back into the current and around the next bend in the river.

My dad was, by nature, high-strung and of a nervous disposition. However, throughout his life he'd also been inexplicably drawn to push against the edges. He was drawn to wilderness exploration, often pushing beyond the boundaries of comfort—and control. Dad attempted to avoid disaster through planning and highly developed skills, but he was simultaneously attracted to the thrill of whitewater canoeing, a dynamic sport that can quickly put one entirely outside their comfort zone.

And even amid the emotional crises surrounding our escape out West, he had a plan.

For this first trip, Dad intended to follow the Lewis and Clark Expedition's route on the Missouri Breaks section of the Missouri River—a 150-mile stretch that remained pretty much in the same condition as when Lewis and Clark explored it—as research for a screenplay he wanted to write.

Dad was an experienced canoeist, and my brother and I had passable paddling and steering skills. Although many people thought he was crazy for embarking alone on a two-week canoe trip with two ten-year-olds and a dog, he felt prepared for our expedition. All our gear (food, kitchenware, clothing, tent, sleeping bags, air mattresses) was stored in waterproof army surplus rubberized bags and metal ammo cans. Everything, including spare paddles, was strapped into the canoe with a secure tie-down system. We were geared up in canvas tennis shoes and wool socks (chosen for their ability to dry faster than other materials), and lifejackets, of course. We stopped in Fort Bend the day after our swim to replace our lost cowboy hats, the last essential piece of our river gear, meant to protect us from both the hot summer sun and pounding rain during thunderstorms.

Dad's hat was a gentile gray like Ben Cartwright's on *Bonanza*. My hat was black and styled after Little Joe. David's was brown,

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with the crown punched out and the brim pulled down like Hoss. It irritated me that my brother had goofed out his hat like that, but almost anything my brother did annoyed me.

I was both my brother's best friend and worst enemy. Because our family moved around a lot, we were each other's most constant playmates. But we had distinctly different personalities. I was bossy, controlling, naturally athletic, and dominated my brother both physically and emotionally. David was terrible at sports and liked games of a more intellectual nature. I wanted to do things fast and had a short attention span. He wanted to take his time and immerse himself into the intricate details of any given activity. He was also extremely sensitive, sweet, and gullible, which made him a perfect victim for his controlling older-by-eleven-minutes sister.

We were both small for our age, with sharp, pixie-like features, and thin to the point of looking starved. Because of my short hair and our androgynous dress—T-shirts, denim jeans, canvas high tops, and cowboy hats—we were often mistaken initially for twin brothers. My dad also treated us equally, never assigning chores or tailoring his behavior toward us according to our gender.

Dad expected us to behave more responsibly than most parents did their ten-year-olds. He let us know that he could not be both a dad and a mom, so we would have to take care of ourselves and pitch in. We had to help cook and clean and be responsible for our personal hygiene and our belongings.

That summer, which must have been an emotionally fragile time for him, he had only my brother and me for companions.

“C'mon David, I need you to paddle a little harder,” Dad called to my brother in the front of the canoe. “Susan, grab one of the spare paddles.”

Usually when one of us was sitting in the middle seat we could rest, but for the last half hour we'd watched the sky behind

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us morph from gray to an ominous black. Now the dark sky was crisscrossed with multi-veined lightning bolts punctuated by deep, rumbling thunder. The speed at which this monster approached was terrifying.

Dad's voice took on that panicky timbre again as he exhorted us to paddle. Since the river was not offering any grassy terraces or sandy beaches along the shore, he steered us to a mid-channel gravel bar as the first drops of rain pelted the water's surface. We set up the tent in record time and quickly clambered in with our sleeping gear and a cold supper.

After changing into dry clothes, we ate our dinner of peanuts, Spam, dried fruit, and crackers while snuggling into our sleeping bags, prepared to ride out the storm. At first, the pattering of raindrops was soothing; we felt protected in our canvas shelter. But after a deafening crack of lightning that filled the tent with bright light even through the canvas walls, Dad advised David and me to scooch away from the aluminum tent poles, worried they might act as lightning rods.

In 1969, "freestanding" tents had not yet been invented. Our tent was a conventional A-frame with aluminum poles holding up each end. The end poles were held in place by two guy ropes outside, four guy ropes on the sides pulled out the walls, and four stakes held down the tent floor. An A-frame tent requires all the stakes to be working together in dynamic tension, or the entire structure is compromised.

As the wind tore at the tent, one of the sidewall stakes came loose, causing the tent wall to shake violently. The force of the undulating wall ripped out the grommet holding one of the end poles—and the entire tent collapsed in a mess of flapping wet canvas.

David and I shrieked and flailed at the heavy, sopping canvas while Dad leapt into action with a series of moves that I still marvel at. Sort of like MacGyver meets the Incredible Hulk.

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First, he grabbed one of my leather camp boots and put it over the top of the pole with the ripped-out tent grommet.

“Susan, come over here and hold up this pole,” he yelled over the pounding rain drumming on the tent.

I nervously followed his command, hoping lightning would not strike while my hands were clenched on the cold metal pole that was bucking violently.

Dad ran out the tent door and returned a few moments later with two paddles.

“David, hold this paddle against the wall of the tent!”

While David held one paddle, Dad wedged the other between David’s feet and the opposite tent wall and then scrambled back outside.

He came in and out twice more, each time lugging a basketball-size boulder that he dropped into respective corners of the tent.

I tried in vain to find a comfortable position as we arranged our bodies around the precarious array of boulders, paddles, and tent poles holding up our compromised tent while the storm continued to rage outside. With the beast right over us, I held my breath every time a bolt of lightning lit up the tent and thunder sounded immediately afterward.

About a half-hour later, the sounds of rolling thunder grew more distant, and I finally relaxed. Our sagging, deformed tent was crippled but still standing. I curled my sleeping bag around Fawn’s warm body in the dark and fell fast asleep.

The following day, after taking our sleeping bags out of the tent to dry under another sunny bluebird sky, Dad leaned over to pick up one of the boulders.

“Ummph!” he grunted.

The boulder didn’t move.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” he said with a laugh. “I can’t pick it up!”

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He got down on his knees. “Hey David, come here and help me roll it out.”

They worked together to push and roll the boulder across the floor of the tent. My dad’s Superman strength from the night before was gone. He had transformed back into our skinny little father.

My camp boot, meanwhile, worked so well that Dad never did replace the grommet. The boot became an essential part of the tent kit, used long after I grew out of it.

Our two-week expedition provided restoration and healing, the building blocks for resiliency. Resiliency we would need to face the life we would be returning to at the end of the summer.

This transformation occurred incrementally, as the events of each day unfolded.

Enduring the discomforts—putting on cold, wet socks in the morning, getting by on repetitive and often unappetizing food choices, and suffering the extremes of weather—made us more appreciative of the comforts we could create, such as a warm, cozy tent at night and the fresh biscuits Dad baked by the fire in a homemade reflector oven in the morning. Finding a shady grove of cottonwoods for camp. That fresh, dry pair of socks we pulled out of our bag every fourth day.

The simple meditation of paddling and drifting, gently transported mile after mile by the steady current of the mighty Missouri River, was calming and grounding. Our canoe’s passage slowly unspooled a mesmerizing and ever-changing panorama of colors and shapes formed by the spectacular cliff formations of the Missouri Breaks. Our daily journey and camp routines were filled with order, beauty, and adventure.

All this allowed us to escape the reality we would face at the end of our journey: no home to return to, and no more living as a family with my mother.