

The River or Gene Rudnick

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Something about the danger of the Cottonwood River in spring when it was high and swift drew Kate and me to it each year in early May. We had never tried to swim in it when it was high; we'd paid attention to the warnings that included stories of drownings when the river was wild and tearing at its banks. But the spring of our sophomore year in high school we ignored the warnings.

One day after school ended we sneaked off to the river knowing the current would be dangerous from the snowmelt in the mountains. We heard the river roaring long before we could see it. We had no intention of trying to swim that day—we were only hoping to gauge by how high and swift the river was, when we could swim in it.

We worked our way through the thick stand of pines that stood about fifty yards from the river's edge, into the dense, spring willows. The city cut the willows back every summer, but the following spring they'd shoot up through the damp earth and be twice the thickness of the year before.

Suddenly, a line arced through the air above us, whistling only a few feet over our heads. It snapped like a whip at its apex, leaving imaginary lines hanging above us like sparkler threads, then disappeared.

I parted the willows to get to the river and Kate followed, the exposed toes of her sandal-clad feet brushing against my heels. When I reached the willows' edge I spotted a

boy I recognized from school, so I jerked backwards into the bushes, almost knocking Kate over.

“Ow,” she said, “why did you do that?”

“Be quiet.” I pointed toward the river. “Look over there.” Standing just offshore, ankle-deep in rushing water was Gene Rudnick. His fishing line was caught in some rocks behind him and he yanked savagely at it. He’d rolled his stiff, ironed jeans above his calves, flung his shoes onto the rocks, and appeared to be trying to fish in the swiftest part of the river. His rust-colored hair bobbed as he jerked repeatedly at the caught line. He scurried out of the water and kicked the rocks, yanked at the line, then dropped it and clenched his fists. We snickered, covering our mouths so he wouldn’t hear us. Frustrated, he stooped, grabbed the line and pulled again, straining and grunting. Finally, he backed up, bent his body into a runner’s stance, and charged, giving a kind of martial arts yell as he launched himself, feet first, at the mound of rocks. We watched as he landed on his back in the dirt, then sputtered obscenities at the sky. We pulled back farther into the willows, trying to stifle the laughter that arose because we couldn’t believe he’d expected an outcome other than the one that landed him on the ground.

Neither one of us really knew Gene Rudnick. I’d seen him, usually alone, in the halls at school. You couldn’t miss his red hair, the freckles, and the too wide grin, an annoying constant on his unfinished face. He was a couple of years older, and had probably just graduated.

A week later, with the sun spilling across the spring sky and the river still fierce, Kate and I, lacking the patience to wait any longer, stood on its sandy shores daring each

other to leap in and swim across. Our bodies smelled of sweet sweat and sand, and a quiet nostalgia whispered between us; this could be the last summer we would spend much time at the river. Once we reached sixteen, we'd be expected to get summer jobs.

We stood in the shallow water close to shore where you could still make out stones on the river bottom. Leaning out over the water, we hugged our arms to our chests, neither one able to find the courage to jump in. Kate's bony knees chattered together and I pumped up and down with my body hoping to generate enough courage to plunge in. That was the best way to do it.

We could have gone swimming at the municipal pool which would be heated, but it would also be crowded and Kate was self-conscious about her reed-like body and the breasts she referred to as nubs, just beginning to poke outward from her otherwise straight, flat chest. My breasts were okay but I'd become self-conscious about thighs that seemed to have exploded during the preceding year and appeared to me to be two massive carved poles protruding from my body. I couldn't imagine being able to find a pair of pants that would ever fit me again. "You're just getting curves," my mother told me, attempting to calm my fits of hysteria when I looked in a mirror. I didn't want curves if they made you look like this. So we went to the river and dared each other to jump in—its frigid temperature more of a threat than its ferocity.

"Okay, which will it be?" I yelled above the bellowing river. "The river or Gene Rudnick? Jump in or you're seriously going out with Gene Rudnick."

"No, you are," she taunted. She turned and looked behind, hugging herself tighter, her breasts compressing into two tight, tiny mounds as she hopped in tense little leaps from foot to foot. "Yup, here he comes up over that ridge."

I turned and scanned the pine trees and scrub oak that clung to the hillside, a mock search for his flaming hair.

“The river or Gene Rudnick,” I screamed and leaped into the river. My body stiffened in the frigid water. I broke the surface gasping and sucking in great gulps of air. “Nothing to it,” I stammered. Then I pointed at Kate and yelled, “He’s right behind you.”

She turned, screamed in horror, then ran along the edge of the river, gathering courage. Taking a strong breath she shouted, “The river or Gene Rudnick!” and dove in. She didn’t cannonball in as I had, she shot her arms over her head like two arrows, and dove in head first, toes pointed like a dancer. We looked at each other for a split second, faces registering the shock of hitting the icy water, then plowed into the middle of the river, neither one of us willing to admit that this experience was too painful to continue.

The current yanked us farther downstream. We flailed in the cold water. Our bodies shrank in upon themselves, our arms and legs numbed and were useless when we tried to swim closer to shore. We could only splat at the surface as the icy tendrils of a strong undercurrent tugged us downward. The river had taken control, sucking me into its deep wet blackness and I knew I was going to die, this is what it felt like to die, black and cold and alone. Our bodies would finally swirl into some inlet downstream and bob there among the rotted leaves and snapped branches until we were discovered. I was struggling against the idea that death in this river was inevitable, when suddenly a force thrust me upward and my head broke the surface again.

Kate’s eyes widened. Her arms sputtered at the surface as the river tore her along.

“Keep your arms under the water,” I yelled, suddenly remembering the way to swim

out of a whirlpool. I didn't know if it would work for an undercurrent, but I was scared and desperate. Kate looked at me, a split second of an uncomprehending frown on her face, then she was tugged past me. I fought to stay close to her, flapping my legs which felt like a pair of useless flippers. When I caught up to her I grabbed at her and caught the strap of her swimsuit, but the force of the river ripped it from my hand. Kate's hand shot behind her and grabbed for my arm, her fingernails scraping me as she clutched at me. My head slapped forward and went under. Water, cold and dangerous, filled my mouth and I swallowed a huge lump of it that forced a slow painful path down my esophagus. Kicking my legs and twisting in the current, I fought Kate, shaking my arm from her grasp, and came up gasping for air.

"Arms under the water," I shouted. I was tired now and knew I couldn't fight the river much longer. "Come on," I yelled, then flailed along even with the riverbank, still being carried by the undercurrent, but working hard not to break the surface with my arms. As suddenly as it had grabbed me, the tug of the river eased and I edged my way closer to the soft brown sand of the shore. When finally, I felt muddy sand beneath my feet, I trembled to standing, then strained to look for Kate. I'd seen her next to me trying to swim out of the current, but then lost her in my own struggle to break free. I grabbed a handful of willow branches to anchor me and leaned out beyond them to look downstream, the current slapping at my calves and unsettling the rocks beneath my feet.

"Kate! Kate!" I pleaded. "Come on, Kate. Where are you?" I pictured her twisted and beaten up by the relentless pounding of the current, her battered body finally coming to rest at odd angles in some shallow area, tossed toward the shore by a spent river which would now just meander past her heading downstream. She would bounce and jostle

there, caught on a broken tree, until a search and rescue team discovered her body.

“We’re sorry,” they would say, “there was nothing we could do.” I didn’t know how I would live without Kate. We’d been best friends since we were four, always together and certain we always would be. I knew I should go look for her, but now I was too afraid of what I would find. Suddenly, I heard a swishing noise to my right. The bushes thrashed and I backed up, a thin thread of fear unwinding inside me.

“We almost died!” Kate yelled, exploding through the willows. I jumped and threw my arms around her, letting my fingers absorb the feel of her shoulders and back, fitting my chin into the curve of her neck, and inhaling her wet river smell. We hugged and jumped and cried together.

When, finally, I was able to push back and look at her straight on, I dug my fingers into her shoulders and said, “Kate, we did almost die. We chose the river over Gene Rudnick and we almost died.”

She laughed, threw back her head, and bellowed, “But we didn’t die, which just goes to show you, we made the right choice.” Her laughter grew loud and raucous. Small pricks of anger teased at me and I pushed away from her. She hadn’t been the one who’d imagined her friend, whitish-blue and bloated, snagged on a branch and thudding at the shore while a relentless river slapped at her. In fact, it appeared that Kate hadn’t been through much at all. She was out of the river, she wasn’t scared, she wasn’t even grateful—she was exultant. But I was drained in every way and I collapsed onto the warm sand, wishing I could cry. Kate was now laughing so hard it gave her the hiccups. The laughter exploding outward, and the awkward, rasping intake of air sounded like

some kind of animal in pain or in heat. I couldn't stay mad, I had to laugh with her. We'd cheated death, done it together, and we knew we'd do it again.

We went to the river at least two times a week that summer. Though the dangers of the spring runoff dissipated throughout the summer and the river wasn't quite as cold, still, we broke into a loping run each time that intensified to a sprint as we approached the river's banks, threw down our towels, ran out of our sandals and screamed, "The river or Gene Rudnick!" We were exhilarated by the cold water, our daring, and the insult to Gene Rudnick, his orange hair and dreadful freckles the only justification for our summer mantra. The more times we retold the story of how we'd cheated death, the more fearless we became, the more reckless in tossing about the phrase that served as our motivation for leaping into the river.

I saw Gene once in town that summer. He was alone, wearing a worn plaid shirt and starched jeans, shuffling down the sidewalk, looking in shop windows. He passed by the doorway I'd ducked into to avoid him, stopped, raised his head and looked at me. I drew back, my heart stammering, but he just smiled, a slow, shy smile, lips stretching tight over his teeth like stressed elastic, then retreated, taking a step back from me. I started to smile back when I felt the bite of conscience and could only nod. He walked past me and I appeased my guilt with the thought that he didn't know—he never would know. It wasn't like we were doing anything that really hurt him. And even more importantly, we'd tasted the elixir of bravado that commanded respect from our friends and resulted in multiple requests to retell the story.

As autumn approached, the air became heavier, woodier, with the dusty smell of dry, turning leaves. The days were crisp, the skies blue and cloudless. Two days before Labor Day, Kate and I made elaborate arrangements to spend the entire day at the river. Our last chance to start school elegantly bronzed or at least, nicely pink. We packed lunches for each other. The contents were supposed to be a surprise but each time we did this I made her a tuna sandwich and she made me peanut butter. I put a chocolate turtle from Fernwood's candy store in her lunch and hoped she'd thought to get one for me.

We stuffed our towels and swimsuits into our backpacks and started off on foot through town to the river's edge. The day was warm, but smelled of the possibility of a bitter cold approaching, the way autumn always smells in Woodland, familiar and comfortable. We passed by Marta's bakery and Kate made a face in the window. We could see ourselves like colored transparencies overlaid on French loaves, rye breads, Danish pastries, and poppy seed muffins. I was eyeing a thick chocolate brownie toward the back of the display, when Kate jabbed me with her elbow.

"Ow, Kate, that hurt," I whined and rubbed my arm.

"Sh...sh," she said, her mouth barely moving, as if she were a ventriloquist. "Don't look up, but look who's coming down the street."

I looked up. He shuffled toward us, his red hair like a struck match in the sun. A twisted grin infected me. "The river or Gene Rudnick," I snickered, then looked away.

Kate grabbed her sides, doubled over and pointed away from Gene. "The river!" she shouted. "The river!" We collapsed together. Gene Rudnick continued toward us, unaware he was the reason for our laughter.

We tried to stop, we weren't cruel—at least we didn't want to be thought of as cruel. But each time Kate sucked in air to stop her laughter, she snorted like a bull, and I couldn't get control of myself. When Gene Rudnick was finally beside us, we were quivering with suppressed laughter.

“H..Hi,” he stammered. “Something must be pretty funny.”

Kate doubled over, then looked up at him. “Yes,” the word burst from her tightened lips. “Something is pretty funny.” She guffawed and grabbed her stomach, her shoulders twisting and shaking.

“Oh,” Gene said. He stepped toward the bakery. “Well, is it something in the window?” His voice cracked and wavered like a twelve-year-old's.

“Yes,” I lied, struggling to control my convulsing insides. I took a deep breath and stood up straight to look at him. He tilted his head and shrugged. I couldn't think what to do now. He was waiting to see what we'd found so hilarious and was already scanning the display, his hands stuffed in his pockets, his eyes squinting at the window. I suddenly felt sorry for him. This short conversation was a struggle. Most boys his age would have passed us with barely a comment, or they would have made fun of us, but this boy couldn't even look at us.

I looked down at Kate, still bent over giggling, and shook my head at her, a signal to stop, but she couldn't. She backed away, holding up a hand to let me know that she couldn't. Her laughter carried her finally to a bench at the bus stop thirty feet away, where she sneaked glances at the two of us, Gene Rudnick and me, then put her face in her hands. I watched the shaking of her shoulders, the lift and fall of them, the rhythm of derision, and for the second time that summer I was angry with her.

Gene stared intently at the glass. “You going to the river?” he asked, not looking at me.

Startled, I said yes.

“Nice day for it. Nice and warm.”

“Yeah,” I said, feeling a gentle shift in me, like sands lifting from the top of a dune, tumbling down its sides to rest at its base. “It’s probably our last time this year.”

He moved closer to the window, his eyes intense in their reflection in the glass. It seemed a long time before he spoke again.

“Water’s not as cold as it was...” he said, “you can probably just get in.”

I looked at him, at the line of red rising from his neck, up through his cheek and into his forehead as though he were a human thermometer.

“Uh huh.” For a moment I was puzzled, then an uncomfortable prickling began in my chest. He knows, I thought, horrified. Desperate, I looked to Kate. I willed her to look up, get off that bench and come and help me. But she didn’t look at me and I stood there not knowing what to do. I knew what I wanted to do, walk away as fast as I could. I wanted never to have to see Gene Rudnick again. I sent silent, desperate pleas to heaven begging for a reversal of what was becoming plain. I tried convincing myself that he was just making conversation and it was my guilt at standing here talking with him that made me think he knew. But the prickling intensified, becoming sharp intrusive stabs. My chest ached, a whitewater sound pulsed in my ears, and I knew he knew.

I reached down and tried, with arms that felt like twisted rope, to pick up my backpack. I took a trembling step behind him and reached for it again.

“I’m not mad,” he whispered.

“What?” I straightened, standing directly behind him.

“I’m not mad. I don’t blame you.” His words were thin and precarious, spoken into the wall of glass. “I just thought today, maybe you’d get in the water without...” he paused, “without...you know.”

My heart thudded. Nausea gripped me, I struggled for breath, and my hand, reaching out for support, found only air in the empty space between us.

Gene hadn’t moved nor taken his eyes from the bakery window. A sickening, sucking pull ran through me, rooting me, draining me of words and the ability to move. I wanted to say something that would make everything okay. Deny what we’d been doing all summer. I wanted to never have been doing it. The heady feeling we’d been drunk on all summer descended on me now like a cloak of chain mail and I wanted all that had happened to just go away.

I grabbed my backpack, which felt so heavy I almost couldn’t lift it. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. It was not enough, but I didn’t know how to fix things. I turned and plodded toward home, my steps heavy with need. Just once, I looked back—hoping he wouldn’t be there, or that he’d look at me and smile and I’d know things were okay. Instead, when I turned, he leaned his head slowly into the window. I shivered—the feel of the glass cold and hard against my own skin.

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