

River Passage

by **Susan Pope**

Hockey posters—two walls’ worth. A row of ball caps slung on hooks. The requisite electronics—TV, computer, smartphone. Dishes caked with dried food. And over every inch of floor space, camping gear, some with price tags still attached.

Perched on the bed in my fifteen-year-old grandson Cason’s bedroom, I watch him pack. Tomorrow we leave for a raft trip, on a river we’ve never seen with people we’ve never before met. He’s had five months to get ready. His mom—my daughter—has quit nagging. He could have recruited his grandpa, my husband, to help. But he knows that Papa—the name Cason calls him—would just say *you’ve got the list, check it off, pack it up*. That leaves me, the organizer, explainer, and most of all, the soft touch.

I miss talking with Cason. We used to have moments of conversation in the car, on the way to hockey practice, when his sister and parents weren’t around. Little things: How he hated math. Liked his new hockey team. Hoped to catch a king salmon this summer. Now he rides with his buddies who drive, so the two of us rarely speak except in passing.

Cason asked for the trip. Not this trip specifically, but any river trip. I’m not sure why. “Sounds like fun,” is all he said when I asked.

His family—my daughter’s—does not camp or fish or hike. “Roughing it” is a cabin with running water on a lake surrounded by all the mechanized toys an American family could desire. To Cason and his pickup-driving, four-wheeling, dirt-biking friends, my husband Jim and I are the quaint old bird watchers, nature lovers, greenies.

But something made him curious, made him want to find out for himself if our stories were true—the river journeys that changed our lives, the adventures, mishaps, near disasters. Maybe it was the passion in our voices or the faraway looks in our eyes as we sat around a family dinner while Cason half-listened to us reminisce about

running rapids through the Grand Canyon or dodging ice on an Arctic river. Maybe he just wanted a way to impress his friends. Whatever his reasons, here was this boy turning sixteen asking to spend time with his grandparents—on a river, no less.

As his life is opening up, our lives are narrowing down. We have this brief moment in time when the dreams of the old and the young intersect, while Jim and I are still hardy enough in mind and body to give him this gift. Of course, we said yes.

Pen poised to mark off items as he packs them, I read from the gear list.

First aid kit. He unzips the small nylon bag with the Cabela's tag still on it. Band-aides, gauze, alcohol swab, tweezers, eye drops, Neosporin ointment.

Check.

Socks. Two pair.

Check.

Bandana.

"Why do I need one?" He asks.

"To keep the sun off your neck, wipe the sweat off your face. We're going into the desert in summer."

"I've got one, but you won't like it," he says.

"What's not to like about a bandana?"

He ducks into his closet and retrieves a neatly folded blue and red piece of cloth. With a flip of his wrist he opens it out. It's a Confederate flag.

"Not appropriate. Not anywhere." I'm about to launch into a lecture and history lesson when I notice the half-smile on his face. He's baiting me. Of course I won't approve. He knows that. I remember doing this with my father, but not until I had left home and was in college. It's called breaking away.

What I can't stand is Cason's sullen, sarcastic, and disrespectful side. Screaming and door slamming are easier for me to handle than silence or outright refusal to help with something so simple as carrying groceries up the steps.

Yet just a few weeks ago, at a Father's Day barbeque, he was the perfect son and grandson, serving food, cleaning up, smiling. Which person will he be when we're out in the wilds without his parents as the enforcers?

As for me, I've taken a silent vow to be the warm, relaxed grandmother who lets Cason experience the river in his own way, enjoying the terrain and our companions, taking responsibility for himself. No nagging, no hovering, no treating him like the four-year-old he sometimes seems to be.

But I draw a line at the Confederate flag. "Dump it," I say. "If you don't have another, I've got an extra."

Cason shrugs, then drops the bandana back in his closet. We return to the last few items on the packing list. He starts pulling knives out of drawers, off his desk, from his closet. "I'm not sure which ones to take."

"No knives on the list."

"But I've got to take *one*."

He lays them out on the bed. A small stainless-steel pocket knife, a bigger one with a bone handle, a sleek silver one that when he hits a button pops out a long, menacing blade. We used to call it that a switchblade, the kind used by gang members and criminals in the movies I watched as a kid.

"What are you doing with so many knives?"

"I collect them. I buy them with my own money."

I've known this kid all his life—changed his diapers, cradled him when he was sick, comforted him when he was hurt—and these are the tools he shows me to prove he's grown up. Inhaling slowly, I hit the pause on my internal alarm and point to the plain silver knife on the bed, the kind that unfolds into a pocket tool kit—knife, screw driver, pliers, everything you could need to repair anything. "Take that one."

He slips the knife into a small nylon bag with his first aid kit and resumes packing from the list. Broad-brimmed hat, camping towel, long sleeve shirt. With each item he grills me. "Why do I need this?"

I should be more patient, relishing this rare opportunity for conversation, but there's only so much you can explain about a raft trip through the desert Southwest to someone who's never been there. Besides, I have to get home to my own packing.

"Trust me," I say. "If it's on the list, you need it."

1:00 a.m., Vernal, Utah. In our motel room, a pale blue light radiates from the next bed. Cason's face is aglow with flashing images from his cell phone screen.

"Cason," I whisper. "Shut that thing off."

A grunt. Covers rustling. The flashing glow shifts from one side of the bed to the other.

"We have to get up early."

Another grunt.

Beside me, my husband kicks the covers, mumbles, and turns over.

No electronics on the river. No cell phone coverage there, so that's our deal. Cason said he was fine with that. Later, I'll find out he's loaded his phone with an entire season of Grey's Anatomy and brought a solar charger.

I want Cason to find life more compelling than images on his screen. I want this trip to be successful, memorable, even life-changing for him. I want him to fall in love with rivers, canyons, the desert, a world beyond.

I believe one journey can change a person's life. The Grand Canyon changed mine. I was fresh out of college, traveling with my then-husband, backpacking with cheap equipment and ill-fitting shoes. We descended from the rim in February to two nights of camping in single-digit temperatures, hiking the trail beside the river, then trekking ten miles back up, icy trail beneath our feet, stars scattered extravagantly across the ink-black sky. Every step was agony but also triumph. For two Alaskan kids on their first traverse of the United States, the world opened up, the map of the country becoming more than just abstract shapes on the pages of our social studies books. More than that, I discovered a person could strike out into unknown territory for no reason other than to find out what the rest of the world looks like.

Sluggish here at our put-in, the Yampa River, which straddles Utah and Colorado, will gather speed until it merges with the swifter, bigger Green. At the end of the trip, we'll run a long string of rapids as the Green rushes to join the Colorado.

Helmets on, life jackets zipped and buckled, paddles raised, the two men I love most in the world are poised to shove off into the brown water on this first day of our journey. Grandpa and grandson. They've never kayaked together, and Cason has never

floated a river. Yet without hesitation, he slips into the inflatable double kayak in front of Jim. A few moments of circling, drifting, bickering, swearing, and they float away. I'll see them—hopefully—at our first camp.

This is what I wanted, grandpa and grandson working together, sharing an adventure. As I snap their picture, I'm proud but also a bit jealous. They're off without me.

I find an empty space on one of the blue rubber rafts and hop in. Together, we are twenty-two guests and six guides in a flotilla of six rowing rafts, one paddle raft, one double kayak and three single kayaks, all traveling at different speeds but never out of sight of each other. With the exception of our guides and two sisters ages thirteen and ten, everyone in the group but Cason is over fifty.

In early evening, we dock our boats on a hard-packed river bank. Jim and Cason—wet but intact—have managed to propel themselves successfully down the river. Together with our group, we haul the rafts and kayaks up on shore and tether them, then form fire lines to unload gear—folding tables, chairs, stoves, pots, pans, dishes, coolers of food, and waterproof bags containing tents, sleeping bags, and personal gear. A pattern we will repeat at each new camp on our five days along the river.

When the boats have been emptied, Deja, our trip leader, yells, "Campers: Set up your tents."

We each grab our two waterproof bags and scurry to find shady camp spots. After surveying our options, Jim picks out a flat space big enough to pitch two tents and far enough away from any snoring neighbor. Working together, we three assemble the tents we've rented from the guiding company. When we've mastered the mechanics of poles and pegs and our two identical tents are pitched within a few feet of each other, Cason throws his gear into his tent, then stands beside me while I pull out clean clothes to replace my smudged and sweaty ones. I hold back a barrage of questions I want to ask—about the river, the guides, our fellow travelers, and most of all about whether he's having fun.

"What do we do now?" he asks.

I'm not sure what to say. The options seem obvious. "Sit, watch the water, swim, take a nap, go for a walk, take pictures," I tell him. "I'm going to wash up in the river."

He wanders off to sit by himself in the crescent of canvas chairs facing the river. I stifle an impulse to rush over and sit beside him so he doesn't feel lonely. This is the empty space I wanted him to experience.

Day two. Cason tries out his skills in the paddle raft with some of the seasoned river runners in our group while Jim and I split up into separate rowing rafts. Our journey takes us through narrow canyons, sweeping meadows, abandoned ranches, and old outlaw hideouts. We tie up in early afternoon and make camp on a floodplain at a curve in the river.

When we've pitched our tents, the group scatters to find patches of shade, awaiting a hike that will start when the heat of the day has passed. An hour later, we fill our water bottles and pull on day packs.

Cason remains in his canvass camp chair in the shade. "Hiking is boring," he's declared repeatedly whenever I've invited him to join me for a walk at home. The truth is that hockey has made him a sprinter, not an endurance athlete.

Bross, our wiry, twenty-something guide, will lead the hike. With his rumped brown hair, big sunglasses and gray hoody, he could be one of Cason's high school buddies. "You coming?" he asks Cason.

"I don't know."

"Sure you are. Get going."

Bross grabs a pack, tucks in a first aid kit and a bag of granola bars, slings a jug with extra water over his shoulder, and starts walking.

Cason jumps up, fills his water bottle, and hurries to catch up with Bross.

The trail that begins behind our camp switchbacks up the canyon wall. At the top, we've been promised a vista of the river, where we've traveled and where we're headed. As our group of twenty snakes up the hill, Jim dallies to take pictures, while I fall behind trying to spot birds with my binoculars. Cason takes the lead with Bross.

At a fork in the trail some forty-five minutes into our climb, Bross and Cason pause in the shade of some thorny bushes while we stragglers catch up. I sip from my

half-empty water bottle, feeling light-headed. Even now, in late afternoon, the air feels no cooler than when we made camp. Alaskans, we're not used to this desert heat. I worry that Cason's not drinking enough water.

As I weigh whether to express my concern, Bross articulates it. "Drink water," he commands, and Cason obliges with a big swig out of his red bottle.

From here the trail is not as steep, but now we labor in soft sand, so the way is no easier. Where we reach solid rock, the trail levels off, ending abruptly at the canyon rim. I peer over the edge at the brown river curving gently below, bright yellow pods of our tents spread out along the bank. I'm dizzy—the heat, the height, the edge—so I step back while others pose for pictures against a backdrop of unobstructed sky. I take pictures of the guides, the other hikers, and Cason, slightly apart from the group, at the rim's edge, smiling back at me in his red Oklahoma Sooners tee shirt, blue ball cap with American flag on the front, red water bottle in hand.

While I fill my bottle with the extra water Bross has carried all this way, Cason wanders off. When I turn back, he is sitting by himself on an overhanging ledge, feet dangling into oblivion, gazing over the canyon. My brain yells *get back, stay away from the edge, you'll fall off*, while my stomach flips and lurches in its own panic dance.

Even if I yelled, he's too far away to hear my pleas, so I motion for him to get back, but he doesn't see me or pretends not to. I wave again. He lies back on the flat rock and stares at the cloudless sky. In my mind, the ledge cracks, gives way, and his body hurtles to the valley floor.

I turn away. He's showing off, testing his limits, feeling the power of his own body.

When I turn back, my husband is approaching the ledge. He's talking some sense into Cason, I think. But no, they're both leaning over to watch something below the precipice. I gesture at the two of them, but they pretend not to see.

I rush to Bross and point to the two crazy guys on the brink. Bross shakes his head and waves them back. Moving slowly, Cason pulls in his feet, takes a swig from his water bottle, leans over for a final look, then rises and rejoins us. Jim follows.

Day three. I join five other women in the paddle raft with Travis, one of the guides. We're at his command, relying on his well-timed directions and expert rudder skills to pivot us from lethal boulders and rubber-piercing logs. The afternoon heat beats down on my bare legs. Even though slathered in sunscreen, they feel as if they've been basted in olive oil and roasted in the oven. Whenever we have a few seconds' break in paddling, I unzip the mesh bag strapped to the pontoon in front of me and gulp water from the bottle within, only to be put back to work by Travis' sometimes frantic orders to *forward left, right, back paddle, stop.*

In my peripheral vision, a shape drifts past. It's a big rowing raft with Cason at the oars. Bross stands behind him, ready to avert a disaster if necessary. Cason flashes a quick smile and continues rowing. I grab my camera from its waterproof case and snap his picture. Broad-brimmed hat, orange-framed mirrored sunglasses, faded red life jacket, blue tee shirt, yellow and blue and orange gear bags lashed behind him. Facing forward, he's leaning into the oars, propelling his raft through the riffles.

How different we are. My life has been careful, measured as I've mustered the courage to take risks, unsure in my body, while Cason is confident, competent, a risk-taker. In another culture, he'd have harpooned his first whale by now, shot his first seal, killed his first caribou. Instead he's here, learning to master the art of reading a river.

Later, as we sit next to each other watching the river at sunset, Cason says, "I wish my family could be here."

"Your sister hates bugs and your parents don't like to camp. They'd hate it."

I catch myself before blathering on, realizing I've cut off a chance to find out what the trip means to him, and to say what it means to me.

"You'd like to share this with them," is what I finally blurt out.

"Yeah."

Day four. The Yampa, the last undammed tributary of the Colorado, has merged with the broader, more powerful Green River. We're camped near a wide, grassy valley just past Jones Hole Creek, a clear, swift stream that empties into the Green.

Cason is now Bross' sidekick. "Guide in training," Bross calls him. Bross has mastered the unique set of skills essential to a good river guide—river running, local

knowledge, yarn-telling, bravado, and above all, patience. Not a bad role model for a teenage boy.

We ready ourselves to hike a trail that follows the creek. The guides promise opportunities to cool off with plunges into the cascades and to view rock pictographs and petroglyphs left by the Fremont people who lived in this country long before the first Spanish explorers.

Bross will stay behind, on dinner duty with Deja and Bob, another guide. I call out to Cason who has slipped into his tent to take a nap.

A muffled moan.

I call again.

“Uh, uh,” he mumbles.

I want him to have this experience. But I want him to choose it.

We leave without him. When we return hours later, bringing stories of still-vibrant drawings by ancient people, immersions in icy water, and encounters with snakes, Cason greets us with a slight nod from a chair in the shade. Hair combed, clothes changed, he looks fresh and clean, his red shirt drying on a tree limb above his tent.

“Bross and I floated down the river,” he says.

The logistics elude me. After floating the river, they’d have to paddle back upstream to return to camp. “How’d you manage that?”

“We hiked up to the creek, put on our helmets and life jackets, floated down the creek, then down the river and back to camp.”

Slowly, I comprehend their feat, undertaken without boats. Frigid water, bouncing over boulders, dodging sweepers, dog-paddling like mad to reach camp before being swept down the mighty Green. “Wow, that’s quite a trick.”

What I don’t say is *What were you thinking? What was Bross thinking?* I wanted Cason to discover a sense of himself on this trip, but letting go is harder than I imagined.

It’s our last night of camping. Exhausted hikers leave the campfire one by one, saying goodnight before they slip into bed.

Cason sticks with the guides at the fire. I take toothbrush and water bottle down to the river. On the way back to the tent, I contemplate nudging Cason out of the circle,

allowing the guides their night to kick back and drink a few beers, sparing Cason the inevitable foul language and stupid tourist stories. But, as I catch his face in the glow of the fire, he looks older, like a taller, leaner version of someone I once knew. So I duck into my tent, slip into my sleeping bag next to Jim, and leave Cason and the river crew laughing around the fire.

The next day we face the biggest whitewater on the river. One long intense stretch that must be scouted, pondered over, strategized by the guides. They've done it before, many times. But each run is different. The river never stays the same.

I decide to ride with Garth. Measured, cautious, conservative, college math teacher in his other life. Jim chooses a different raft, while Cason of course rides with Bross, who takes the most aggressive run through the rapids, drenching everyone in his boat. When we reunite at the take-out, Cason's grinning, eyes wide, wet clothes clinging to his body.

"That was so much fun. I want to do that."

"Do what?"

"Be a river guide."

This is what I wanted: For him to fall in love with rivers, to find a world beyond cell phones, hockey, and pick-up trucks. And for me: To step aside and let him.

Back at the Microtel in Vernal, I awake to a familiar blue glow in the bed next to me. I get up and gently tug the cell phone from Cason's sleeping grasp. He jerks awake and snatches it back. Doctors and nurses flicker on the screen. He's back to Grey's Anatomy.

"Cason, we have to get up early."

"I don't care."

I climb back in bed and think how nothing has changed. And how everything has.



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