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10<sup>th</sup> grade/ homeschool

Madison, VA

### Canoeing Hollywood

I sat in pure amazement looking across the placid water reflecting the radiant orange and yellow rays of the sun as it disappeared below the horizon. The rippling water made a pleasant sound as it lapped at the shore. It was as if the water was a mirror reflecting the last brilliant rays of sunlight before the earth was plunged into darkness. As the remaining light withered away, I reflected on our trip so far. I was reminded not only of the beauty, but also the brashness of the river that we were traveling down. More than once it had threatened to rob us of our canoe and all of our supplies. One of these experiences in particular struck me as something that will remain in my memory forever.

It was the third day of our 200-mile canoe trip down the James River to the Chesapeake Bay. The night before we had camped just before the fall line at Richmond. My father and I woke up refreshed and ready for the challenges that lay before us. As the James River rages past the city of Richmond, it splits into two branches that engulf Belle Isle. On the right side of this island, there are minor rapids that are able to be navigated in a canoe. On the left side, however, there is a notorious set of awesome rapids usually only run by experienced kayakers and white-water rafters. We opted to take the less dangerous side because we did not want to run the risk of losing our supplies.

We got an early start to the day and traversed down the beginning rapids; they were fairly easy, and we had no difficulty weaving the canoe through the many rocks. But the rapids

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gradually became more and more difficult until we found ourselves fighting a formidable rapid with water gushing in over the top. I furiously paddled on both sides of the canoe just trying to avoid the massive rocks jutting out of the water that seemed to be placed there specifically for our ruin. All the while, water filled the canoe, causing it to be unwieldy and prone to capsizing. We slowly began heading for shore, trying not to capsize along the way.

Once on shore we bailed out the water in our canoe. We looked at our map and realized we were on the wrong side of the island! How could we have missed an entire island? It didn't seem right, but we had no memory of passing anything that remotely resembled an island. We concluded that we must have been in the middle of a rapid and so focused on not hitting a rock that we missed the turn off to go on the right side of the island. There was nothing that could be done about it now but prepare ourselves for the worst. We tied in all our supplies and tightened our life vests.

We began our trek again, this time warier of the dangers that lay ahead. It did not take long for us to find ourselves fighting to stay afloat, racing down another massive rapid trying not to be smashed against the rocks. We were doing well, and it seemed as if we may be able to get through the rapids without losing supplies or suffering any damage to our canoe. But then I saw it. It was a huge force of water gushing downward smashing into a sharp rock below. Later, we identified this section of whitewater as Hollywood Rapids, a class IV on a scale of I to V, with canoes limited to class III and below. There was no way to avoid this rapid, and it seemed as if

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there was also no way to avoid being wrecked upon the sharp rock below that scrubbed out life in its washing-machine action. We tried our best to steer the canoe off course of the rock, and for a moment it looked as if we may only skim the rock. We both leaned simultaneously to get the most out of our stroke to get out of the way of the rock, but all the water that had filled up in the boat, and the little imbalance we had made by leaning, caused the canoe to capsize and dump us into the raging whitewater.

I found myself struggling to hold onto our paddles while not letting myself get slammed into any of the numerous rocks jutting out of the water. I saw my father farther down, out of the boat, maneuvering the water-logged canoe from behind through the whitewater. We floated down another major rapid swimming alongside the canoe. We struggled to pull ourselves onto a large rock that was jutting out from the wild whitewater and bailed out the canoe again. The force of the water had been so strong that it ripped our tied-down, laundry bag of food supplies out of the canoe. The knot was still intact, but the rope had been sliced in half. Thankfully we were in the middle of the City of Richmond and were later able to resupply there, which was an adventure in and of itself. We were able to maneuver through the rest of the rapids safely, and celebrated with a huge meal at a restaurant alongside the river.

Sometimes creation provides us with an opportunity to relax and marvel at its beauty, as when I marveled at the spectacular sunset during the trip. Other times, just as in life, we are challenged by creation with obstacles that we think we will never overcome. We are afraid that

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we may fail, that we may not have the strength to overcome these obstacles, but, then, standing on the summit of a mountain we thought we would never climb, or at the end of a series of rapids we thought we would never paddle, we feel a sense of empowerment, a feeling that makes us wonder, “whom shall I fear?”

word count: 1022