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Raftermath

Somewhere behind me sits my older brother Dan. He didn't want to do the second part of the rafting trip today. "We had enough fun yesterday," he pleads with us, "why are we risking it today?" Most of the party, including myself, doesn't share his sentiments; we're excited to raft down the Penobscot River for the second day in a row. Come on Dan, stop being so scared and just enjoy it! I think to myself. I hope he can at least appreciate the beautiful scenery: the water is crisp and crystal clear; lush, green forests surround us on all sides; and looming off to our right is Mt. Katahdin, the biggest mountain in Maine.

"What you're all feeling right now is called 'false sense of security'," our rafting guide explains to us as we lightheartedly perform some quick paddling drills before starting down the fourth most difficult river in the country. "Now as we head towards the first rapid, The Exterminator, we're going to try our luck by hugging the cliff wall on the right," the guide says eagerly. I hear some quiet moaning behind me and can only assume Dan is envisioning what may become of "trying our luck" against the sheer rock face of the right side. "All ahead!" our guide shouts, and we dip our paddles into the frigid water, giving a good pull.

Coming up on The Exterminator, we guide our raft as far right as possible, just as instructed. "All in!" he yells above the roaring current. As we're about to cruise over the wall of water, our raft strikes a rock hidden below the churning water's surface. How many times when we were younger had Dan and I been getting along just fine when all of the sudden something really ticks off the other and we don't talk to each other for a day or two? The raft jerks violently sideways. My side is lifted up into the air. As I scramble for the rope to hold me in, I steal a quick glance at the helpless faces to my right. Already they've begun to tumble into the icy water. The roar of the river has suddenly receded; I take a big whiff of solid, Maine earth; and all I see is deep green with white frosting as the fierce Penobscot seduces me and beckons me in for

tea.

It's completely black as I bob beneath the waves and reappear under the capsized raft. It's almost calming how quiet and dark it is. When Dan and I got into fights, I had always thought that it was more calming to ignore him, but now I realize I was just ignoring the real issues. "Under the raft is the worst place to be," I remember our guide telling us earlier that day. Now I know why: I have no idea where this river is dragging me, when another wave is coming, or how to get back to safety. Whether Dan meant to or not he was constantly giving me guidance on life. He'd already been all the places I was headed and always would be. Through his examples I learned what to and not to do. The water sucks me back under and I pop out beside the raft. I can't take a breath without inhaling more water than oxygen. My eyes quickly scan for our bright orange raft, and upon finding it, my hands lash out towards the rope that lines the side. Thud. I briefly notice my dangling legs banging against solid, steel rocks. My limp body is getting sucked up underneath the overturned raft. Before I can decide whether it's better to let go of the raft or stay with it, another wave overtakes me: I didn't have a choice.

Yes I did. In all our infinite wisdom, we had made our choice today. Dan chose not to traverse the river, but got dragged along by the majority. The one who had foreseen our catastrophe was receiving his own prophecy.

The surrounding trees and beasts appear calm despite all of the turmoil and death. Even the river, although crushing and relentless, seems completely at ease. In contrast to the environment, I have become increasingly frantic to get out of this river. I can see Dan up ahead of me a ways, but I can't seem to find anybody around me. I can't waste energy looking for people that aren't in my power to save. *Mom, Dad, ex-girlfriend*. It's cliché, but images of the people closest to me flash through my head as I continually choke for another breath. Another rock slaps my leg.

Ahh, finally a small break in the crashing rapids. Even with tensions running high, Dan

and I could always manage to be respectful and act decent in front of other people. Miraculously, after what seems like hours spent struggling through the river, our party manages to clamber back up onto the overturned raft. Dan and I exchange meaningful glances: 3,000 words pass between our eyes in the split second while all of his fear and concern reflect off my face. After rowing back to shore and checking ourselves for injuries, everybody seems to be in pretty good shape: a few cuts and bruises, but mostly everyone's just shaken. A hazy, blue Katahdin still looms off in the distance, unmoved and undisturbed by our near death experience. I wonder to myself how many rafters it's seen be claimed by it's cousin, the Penobscot.

Steeped in adrenaline and excited by the fact that my body isn't currently floating face down in the river, I'm not feeling too bad about the whole situation. Dan's completely silent, leaning against an ancient pine tree. Come on Dan, it's okay to be a little excited. Everyone's sharing their own personal view of what just happened, but one in particular catches my attention: "Me and Dan were right next to each other clinging onto the raft at first. We both looked at each other and knew it was going to be bad..." our friend Jason continues his narrative, but I'm only half listening now. I know that If I had been next to Dan on that raft, I would have lost it. If I had seen anything happen to him, my life could never have been the same. Although in the end I had to maneuver myself down the powerful river, there was always that guide just one step ahead of me, showing me what was in store. After experiencing racking sobs and hysterical fits of crying later on, I knew I would forever cherish and appreciate my own personal guide down the river of life.