

BARELY RUNNABLE

JAKE MAYNARD

One week after record rainfall burst the riverbanks of southern West Virginia, destroying homes and roads and ending twenty-six lives, I gawked at the destruction I passed on the two-lane highway. Downed trees, culverts washed away, sheds knocked cockeyed. Hundreds were still displaced,

many more still without electricity. It was mid-summer. Hot, cloudless, and bright. I was headed to Fayette County, near the heart of the damage, to spend the weekend at an “adventure resort.” There, I would be paid 400 dollars to write a short narrative promoting their main attraction—whitewater rafting on the Gauley River.

I wasn’t to be rafting, though. The Gauley was too flooded to raft. But there were deadlines to make, promos to release. Therefore, as the marketing company explained to me, “the story will require research and some imagination.”

What they meant was that they wanted a fake narrative they would publish as travelogue, as truth. They wanted “vivid and colorful” language. Something *picturesque, majestic, fulfilling, resplendent*, etc. They’d hired me, in part, because my CV showed I was “also a fiction writer.” But name a writer who doesn’t tell a little fiction.

Big blue resort signs pointed me—like I would be otherwise incredulous—down a county road with ditches still choking on flotsam. The road wound through a little town where all the once-identical company houses had turned different shades of haggard, like the place where I grew up. Past town, the resort’s entrance appeared: a billboard, fresh blacktop, and a pond the color of a peacock.

At the log-faced Welcome Center, the tattooed hostess surprised me with the news that I’d be rafting The Gauley after all. And instead of the usual summer current, we’d be rafting at 9,000 cubic feet per second—the highest flow that they would take guests on, per industry policy. “You’ll be on the first trip since the flood!” she told me. “There’s no real way of telling what you’re gonna find out there.”

Across a parking lot, I found the resort’s bar & grill, a structural twin to the Welcome Center. It was called The Lost Paddle, and inside it looked like Applebee’s had tried to

launch a chain of dive bars. At a barstool, two free beers later, I googled Gauley River. Google read my mind, suggesting “Gauley River Deaths.” I stopped myself from reading the statistics. Instead I found a site that provided up-to-the-minute gauges of the river’s height. In bold red letters, it said the river was “Not Runnable.” Good, I thought. Maybe this was official. Maybe I could just drive home and imagine the whole piece.

The Lost Paddle was running a special: one dollar from the sale of every West Virginia-made beer would be donated to flood relief efforts. Drinking my charity beer, I listened to two dreadlocked bartenders discussing the flood. One person—*one body*—was still missing. They seemed shaken-up and rightly so. This was their community. But they still had to sell T-shirts and rent cabins and take people down the river, riding the same water that’d done the deed.

I checked the site again. In electric green it read, “Barely Runnable.”



The backside of the bar opened to a veranda overlooking the “Wonderland Waterpark”—a two-acre lake crowded with zip lines and giant inflatable pool toys. Some were shaped like ships, others like castles. Kids and shameless adults climbed the toys and jumped headlong into the water. The resort staff milled around the lake after their shifts, smoking and discussing work. I found a circle of grimy raft guides and told them I was a travel writer, not mentioning that my five stars had been pre-paid. I asked about the flood. With kayaks and rafts in tow, they said, they’d driven the swamped valleys, searching for trapped people and animals.

One guide, the only one dressed like a soccer dad, told me about an old woman who’d died. Howard’s Creek, one county

over, had burst its banks and flooded her creekside home. She'd climbed to the upstairs, then the attic, and then the roof. The house floated away with her on it, catching fire when the gas line sheared. She clung to a tree, badly burned, through the night. There's a video online of her burning house, floating down the creek like a boat in a Norse funeral.

"We could hear her," he told me. "We could even talk to her. We could have gotten to her with a kayak. Even if I had to just cling to the tree with her all night, I would have."

He said the local fire department, which was managing the rescue effort, wouldn't let him help because of something to do with insurance. "If your house is on fire, you call a fireman," he said. "If you're trapped in a flood you should call a raft guide."



Geologically speaking, The Gauley is one of the oldest rivers in North America. But in another sense it's a modern construction. Beginning as a bog on one of West Virginia's highest mountains, The Gauley runs southwest for about a hundred miles through steep mountains that stop Midwestern clouds and shake the rain out of them. The Gauley used to cause severe flooding way downriver in Charleston, West Virginia's capital. In 1960 the Army Corps of Engineers decided to dam it. The process took six years, displaced the community of Gad, and created a four square-mile lake. A cemetery was flooded in the process, the bodies relocated only if the next of kin requested it.

Each fall, the Corps drains the dam and, for a few weekends a year, The Gauley becomes one of the best whitewater rivers in the country. In the summer it's supposed to be shallow and pittering. But the extreme rainfall had lifted the water level of the lake by thirty-eight feet. Worried for the

dam's integrity, they'd been forced to open the dam wide for a few hours, releasing water at twenty times the usual flow. That much pressure could alter the river, the rapids. "It could be a whole new river," the tattooed hostess had told me. I knew I shouldn't write as much; my experience should be replicable by any potential visitors.



The next morning I signed waivers releasing liability for everything from drowning to theft to snake bites to "slippery mud." Then, thirty hokey tourists and I loaded onto an old school bus with a trailer of stacked rafts hitched to the back. To make more room, the guides made us wear our bright yellow life-vests and helmets during the bus ride. All of the tourists were white, sunscreen white. Some couples, families, aging buddies trying to reconnect. Then there was the

The alders and laurel that grew along the banks were all bent downriver, slicked back like a greaser's haircut.

Christian young men's group from Iowa that had just finished a few days of "flood relief aid." Their leader—a little goateed guy with barbed wire tattooed around his bicep—kept telling his guys to "go big or go home." He said it again and again, slapping each teen on the back of his helmet.

"Are you ready to party on the Gauley?" a guide hollered from the front of bus, pumping a fist into the air.

"Yes."

"You can do better!" he hollered.

"Yes!"

When the guides told us of the river's dangers, I hoped they were exaggerating. I'd once known a raft guide who liked to terrify his clients with fake stories of deadly undercurrents on the safe river where he worked. He reasoned that by making the guests more afraid, they'd tip him better when they survived. His job, like mine, was in selling untruth.

Our guide explained that The Gauley's hydraulic currents can bore holes straight through the center of submerged boulders. Occasionally these holes are the size of a car. Occasionally these holes are just big enough to inhale a person, but not big enough to spit them out the other side. Rafters call these "retirement holes." When, rarely, someone is lost in a retirement hole, the Army Corps has to turn off the river to retrieve the body. Slowly, the water level drops as other rafters ride out the last of the water ejected from the dam. Sometimes the reduced pressure lets the body pop out and rise to the surface. Other times the river just drops until they meet.



The Gauley was brown and foaming, half again as wide as I'd seen in the pictures. The alders and laurel that grew along the banks were all bent downriver, slicked back like a greaser's haircut. Matted leaves were stuck in the trees, fifteen feet above the river, the high water mark from the dam release.

The other tourists tried to make themselves useful by tightening each other's life jackets. Two strong guys in their late twenties caught my attention. They wore expensive, water-wicking clothes and swaggered along the river's edge. They were my mark. The marketing company had told me who to write for: "A guy in his mid-twenties/early thirties who has a good job or is seeking higher education. Is an extreme,

thrill-seeker who enjoys adrenaline activities and wants to break up the monotony of adulthood. Doesn't hesitate to spend money to have a good time. Also attends concerts, initiates group outdoor trips, and paddles hard and parties harder."

One of the guys, I learned by eavesdropping, was in medical school. The other did something with clients and accounts. And what luck—these shmucks were to be in my boat. They were paying \$265.00 each for this.

I met the rest of my crew. The shmucks had each brought a quiet girlfriend, eyes heavy with mascara. Our guide was a big redhead named Derek and along with him was a guide-in-training. She was dressed in a shiny black neoprene wetsuit stretched tight against her large middle. She wore a white lifejacket and a black helmet with huge white stickers on the sides. The stickers looked like the eyespots some animals develop for protection. When she put the helmet on, she looked strikingly like an orca.

Together we carried the raft to the river's edge and hopped in. Derek walked us through the commands for paddling and told us we could call him by one of many names: Derek, D-rick, D-Rock, D-Bag or just D. I chose D-rick because the shmucks went with D-Rock.

And then it was time to party on the Gauley.



Psychologists say that most fears are learned through experience, family, culture, etc. There are a few, though, that are lodged deep in our genetic coding. Think: darkness, snakes, spiders, murky water. Brain scan technology illuminates this. When shown videos of brown, frothing rapids, something in your primitive brain lights up. I thought about this as we went through the first few rapids; I was

supposed to be afraid. Choosing to be afraid was the point. But on our raft, one of the girlfriends seemed unable to quiet her raging medulla oblongata. Every time we hit whitewater she faked a loss of balance and threw herself to the center of the boat, away from the slippery edges where you sit to paddle. She thought she would be safer in the middle. And she was probably right. That is, until our raft went ass-over-tincups in the biggest rapid on the middle Gauley.

We were the second of the four boats to go through. The first had skirted the rapid to the right, missing the giant haystack of a wave that recirculated in the center of the river. We hit it dead center. The nose of the boat reared up like a wheelie gone awry. I saw foamy white, pale blue sky. An empty space where the schmucks were supposed to be.

I was in the boat, then the water. It was that immediate. Boat / water—the cold angry shock of it. I don't remember swimming. Or rising to the surface. Just waves and the upside-down raft next to me. I grabbed ahold and scanned the horizon for my crew. Nothing but river. The river was everything, everything and every direction.

When the boat reached a piece of steady water the world reappeared. I saw the guide-in-training holding onto the back of the raft, gagging water. D-Rick swam up from behind, climbed onto the flipped raft, attached a strap, and threw himself backward in the water, righting it. I kicked and pulled and scrambled back into the boat. The guide-in-training could not make it back in, so I pulled her back in like I'd been instructed beforehand. We fell backward into the raft and her face landed exactly in my crotch. Another raft had picked up the schmucks and their quiet girlfriends as they floated downriver. The fearful girlfriend had been knocked under by a recirculating current and she looked green in the face. The schmucks hooted and hollered about how much

fun they'd had. We picked them up from the other raft and collected our paddles from the slack water. I was shivering. Guide-in-training was still coughing up river. D-Rick said, "Well, that rapid's not the same as it used to be." The other guides were already heckling him.

We stopped at a sandbar for lunch and ate food fit for a Methodist potluck. Once dry, I began to feel the pull of the schmucks' enthusiasm. Fun—it *had* been fun. It felt authentic, or something like it. I knew the river was dammed, not wild, but for a minute I didn't care. The Army Corps had shaped the river, and I would shape a bullshit travelogue about it. So what. Justifications are everywhere if you look for them.

After lunch we paddled toward the last three rapids and the take-out, where, we were told, a cooler of beer waited. D-rick said that we were lucky because the church group didn't drink. There'd be more beer for us. The shmucks were grinning and a human color had returned to the scared girlfriend. The travelogue was already taking shape in my head. Something-something about a gathering of old college buddies, like the schmucks, who met each year to chase adrenaline. One of them could be a coward who finds his courage after taking a swim in the mighty Gauley River. His friends would pull him back into the boat, strengthening their bond and staving off the doldrums of adulthood. Ta-da.

But as we ran the rapids, I became my own story. The shmucks and girlfriends and I clanked our paddles in celebration. At one point I hooted *woo-hooo*, calling to the fake thing now becoming real.

We came to the last rapid and D-Rick warned us of an undercut rock on river-right. If you hit the water, he said, "Swim as hard as you possibly can towards river-left and don't stop until you hit the shore." We took the safe route and skirted the rapid to the left. The next boat canted sideways and

nearly flipped. Two of the church group toppled in, one from each side of the boat. A heavy kid landed in the still water at river left. A muscular kid was sucked into the rapid. His helmet disappeared, reappeared, and went under again.

The guides blew their orange whistles. We scanned the water from the eddy downriver. Painful seconds passed. He popped up and was walloped through the waves. Towards river left, the heavy kid bobbed in the slack water like an apple. They told him to swim to shore and made for the muscular kid, who flailed ten yards downriver. When they got to him, he was screaming.

Their raft beached in a whirl of commotion. The muscular kid lay skyfaced on the floor of the boat, guides and church kids circling him. The medical-student schmuck jumped from

The guides blew their orange whistles. We scanned the water from the eddy downriver. Painful seconds passed.

our boat and thrashed through the knee-deep water toward him. D-rick told us to give them some room.

After a few minutes they lifted the kid up and walked him to the beach. His left arm was dislocated at the shoulder, deforming the silhouette of him against the sun. He wailed and babbled. Close by, the church group kneeled and prayed like a football team encircling an injured quarterback. I found the cooler and grabbed two beers. I opened one and placed the other in my upturned helmet that I'd nested in the crook of my arm, like a baby. The medical student—who I'd decided was not a schmuck—was taking charge of the kid's care, asking him calm questions about the scale of his pain. But the kid wouldn't answer questions. Instead, he talked about the

undercut rock. He said he'd been pulled under it; he'd felt the rock on top him. And why had the hole spit him out? It was Jesus, Jesus had spared him. His face was streaked with tears.

Later, D-Rick told me what actually happened. The kid was likely thrust down to the river bottom by an undercurrent. When he rose, arms lifted, he bashed into the underside of the raft, popping his shoulder. He'd been nowhere near the retirement hole. They spent thirty minutes trying to convince the kid to let them set the dislocated shoulder. The church buddies whispered among themselves and thanked god. It was all incredibly awkward. By the riverbank, I heard one of the church kids say, "He needs to stop being such a pussy and get on with this." Eventually they did set the socket, and we all heard the scream.

Because of the flooding, the dirt road from the river was a pitted mess that took forty minutes to climb. Some homes along the road were still without their power lines. One was missing its bridge. We hit a pothole and the kid's shoulder dropped from its socket. They set it. It happened again. Each time we sat in silence, slurping beers over the thrumming engine. The kid sobbed as the medical student adjusted his makeshift sling.

When we finally hit blacktop, we all started chatting.



The travelogue took me ninety minutes to write. I did it as soon as I got home, and a few days later I made small revisions when the company said it should be "more positive."

It would take a week before I began to churn with the hypocrisy, the questioning. After my check was deposited and my sunburn had molted, I would sit with the moths on my porch and work to extract some selfish meaning. Something

something about how safe we've become. About the flooded cemetery, about poverty and geography. I don't know— something about rafting the killing water to feel alive.

But even now, despite the ironies, I can't shake the way I'd felt when that bus hit blacktop. On the bus, I didn't care about the flood or my dishonest writing. On the bus, I was dirt-flecked and half-drunk. I was tired and stupid. And I wanted to laugh and drink and bullshit with all the other tired and stupid people. I wasn't worried about authenticity, or complicity, or any of the other *-icities* that keep me up too late. Because I felt safe, and real, and happy. Happier than I'd felt in a long time. ■