

Of Time and Rivers

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The A/C was cranked, but all my windows were down. The humid air from this baked afternoon whipped by my face, but the rattling A/C kept us fairly cool. I gave a sideways glance at my father in the passenger seat, and could tell he was seconds away from starting a lecture on why this was not the proper way to cool down your car. But I simply smiled broadly at him, and he backed off. He hadn't yet reached the age where he had forgotten his youth, and I hoped he never would.

The route to Shaw's from my house is simple enough, and I never paid more than one glance at any given object. Yet as we went over the bridge that would take us into North Conway, I couldn't help but look down.

The Saco.

I twisted my head around to look over the bridge, but it was no use. Before I knew it, the bridge ended, and the River was soon far behind. I smiled yet again, and realized something that gave me some comfort. The River had not left me after all. It was still here to greet me, to watch and protect me. It was still part of my life.

"Hey Dad, where does the Saco begin?" I asked tentatively.

"Up near Crawford Notch, if memory serves me right. From the Saco Lake, predictably. Why?" He responded, eyeing my shrewdly. "And what were you looking for back there?"

"Oh, well, nothing," I said quickly, keeping my eyes fixed on the road, "I was just looking for a wooden boat."

"You know what this is, Josh?" my dad asked, pointing to the moving body of water in front of me. I analyzed it in my own head, looking for a trick to the question.

"A . . . river?" I asked hesitantly.

"A river? You're insane. This thing couldn't be moving more than a few inches per second. Look at that stick floating over there. I've seen turtles move faster than that." He grinned at me, and nudged me to show he was joking. "No, this isn't a river. It's a brook. Thus the name of the business . . . 'Sunny Brook Cottages.'"

"It doesn't look too sunny to me," I replied, refusing to let him have the last verbal jab. And it didn't. Trees flanked the brook on both sides, casting long and deep shadows over the water. It was cool down here, even with the blistering July sun as our backdrop.

“Funny you should say it looks like a river, though,” he continued, ignoring my last statement with practiced ease. “This thing eventually joins with the Saco River. Amazing, isn’t it?” My ear perked up at the sound of my old hometown, and I pined to return to it. I had not yet adjusted to this . . . New Hampshire . . . that was suddenly thrown upon my lap like a two-ton heavy thing. We had only moved in last week. But I looked at the river with a new respect. It felt like an old lifeline that connected me to Saco, or maybe even Biddeford, my birth town. At any rate, it was a little bit of Maine . . . or rather, it *would* be a little bit of Maine once it reached there. Time and Rivers are funny like that.

“In fact, if you were to put, say, that wooden boat on this brook, it’d eventually make its way back to our old home.” His statement eerily echoed my own thoughts.

“Really?” I asked in wonder, hoping that it was true. Maybe I wasn’t so far from home after all.

“Yep,” he said, not wanting to let me down, “Although due to the amount of dams it’d run across, you’d be better off spitting into it, and hoping your saliva makes it.”

I giggled and said, “Good idea! So when I go back to Mom’s, I can take her swimming in the River near the playground and can tell her that I spit in it! Hah! Won’t she be . . .” I trailed off, hating myself for not thinking before I spoke. I just broke Rule Number One of living in a divorced family.

My dad cleared his throat. “Right, well, how about unpacking the rest of your stuff? You have a bed, but I’m sure you want at least a blanket.”

“Yeah, sure,” I replied, still staring into the waters. I had not yet come to grips with the move, and my 10-year-old mind couldn’t understand why we had to move at all. New house, new school, new friends, New Hampshire.

It was hard to believe this brook eventually joined with the mighty Saco. It was almost as lazy as the days I hoped to spend upon it. There was a dam built up in the middle of it, and water was coursing down the rocks and logs in a shamelessly noisy fashion. It seemed as if this noise held hidden messages for those who listened. The Brook was speaking. Not about anything serious, mind you: just making conversation. The brook never struck you as a heavy thinker.

“. . . which is perfect, since the water is so calm.” I realized my father was in mid-sentence, and I strained to look up at him. He looked down at me with a smile, knowing full well I wasn’t listening, but making his face contort into mock anger.

“As I was saying, before I was so rudely interrupted, was that this river is perfect for fishing. The water is so calm; you could set your lure right on the fish’s head.”

“Heh, I bet we could catch ‘The Big One’ here,” I joked. My father stifled a laugh.

“Yeah yeah, how about you start unpacking? School is only a short week away. Chop chop!”

“I’m telling you, the fish was huge,” Mike was saying, showing signs of irritation at our laughing. “Oh come on. I’m telling you, I saw it! It was right off the edge of the river where it nibbled my line. The bastard dragged me upriver while I held on to the pole, only to have the damn thing snap. God damn! It was the Big one, Sean, mark my words. And we’re going to catch it.”

My father nodded gravely. He knew it was best not to disagree with Mike when it came to fish. We were all sitting in a canoe sailing away the day. I guess you could say we *were* fishing, but we hadn’t caught a thing, so it was less embarrassing this way. I suppose you could go further and say we were sailing to get our minds off of my mother, the divorce, and her late nights at Dunkin Donuts with the man that was not my father. I suppose you could call this simple trip a lot of things.

The water was a deep, sapphire blue. My 9-year-old eyes could not see the bottom of the river, so my 9-year-old mind figured it went down forever into the very abyss. The air had a fresh smell to it, one you only find where the water is clean and the land unspoiled. I took it all in and loved every minute of it. This was paradise.

And today was . . . the day.

I had been looking forward to it all week, counting down the days on a wall calendar that had ‘PrimeStar’ written in big, bold letters across it. Today was the first day I had ever been in a boat, and to be in it with my dad and his friend on a fishing trip . . . I didn’t know what to think. This was my Rite of Passage, the thing that would make me a man. I had to just one simple thing, and I’d be all grown up, just like my dad and Mike.

I had to catch a fish.

My ‘fishing pole’ was roughly two feet long, made of plastic that was a hideous shade of neon green. I swung it backwards with reckless abandon, catching the hook into the back of the boat. I cast it forward just as wildly, and the line caught and pulled the pole back. It snapped in two, connected like a severed arm with strands of sinew, by the fishing line. I gasped in horror, my 9-year-old eyes seeing a broken pole, my 9-year-old mind seeing a broken dream. My eyes began to water.

“Ah, broke it, eh? No worries. It wasn’t that high quality anyways. Just something from K-Mart, like two dollars, seriously.” My father looked down at me, and patted my head. “Come on, it’ll be okay. We’ll buy another one or something.”

“B-but the f-fish . . . the Big One . . .” I stuttered, seeing my chance of being ‘one of the guys’ slipping away, sinking down the immeasurable depths of the river.

“Oh, that thing? Come on. You really think that thing exists?” my father said, nodding his head towards the river. “You have a better chance of catching the flu than a fish here. Here, have a sandwich.”

Mike laughed loudly at the other end of the canoe, beer in cozy, cozy in hand. He glanced back at us, resembling a pirate with his black, unkempt beard and wild eyes.

“A sandwich . . . some father you are. Your boy is devastated at breaking his pole and that he can’t catch MY fish, and you offer him a sandwich for comfort. A sandwich!”

“What? A sandwich is a proven stress reliever,” my father retorted, handing me a plastic bag from our cooler. “Scientifically proven. Here, Josh. Peanut butter and jelly . . . your favorite.”

“Hey, come on, be careful. You want to break your neck?” my father yelled at me and my friend, Nate, as we climbed up the massive castle that was the Green Playground. It had been built on the edge of the river in Saco, and was only miles from my house. It was my favorite place to play, to become something that was much more than an 8-year-old boy. A pirate sailing the seven seas, a Power Ranger vanquishing villains, a police officer arresting crook—

“Josh, are you even listening to me? Get down from there.” He was a million miles down, and I felt a sudden rush of vertigo. My hands shook and my knees almost buckled. Nate glanced down at me, even higher than I was.

“Come on, come on! Go down, or your dad will be mad at us,” he yelled down at me, oblivious to my obvious predicament of life or death here on the green playground.

I shakily put my foot on the rung of green wood below the one I was standing on, and let my weight ease onto it. It was like learning how to walk again. I took another glance down, and fancied this was what skydivers saw when they make that first jump. Ten feet up? More like 10 miles, 10 hundred miles. Nate was climbing down fast now, not even looking down. Hastily I took my foot off and went to the next rung, when the weak grip I had let loose. And suddenly I was falling, falling a million miles to the ground below, where I would hit with a sickening thud and the very ground would quake. This was it, this was the end. The papers would be hot off the press screaming headlines: BOY FOUND DEAD AT PLAYGROUND, SMOOSHED LIKE A BUG. I twisted around to look at the coming ground when sudd—

“What did I say? I told you you’d fall! Come on, it’s time for lunch.” There my dad was, just there in the nick of time to reach up and catch me from my impending doom.

Together, the three of us walked towards the green picnic table where my mother was sitting with the all-too-cliché lunch basket and red checkered table cloth. I climbed

onto the bench there, feet happily dangling under me, swaying back and forth in the light breeze. My mother smiled at me, and then at my father. They sat down on one side, and me and Nate sat on the other.

“How do sandwiches sound, gentlemen?” she asked. We all cheered, anxious to eat so we could swim. I was still trying to learn how to do this complicated task: the yellow arm floats a constant reminder.

“Here, Josh. Peanut butter and jelly, your favorite,” my dad said, handing me a plastic bag that contained a sandwich, sans crust.

“Dad . . . I like ham and cheese with mayo, not peanut butter and jelly. You *always* forget,” I moaned, but took the sandwich anyway.

“Oh, is it now? Well, I’ll try to remember that.”

Then we ate sandwiches, followed by chips and some pumpkin pie. Me and Nate got up and ran to the makeshift beach, blissfully ignoring my mother’s commands to ‘wait 30 minutes before swimming!’

We splashed noisily into the water, yelling at the tops of our voices in some feeble attempt to ward off the ice cold that clawed at our bare skin. Finally our bodies won the battle with the cold river, and we were free to swim. The yellow floaties on my arm allowed me to go into the ‘deep end,’ but not beyond the roped-off area. A loud splash erupted behind us, and I was able to catch a glance of my father diving in head first. He swam fast and hard, and dove under the forbidden roped area and into the wild river.

“Where do you think the river ends up?” Nate asked as he swam in small circles, his own red floaties keeping him up.

“Dad says it ends up in the ocean in Biddeford. He says it begins way up there,” I pointed absently in some obscure direction, “Way up there in the mountains. And it comes all the way down here.”

“Wow,” a single word, holding so much wonder.

My mother was packing up already, ever diligent. She smiled at us, and lugged the picnic basket to our old brown sedan, plopping it into the trunk. I took one last look at my mother and swam away to catch up to Nate.

Bits of color; snippets of sound and light. My earliest memories: a jangled piece of work that held little information, but much significance. Laughter, from both my mother and father. The world flies past the windows in a blur, a painting of reds and blues and yellows and greens.

In a car. A brown car. With four doors, a cracked passenger window, and child locks on the rear doors. More laughter, and my mother’s brown eyes looking back at me. I giggle.

Craning neck, looking outside. More blur, but of one color: blue. The ocean. The ocean means we are close to home and I am glad. I hear the familiar ba-bump of the wheel running over the divider that led to the bridge. Looking right, a big river cascading down over rocks and under the bridge. Looking left, a river flowing out beyond my sight. And further? The Ocean. The River met the Ocean with a crash, and each ceased to exist independently. River was the Ocean, the Ocean was the River. We're often told that life has a definite beginning and a definite end. We think of time as a river, bending and twisting with the weight of time until it eventually ends. But it doesn't end there, not at the Ocean. River becomes Ocean. Ocean becomes Vapor. Vapor becomes Rain. Rain becomes River. It's not the end of the journey . . . it's the beginning.

I thought none of this as I sat in my blue and red booster seat.

In fact, my 5-year-old self would have nothing to do with this philosophy nonsense. It was content to just sit there in the brown sedan, blissfully unaware of the weight of life, the workings of time and rivers. My world was the now, driving down the road to our house with my parents. Windows rolled all the way down; the A/C cranked.