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RIVER RATS

Megan M. Carpenter

—for RR Dollison

At their essence, river rats are aquatic rodents. They live in, on, and near the water and depend upon it for their livelihood. My family is, and have always been, river rats.

My mother's family grew up on the west bank of the Tygart River in north central West Virginia. My great grandparents used this land as a summer camp: a place to ride horses named Honey and Chief; a place to host parties; a place to plant flower bulbs from Holland. My grandfather spent most of his childhood working the land for his parents. While his older brother slept late and hung out with friends, my grandfather smoothed the seams between land and water, covering them with the mortar of home. To the day he died, my grandfather was a hard worker.

My grandfather was also a faithful subscriber to the magazine *Playboy*. I am not convinced he gave much time to any particular issue; but each one spent enough time on the kitchen bar to serve as the brunt of many of his jokes, and the focal point of much disgust from the rest of us, before it joined the others in a stack on the bathroom floor. We all resented the presence of these magazines in our lives. His response was a laugh, a big belly laugh, and sometimes a poke in the ribs while he asked us to read the latest article on Jesse Ventura, or look at some girl who was "almost as pretty as Raquel Welch!" My grandfather's value system was centered around hard work; his sense of humor focused on the inappropriate. On the day he died, he said he had been "doing a lot of work, but not for *Playboy*."

River rats are also hard workers, surely also not for *Playboy*. This member of the genus *Mus* works to survive, stuck in the hierarchy of the food chain with the mudsuckers and the bottom feeders, scavenging for whatever it can find, omnivore extraordinaire. While snapping turtles lie lazily in the depths, and ducks float socially in the sun, river rats work, traversing the space between surface and depth. It is in their nature to persevere. Hard work is a value bred into the members of my family and imposed upon those interested in joining. All teenage girls in my family know that "He sure is a *hard worker*!" is one of the highest family compliments a He can receive.

River rats are stealthy. They live in the water, play in the water, eat in the water, but you almost never see them. They remain undetected,

swimming below the rays of the sun. My grandfather taught me to paddle a canoe like an Indian so that I could travel through the water invisible to my enemies, too. He wore shorts when he took me out in the river, one of few times I ever saw him wear shorts. He always said, "Anyone who would wear shorts would suck eggs!" I was surprised, thus, at his funeral, to see a picture of him wearing shorts on his honeymoon, leaning against a door jam. He was thin, lanky, and wore the grin of a man driving across the country with his new wife, somewhere in the middle of Route 66. The photo bore the caption "The Fifth Day." (Somewhere in the family albums, there is a picture marked "The Fourth Day," where he is standing a little straighter, and one marked "The Sixth Day," where he is leaning a bit heavier.) At the funeral there was another picture of him, maybe thirty years later. By then he was bald, his head a suitable match for his enormous belly; by then, he had a waist of 52" and an inseam of 26". In that photograph, he is wearing shorts too, but this time he is sucking an egg, a big smile on his face, winking at the camera.

To paddle a canoe like an Indian, you must keep your paddle in the water at all times so the sun won't glint off of it and alert the cowboys to your presence. After you stroke the paddle, you turn it 90 degrees and slice up through the water, bringing it to the top of the arc. Then you turn it back, and bring it straight down. Stroke, turn and slice. Stroke, turn and slice. To keep the canoe straight, you flip the paddle at the back from time to time, using it like a rudder. Stoke, turn, flip, and slice. Through four eyes, and braces, and broken friendships, and hearts. Stroke, turn, flip, and slice. If you keep the paddle in the water, the cowboys won't find you.

Metaphorically, a river rat suggests the vagrant, the thief, an unsavory type who frequents a waterfront hoping to scavenge something of use. River rats are thieves; they take from the water and give to the land. They take from the land and give to the water. Their very existence hinges on this exchange.

As a young boy, my grandfather was paid by his father a penny a rock to bring stones up from the river to build a chimney in their house, which later became my house. He went down to the river in the morning fog and waded in to his ankles. He found rocks that fit neatly, smoothly in his hand. Soon, the only available rocks were a bit bigger than that. He brought them up in buckets; the bucket strained, too full; he clenched his teeth. He brought load upon load, piling them up beside his house.

As the fog burned off the river, he took breaks to catch crawlcrabs in his buckets. Rocks That Would Make a Good Chimney became instead Rocks That Might Reveal the Unknown. He started looking for wide, flat rocks. He tried to move the rocks without raising silt. He pulled up his

sleeve, put one hand under the water, and gently lifted a corner, bending down to watch the water swirl underneath. If he saw a scuttle, he guided the crawlcrab with the side of the rock, caught one in his bucket, and then another. And another. The challenge mounted, as his bucket filled, not to lose any in the process. He kept a little water in the bottom of the bucket to help the creatures adapt to captivity. He studied the crawlcrabs: their camouflage, their pinchers, their intent. He took them downriver, and let them go.

My grandfather got hungry as he worked, but his mother would not let him eat between meals. He vowed to eat as much as he could at lunchtime. He pictured a glass of milk. He thought of his older brother, sleeping late. The glass of milk. The lunch. The bucket, whose handle dug into his palms. The pennies.

My grandparents raised three children, and then adopted triplets. They built their own camp slightly upstream from my grandfather's childhood home, using wood from nearby trees for support, decorating with driftwood and river rocks. They named it Camp Comfort. "Camp Comfort sits at the navigable headwaters of the Mississippi," my grandfather said, and now I say it, in turn. There are small rapids, just upriver, which are generally impassable. If you put a boat in at Camp Comfort, he said, "you could float down the Tygart, to the Monongahela, up to the Ohio, over to the Mississippi, and then down to the *Gulfamexico!*" If, however, you enter the water just upstream, your journey will always end at Camp Comfort.

River rats know something others do not—that the water gives, but it also takes. For the river rat, the river is both a strong ally and a formidable opponent. The giver of life, and the arbiter of death. And as its relatives the field mouse and the wood rat, the river rat is at the mercy of its piracy, ever reminded that there are forces greater. One warm summer afternoon, driving down the road with my grandfather, we saw ambulances and police cars at Camp Comfort. We pulled down the driveway, panicked. Hearing noises from the water, we ran down the bank. At the beach, we saw the police in our rowboat. They were going in near circles, unable to keep the craft straight, yelling at each other in the panicked voice of public incompetence. "These people clearly do not know how to paddle like an Indian," I thought. As I turned to share this moment with my grandfather, I noticed his gaze intent upon a large object being towed behind the rowboat. The police dragged this object onto the beach. It was shiny in the sun, white and purple. Blurred, like an overexposed photograph. And it was wearing shorts.

I looked at the shorts, the only thing in focus; I fixated upon them as if they would eventually give way to line and form, fill in the detail that had been lost. They were blue shorts, West Virginia University shorts.

They said WVU in yellow block letters. They were collegiate, still ready to attend classes, go running, dive into the falls up river. But I slow-motion realized that the shorts were the only thing there that had yet to let go of its shape. And I could not let go of them, either. I stared at them until my eyes jerked upward as the police pulled the tow rope. The rope tightened around this mass; water rushed from its mouth in lazy vomit. It was cloudy and full, filled with internal knowledge of the bottom of the river, the secrets of duck eggs and snapping turtles, maybe even river rats. It was unseemly knowledge, knowledge better kept private. My grandmother came down the bank, then, with a police blanket that had been left at the house decades before, two lifetimes ago, when another body had come down river and ended its journey at Camp Comfort. There are some waterfalls about ten miles upstream, called Valley Falls. Valley Falls is a popular spot for college students to go on sunny afternoons, to drink beer, have picnics, test their mortality. There are signs posted everywhere that say DANGER and NO SWIMMING, and, for the most part, people heed the warnings. But sometimes, they don't. Because our houses are in a U-bend of the river, here at Camp Comfort, things, and sometimes people, get stuck here.

The river offers itself up, but you must be wary of its demands. River rats live by this principle. And sometimes all you can do is wait and watch. A few years ago, on Good Friday, there was another drowning at the Falls. We spent Easter weekend looking for the body, waiting for him to rise to the surface. That year, the sacrificed one was a Kuwaiti graduate student who drank too much beer and wore Birkenstocks, who fell into a river in rural West Virginia, my river. But there was no resurrection that year. Jesus stayed under the water, Jesus was stuck under a rock.

As a child, my summers were divided into two activities: being on the river and reading. My family always joked that I couldn't hear a thing while I was reading, that I became so consumed by the pages of a book that I was oblivious to anything outside it. This, like most things, was only partly true. Sometimes I heard, but I chose not to listen.

My sixteenth summer we had a dock that we floated out into the middle of the river, and there I would sit and read. That summer I read everything I could find by Kurt Vonnegut. I held the book above the water as I performed a contorted sidestroke to get out to the float. I told myself that I was training for a one-armed swimming contest in the event that I ever lost one of my arms. The float was covered with Astroturf, prickly on my stomach and elbows as I read. One particular afternoon, I gradually noticed a group of people upriver, yelling and littering. I was distracted from my literary universe; I tried to decide whether I was annoyed more by their uncreative cursing or the sound of

their beer cans being thrown against the rocks on the shore. "Motherfucker!" Clink. Clink. "You son of a bitch!" Clink. The valley magnifies sound so, and this overture was an ill fit for the symphony of the river. I had gotten myself in trouble on more than one occasion for forgetting this chamber effect. I turned back to my book.

After several minutes I noticed the group bringing its cloud of disruption closer. They were swimming downriver, pushing each other on and off black rubber inner tubes. They were on the other side of the river, and as I looked up from *Slaughterhouse Five*, I saw black hair and a beard sink beneath the water. I waited. The man quickly spluttered to the surface with big splashes, then went down again. He didn't come back up. His friends started to yell, "Help!" and "He can't swim!" I dove into the water. I swam as if leaping from turtle shell to turtle shell across the river, went under and grabbed this man, pulling him up to the surface. He struggled and tried to free himself from my grasp. I held fast around his neck, my elbow crooked and wrist tight under his arm, my fist clenched. I sank underwater with the knowledge of just how large this man was, and then found my strength. I pulled his head out of the water and swam to shore with my one free arm in a sidestroke. At the shoreline, I hoisted him onto a rock where his friends were able to pull him up onto the bank as I pushed from underneath. Once ashore, he rolled onto his side and vomited. When he was done, he used his saved life to curse at me, all the while never once looking me in the eyes. I turned around and swam back to the dock, only to find that my book had fallen into the river.

I told my grandfather this story that evening as I made myself some hot chocolate and sat down at the kitchen bar. He offered me some fruit from the dish on the counter. There was always fruit on the counter, and in those days, when we were all together, it never got too ripe. I took a plum and told him my story. Before I was done he began to talk about other lives the river had taken, and other times it had offered up its mercy. He gradually segued into the story that ended most of our conversations in those days: "Now, Tweet!" he always called me Tweet, "Do you remember when you were four or five years old and you always wanted to know the opposite of everything? You would say, 'What is the opposite of grass?' and I would say, 'Why, I don't know,' and you would always come up with some word that wouldn't seem right, but then, the more I thought about it, it was exactly right! Here, have another plum!" Perhaps he had heard, but had chosen not to listen. Perhaps, being a river rat, the force of the river was a mere fact of life for him, like the opposite of the word "grass."

Contemporary online dictionaries often do not recognize the word river rat. They provide alternative words, politely suggesting that you

have, in fact, mistyped your query. They tell you how frequently these other words appear in dictionaries, letting you know that other words are much more popular, making their suggestion slightly less polite than it would otherwise be. Instead of river rat, these dictionaries suggest that I really mean: riveter (11 dictionaries) or rivera (4 dictionaries).

Like a river rat, a riveter is also a hard worker. A riveter, according to these eleven dictionaries, connects two objects by passing a third object through a hole. Rosie was a riveter. She passed her work ethic through the hole created by the American war effort to seal up the employment gap. My grandfather, in part, was also a riveter. As a boy he used his work ethic to make a hole in our river to connect upstream and downstream. The river was shallow out in front of their house, so shallow that it was often impassable. He cut the channel by moving some of the rocks to a depth of eight feet or so, enabling boats to pass through without scraping the bottom.

For those who have little experience with river transport, such an endeavor might seem novel. For those who have been hung up on shallow rocks in a canoe, such a channel might seem beneficial. For those who saved hard-earned pennies during the depression—or hard-earned dollars in the 1980s—to buy a canoe, this effort has been much appreciated.

Rivera, it is suggested in four different dictionaries, may refer to a novelist, a revolutionary, or a painter. Rivera, I suggest, is a name that symbolizes hard work and attachment to land. Rivera the novelist decried the development of the Amazon jungle. In *La Voragine*, this Rivera asserted that the wilderness should be protected from outside influence for those creatures who reside therein. Rivera the revolutionary was a gaucho, a cowboy who staunchly defended his lands from colonial powers. Rivera the painter strove to elevate the struggles of the working class. One of his greatest talents was to condense a complex historical subject down to its most essential parts.

Prior to the construction of the channel, the shallow waters in front of my grandfather's childhood home served as a barrier to navigability. The channel that my grandfather made, rock by rock, made our waters navigable by canoe; but the channel cannot be seen quickly from the deck of a motorized craft. Throughout the decades it has thus taken on an additional purpose, as our stand against encroaching development and tourism. We often spend summer evenings listening to the growing whine of motorboats and jet skis approaching too quickly, their motors anxious and insistent, the inevitable and slightly satisfying thud when they bottom out. As the motors grow loud, we wince, and wait.

Rivera, the novelist, came of age when he published his only book, a testament to the land he loved. Rivera, the revolutionary, came of age

when he took command of a gaucho cavalry. Rivera, the painter, came of age when he returned to his homeland to make art real for his people. Riveras seem to come of age when they make public what they know in private, bells ringing out across the land. In our family, we come of age when we make the river our very own.

As children, we catch crawlcrabs in Cool Whip containers while our parents watch from the bank. Make drip castles in the wet sand by the shore while our mothers talk on the beach. Go fishing with uncles in the coves on the opposite side. But it is not until we swim from one shore to the other, without stopping, that we can have the river for ourselves. The summer you swim the river is a summer written into your timeline. Megan Carpenter: Born, 1972; Swam River, 1980.

My mother went with me when I swam the river. It was one of the few times she went into the water with me. She grabbed a faded red canvas raft in case I needed it and joined me in the water. She was wearing a swimsuit with a built-in skirt because, despite her infallible reasoning in other areas, she has always been plagued by the misconception that she needs to lose weight. This day, as I looked past her skirt billowing up in the water and across a sea of murky green, I was happy to have her with me. The space was infinite, the trees on the opposite bank suddenly miniature. But it was not the distance that worried me; it was the depth. In front of my grandparents' house, the water gets to twenty or thirty feet deep. And, from all the tales my grandfather had told of snapping turtles *thiiiiis biiiiiig* and copperheads that'll *take yer arm off*—and from one accidental viewing of the movie "Jaws"—I was sure that the bottom of the river was filled with treachery.

Adrenalin and determination were effective propellers, however, and before I knew it I was to the other side. I looked over to the other shore and raised my arms. There were cheers from the beach, and my grandfather rang the old railroad bell on his front porch, high on the bank. The bell echoed through the valley in many notes, ricocheting from the water to the trees and back again. "Yea, Tweet!" he yelled. I looked at my mom, who was smiling at me and clapping. I rested my head on the faded red canvas raft. It was warm in the sun, and I could hear my breath echo through the air within. My mom was proud. The river was now mine, too. And everyone knew it.

River rats always return to the water. They may scurry up the beach as if in a great hurry, as if they have places to be, things to do. They may even do it with determination, making beelines for the bank, crawling ever higher. But they always return. Years ago, after backpacking through Eastern Europe, I flew home, and the first thing I did when I got back was jump into the river, clothes and all. I swam out to the center, past the snapping turtles, toward the copperheads, to where it

scared me, and even farther, past all that murky green to the other side, all the way, swimming the river, grabbing a rock and pushing myself up onto the bank. Swimming the river.

The summer I was pregnant I traveled back again to Camp Comfort, testing the effect of pregnancy on floatability, pleased to find myself more buoyant than ever. I swam in the afternoons, and took canoe trips, paddling to the other side of the river, upstream and downstream. As I stepped into the canoe, I remembered my grandfather teaching me to put a river rock in the front to weigh it down. I laughed to think, as I looked down to see my feet obscured by my growing belly, that a rock would no longer be necessary. I could barely see the zipper on my shorts as my belly hung over in a round orb. I was thankful, then, that maternity clothes were not measured by inches in waist and inseam. I thought of my little boy, his first canoe trip. "This is how you paddle a canoe like an Indian," I told him. Stoke, turn, flip, and slice. He will be born of the river, just like the rest of us. He will take from the river, and give to the river. He will work hard for the things he believes in. He will be a river rat, just like the rest of us. He will be named Tygart. I looked up to my grandparents' front porch and saw that it was empty.

When I pulled the canoe up on shore, I joined my mom and aunts on the beach. I dug a hole in the sand, and put my belly into it, lying down on my stomach for the first time in months. I lay there, feeling the cool of the sand as everyone talked around me, listening only to the current flowing over rocks in the distance.

Last year, again, the river beckoned, and again across an ocean. I packed my bags, booked a flight, and returned. I didn't know at the time that the next few months on the river would be my grandfather's last. I just knew that it was time to scurry back, through the grass, down the bank, into the flow. It would not be long before he became ill, before he was shuttled off to hospitals and rehabilitation centers. Before he begged to be home again, to rest at Camp Comfort.

In my grandfather's lifetime, he built dozens of cars, two houses, and one airport; spent decades mowing and chopping and sawing; hunted deer and pheasants; helped run a farm, a bank, a factory, a hospital, and a family of 36 people; knew how to blow smoke rings, paddle a canoe like an Indian, and suck the fruit out of a scuppernong without using his hands; and accomplished most any other task with his pocket knife—including cleaning his toenails and peeling an apple, often consecutively. But when he came home to rest, it was at Camp Comfort, on the west bank of the Tygart River. And in that moment of rest, nothing else mattered.

River rats. Working hard, gathering rocks, filling the holes of time and pain. Hearing some things, listening to others. Defending our

territory, condensing history, down to its most essential parts. Watching the water flow, while we remain, just below the surface.

My grandfather was mowing the first time I saw him again. I waved to him in the distance, and I could see his smile from across the lawn. Later that evening I went down to see him. I tried to tell him the stories I had brought home with me, the work I had done. He stopped me. "Well, Tweet! Glad you're back! You sure did miss a good summer! Now, get yourself a piece of fruit!" I noticed the array of rotten fruit in the bowl and grabbed a cherry by its stem. I hugged him, and then walked out onto the front porch to look at the river. It was high and flowing fast. Rushing by, with stories to tell, stories left untold, spilling over the banks. I had come home.

