

Breaking The Surface

WRITTEN BY BRIAN SCHOTT

Thomas died early in the raft season, under the cold June waters flowing from the high peaks of Montana's Glacier National Park, when the green river full of glacial silt licked the 8-foot mark on the cement pylons of the Old Glacier bridge stained red with iron deposits. At the 4-foot mark, the river was a good ride. At six, you better hold on. But at eight, which was just shy of flood stage, the river became unpredictable, more clever, often cunning. Never again would water, for which her parents had named her, mean what it had always meant before.

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Brooke, fresh from college and optimistic about life's possibility, approached the cold, rainy morning as she generally approached any other day, like a sailor. Weather changes — it's all how you handle the wind. It had been showering walls of water for the past two days and the river had risen 3 feet overnight. With her wavy blonde hair neatly braided, silver necklace hanging below her supple neck, she greeted the guests that she would be guiding down the river: the family of five from Washington (Thomas and his wife Janet, their daughters Jade and Sophie, and their son Tim — Brooke memorized the names quickly) and two random teenagers from Nebraska (Craig, Mark, easy to remember because she had cousins with the same names). As she busied herself making sure that they had enough paddles in the back of the bus, she wished that she was still snug in her tent, her home for the summer, pitched behind the headquarters of Rising Moon Raft Company.

Seven, though. At least it's a good number, she thought. We'll have some power. Not like heading into Tunnel Rapids with a raft full of grannies and the current pushing them toward the sharp "can-opener" rock that sliced open the center of the river — and rafts that couldn't make the move. Billy, a senior guide who had been educating Brooke in a variety of extracurricular lessons in her tent at night, was busily preparing his gear, gabbing with his crew — a gang of high school teachers on an adventure to celebrate the passing of another academic year. He smiled at Brooke, who darted around the trailer strapping the boats down. At 33, he was glad to have met this sharp Eastern beauty in the mountains. She was smart, funny, fit, and she looked good in her whitewater gear.

After securing the rafts on the rusting trailer, Thomas, the father of the family, told Brooke that they had been com-

ing to Glacier Park for the past five years, and always took a raft trip.

"We just can't seem to get enough of this place," he told her.

Thomas' young son Tim asked Brooke about the river knife attached to her sun-bleached life vest as they loaded the old school bus.

"Why you got a knife?"

"It's just for safety," she replied. "And if anyone gets out of line." She winked.

"You better watch it, kiddo," said Thomas, laughing, as they walked up the steps of the old school bus, painted green with the raft company's moon logo.

After the 20-minute bus ride up Highway 2, with guides telling lame jokes but getting good chuckles out of the nervous-looking faces, the group piled out in single file at the put-in on Moccasin Creek, the small channel that would eventually lead them to the raging waters of the Middle Fork and eight miles of Class IV rapids. Everyone wore wetsuits, standard attire for the cold waters of early season. The neoprene had a slight rank smell, subdued by the chemical sanitizer that the freshman guides soaked them with each evening, one of the jobs Brooke hated.

The group looked awkward standing there on the cement parking area in their tight blue suits, dirty orange life jackets on, stained yellow paddles in hand, shifting from foot to foot, almost behaving as if they were standing there naked. Brooke offered wool hats and extra fleece for her guests, but everyone refused them. Brooke and Billy rolled the fat yellow rafts onto the creek, and the big tubes softened as they sat in the shallow, near-freezing water. The water stung her feet, but she ignored the sensation as they topped off the tubes with

large hand pumps, Brooke glancing at Billy as he added air. Brooke waded across the slippery rocks and tied her throw-bag to the bow of her raft, a safety line to reach a “swimmer” if someone fell overboard. The chill of the water flowed from her feet and into her body. Neoprene booties couldn’t even cut cold like this.

Both crews piled into the rafts, adjusting themselves, stretching, eyes wide with anticipation. They pushed off and finally floating, they began navigating the narrow passage that snaked through thick, green alder and cottonwood. Brooke’s fingers were white as she guided her raft along the skinny channel; and she churned through her safety talk that she had perfected over the past month of training. This talk, which she referenced from a laminated cheat sheet she tucked in the small pocket below her river knife, instructed her guests

on proper paddling techniques and possible dangers they might face on the uncontrolled ride. No Disneyland roller coaster tracks here folks — just open, raging water.

“One of the most important things we can do to stop a raft from flipping is to jump to the high side of the boat if we get into a bad spot,” she said, her Boston drawl masked by four years at the University of Montana. She described how, in a hypothetical situation, that if for some reason they broad-sided a rock, a tree, or a very large wave, she might use the command “High side!” — the necessary act of jumping to the “high side” of the 14-foot raft when broaching an obstacle.

“Always move toward the obstacle,” she told her crew as she feathered her paddle in the swirling current. “If you do it right, it can help prevent a wrap or a flip.”

She lowered her paddle and showed them this visually



with her aching hands, her flat left hand simulating a raft colliding with her other closed fist, the raft hitting the rock broadside, the upriver tube being sucked under the water.

"If the raft stops, the upstream tube has nowhere to go but under the pull of the current. And we flip. Get it? Not good. But if we jump to the high side and get the weight off the upstream tube, we might be able to spin the raft around. The water might let us go."

back at her and she immediately knew that something was wrong. Brooke pointed the nose of her raft upstream toward the bank, and ordered the crew "all forward," a move she had practiced hundreds of times to slow the motion of the boat in the current and ferry toward the shore. She saw the fallen tree spanning across most of the main channel, and water splashing off the panicked paddles of the teachers in Billy's boat as they grunted toward the small opening between the top of the

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She'd practiced this in training, and it worked surprisingly well. It was counterintuitive, so she had everyone practice it several times, jumping from side to side in the boat, and it got people laughing. She moved on to explain other hypothetical accident scenarios. Alder branches hanging over the banks of the creek scraped the raft as they practiced paddle commands and prepared to enter the main flow.

When they finally merged with the Middle Fork, paddling into the current at an upstream angle, a train whistle in the distance rolled up the river valley, carried by the wind. Errant spray from missed paddle strokes in the front of the boat splashed Brooke, and she wiped the gritty water, silt churned from the river bottom, from her face.

The river was moving faster than she had ever seen it and normal paddle strokes across the current made it feel as if they were moving in slow motion. The mountains of the Continental Divide lay sleeping in the distance, sharp peaks covered by cotton clouds, and the air smelled of wet pine. The moist air felt good entering her lungs, and the swirls left by the tail of her paddle strokes were dwarfed by the boiling water, pushing and surging over the bedrock below. Branches and root balls floated past the raft as the wind swept up the river canyon.

They were now on the easy stretch of river, a mile above the section of rapids where her training would really be tested. Brooke was teasing the kids, telling them about bugs and birds and bears and trying to keep them talking so they would forget about the cold, when she lost sight of Billy's boat around a sharp bend. As he came back into view, he looked

fallen tree and the shore, fighting against the pumping water.

"Come on guys, dig in," she called. "We gotta move this raft!"

The tree must have fallen in the storm last night, its roots eroded by the strong current, but it was still anchored to the bank by clinging roots. Logs and other debris had bunched up in the eddy behind it, forming a logjam that shuddered with the pulse of the river.

Billy's boat slipped by the top of the tree and he maneuvered into the calm water, beaching the raft on a gravel bar, and looked back.

"Dig in! Dig in!" Brooke was practically screaming.

Five seconds to impact, she prepared them to high side.

"High side!"

The only person who moved was Thomas.

The raft hit the huge tree, stopping its motion, and the river sucked the upstream tube under the current, flipping the boat in a flash of yellow, exposing the underbelly of the raft. They were tossed under the water before she even got a breath. Everything was murky as the river swept her under the jam, branches like rough tentacles scratching at her face. The water felt thick as oil and everything was black with flashes of sliver light. The river tasted dirty as it forced its way into her mouth. Light appeared as the river flushed her from under the floating logs. She grabbed a branch and clawed up onto the logs on the back of the jam like a panicked dog and started counting heads. One, two, three ... bobbing there in the water ... four, five, six already crawling up on the gravel shore. Seven? Seven? Seven? Down one. She understood now

why they call logjams “strainers” — not everything that goes in comes out.

Brooke scurried across the logjam without thinking, legs as sure as a lumberjack. She could hear one of the girls screaming “Where’s Daddy?” and she knew exactly who was missing. Gaps in the logs cut her off, but she backtracked and picked another route in the maze as she slowly made her way to the tree where the raft was overturned. The bottom of the boat looked like the smooth skin of a turtle, pressing violently against the logs. Then she saw a flicker of orange through the logs below her. There it was again. Thomas was under the jam.

She pulled out her knife and thrust it into the water below her, fishing for whatever was keeping his submerged body trapped. She cut at water-logged tree branches that extended into the murky water, and finally she felt a release. The orange flash below her disappeared, and Thomas’ body surfaced and floated face down with the branch that had hung him up still tangled in his life jacket. Brooke dove into the water, racing toward him. The current swept them toward the gravel bar where the other rafters were standing, shivering.

“Everything’s OK,” said Brooke, panting as she approached the shore, looking at no one as Billy helped her with the heavy body, laying Thomas on his back. Mucous streaked out of his nose and his lips were blue. Billy began CPR and Thomas’s wife insisted on taking turns. Brooke hugged the kids, trembling and shaking.

Billy came to her after midnight to tell her the news.

For the next several days, Brooke remained in her tent. Friends would slip inside the nylon womb, saying things like “Time heals all wounds” and she wanted to say: *What do you know about the depth and severity of my wounds?* But she said nothing. She concentrated on the pain and moved the guilt around her body, shifting it to new areas when she could. During the day, when her chest felt like it was about to burst, she moved the grief to her feet. In the darkness, which came later every day before summer solstice, it would migrate to her head, pressing out on her skull, pushing on the inside of her eyes, then dissipate as she drifted off to sleep. But in the morning when she awoke, it always returned, sitting on her chest, squeezing her.

One day, she woke up and walked to the grocery store, her eyes red and swollen. As she wandered the aisle by the pharmacy, she listened to a family argue about which toothpaste to purchase. *Do you realize that people die?* she wanted to say. Everything seemed so stupid to her. As she walked back from the store, a small paper bag in her hand, she wondered how anyone could sit around talking about what the weather was going to do. Who cares? *People die.* She was hired to get a family down the river safely and she had failed to do that. In her mind, the responsibility was like a cement block on the end of a thin wire. We should have done it this way, she thought. We could have done it that way. We should have had our boats with that kind of big water. We should have split up

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Back at the raft company, after running through the scenario with her manager, Brooke crawled into her tent and lay there looking at the nylon ceiling. Suddenly, she began sobbing, her salty tears flowing down her face, soaking her pillow.

the paddle crews differently. There were a thousand endings to the story, all better.

No one spoke to her about the newspaper articles describing the accident, even though major factual points in the reporting were wrong. The insurance company swept in and out for meetings and Brooke continued to spend most of her time in the tent. The guilt was like stacked bricks on her chest as she lay there in her down sleeping bag. Having everyone in the small community know what had happened made it even worse. *You didn’t drive the boat into the tree,* she wanted to say

when people would check on her and try to console her. *I did*. She constantly pictured Thomas' family around the breakfast table crying, photos of past vacations hanging on the wall.

"You've got to start trying to heal," said Billy, one night, late in the evening.

"I'm so mad," she whispered. "So fucking mad. You just don't get it. Nobody gets it."

"You need to do something," he pressed. "You can't just lie in your tent and pretend it didn't happen."

When she said nothing, he said, "We need a shuttle driver. You should try driving the bus."

"I'm gonna do what I wanna do — and do it when I wanna do it." That was all she had to say.

Brooke was angry at everyone. She began to take walks and would watch people letting their children get too close to the edge of a bridge. She wanted to scream, *Don't you understand? Get your kids away from the edge!* She felt like lecturing everyone she saw about how fragile life was and about not knowing when you were going to die. *It might be tomorrow, so don't live today arguing about stupid things.* But she didn't. She didn't have the energy to lecture the world. The conversations swirled in her head. She spoke with her parents on the phone, who pleaded with her to return home to New Hampshire, where they had retired.

A water person all her life, having grown up sailing in Boston Harbor with her family, Brooke could not even enter the shower now. When she tried it the first time after the accident, the thin film of water flowing over her face made her feel like she was back under the current with commotion and chaos all around her. She tried again, several times, over the next week. She would start the shower in the guide's bathroom and enter the stall, but as soon as the water flowed over her head, the sound would echo in her ears and she wouldn't be able to breathe. She washed her body with a damp cloth and cried silently in the shower stall. She would not look at herself in the mirror. Finally, a week after venturing to the



store, she opened the brown paper bag and removed the pregnancy test. She sat on the toilet, staring at the affirmation.

Billy finally convinced her to try driving a couple of shuttle trips, but driving guests to the boat launch and watching people smiling and laughing while guides made jokes made her feel like throwing up. She was constantly nauseous. She wanted to grab each and everyone one of them and shake them by their life jackets and warn them. *The river isn't fooling around.* Even just simple banter would take away her ability to talk. From the perch in the front of the bus, she'd see someone driving dangerously, passing in a no passing zone. "You moron!" she'd yell. "Don't you get it?" A hush would come over the bus, until a guide would inevitably break the silence with a joke about the bus ride being the most dangerous part of the adventure. Her guilt became acidic and she handed the keys back

after making only five trips.

WHEN THE RIVER FINALLY RECEDED IN MID-JULY, the waters clearing to a tropical green, she returned to the logjam with Billy, walked out to the gravel bar and collected the most beautiful rocks she could find and built a cairn on the gravel bar. She scratched Thomas' name on the face of a large, smooth stone and balanced it on the top of the pile. She had heard, through the company owners, that there would be no lawsuit filed. It was an accident, everyone had surmised, but it didn't matter. She gathered driftwood, made a wind chime with some twine, added small bells, and hung it on a tree by the bank. She felt like Thomas was inside the wind and she wanted to let him talk, somehow. She had only known this man for an hour, but had seen the way that he looked at his family, how he had joked with his son. She kissed Billy on the shore, then she returned to her tent, rolled up the damp nylon, and boarded a plane for New Hampshire. In her dreams on the plane, she continued speaking with Thomas. She dreamed

the accident had happened, but he had lived. For the next several weeks, she continued to speak with him each night.

Brooke returned to her family lake house, greeted with the wide eyes of her parents and the expansive circle of water that stretched out from the shore. The heat and humidity were oppressive and haze lingered in the sky, the air thick with moisture. She did not say hello to the lake, as she always had in the past. Her normal greeting on trips home was a whispered "hello again" to the vast body of water as she would survey the resting boats from the dock, the breeze caressing the water's surface before she would dive into the water, engulfed by the weight of Lake Winnepesaukee. This time there was no greeting. She would not even stand on the dock. Instead, she spent most of her time in a reclining chair on the porch outside the sliding glass doors to the living room, sleeping. Her thoughts went backwards.

Specifically, she recalled one afternoon when she was 10, at the old church in Gloucester with a roofline that looked like a futuristic airplane wing, aimed at the stars. After many years, her parents had returned to the Catholic Church in order to expose their children to ideas other than yacht-club culture which, while also centered on wine and water, the symbolism — and effect — were entirely different. Standing before the congregation, clutching a sliver pendant with an inscription of Saint Christopher, the priest raised his arms and recited a prayer.

"We pray for our child to lead a life rich in the teachings of the Bible. We pray that our child grows into adulthood with a strong sense of grace. We pray that our child will always call on Christ in prayers of thanks and prayers for peace. We pray that our child always enriches the lives of people she meets and never leaves anyone sad. We pray for our child." Dipping a silver cup into the holy urn, he had baptized Brooke, washing away her sins.

SITTING AT THE DINNER TABLE ONE EVENING, her father asked between bites of sweet summer corn, "Why don't we go take a ride?" He had a balding head, and a former athlete's body covered with a thick wrapping of fat.

"In the boat, to Meredith," her mother added. "We'll go get ice cream."

She was a proper woman, a little nervous, and always looking for something to keep her hands busy.

"Peppermint stick," said her father.

"Or soft serve."

"With jimmies."

Brooke did not reply, just tasted her anger, pushing pieces of chicken with thick black grill marks from one side of her plate to the other.

"Brooke," said her father. "It wasn't your fault. It could have happened to anyone."

"It didn't happen to you," she said sharply, her eyes like slivers of glass.

"Honey, I want you to go have a talk with someone about this," her mother cut in.

"It's my pain," said Brooke. "Let me have it."

A pitcher of water was sweating at the center of the table on a checkered place mat and the sound of motor boats wafted in on the humid breeze. The humidity and heat made beads of sweat form above her lips, on her forehead, on the backs of her knees, merely from the exertion of walking across the kitchen to put her plate in the sink. Everything was sticky. Papers folded and cereal became stale in the old cupboards. The energetic calls from the announcer of a Red Sox baseball game sounded from an old radio. *Shilling sets, throws the pitch, it's a high fly ball, center field...* Through the picture window, she could see sailboats leaning over with the wind and she could hear the neighbors playing with their grandchildren. Their laughter at the child's play was amplified by the big drum of the lake.

Although the sound of children made her breasts ache, the sound that was the most difficult for her to hear, was the lonely call of the loon, at night, when she dreamt of Thomas. The bird's call would float above the still water of evening, when the moonlight skittered across the painted surface. Fireworks left over from the Fourth of July exploded across the cove and the sound of a barking dog echoed behind the noise. In bed, she rested her hands on her belly, waiting for something.

A letter arrived one afternoon.

"It's from Billy," her mother reported. "At the raft company." Brooke opened it with a silver butter knife.

She sat there at the kitchen table reading it, her father engrossed in a newspaper, her mother trying not to be nosy, but wondering.

Brooke placed the letter on the table. She wanted to speak to her parents — tell them everything — but each time she opened her mouth it was as if there was only space, no substance, no form with which to mold words.

"I want to—" she stammered.

"Are you hungry? I can fix you a peanut butter sandwich," her mother said.

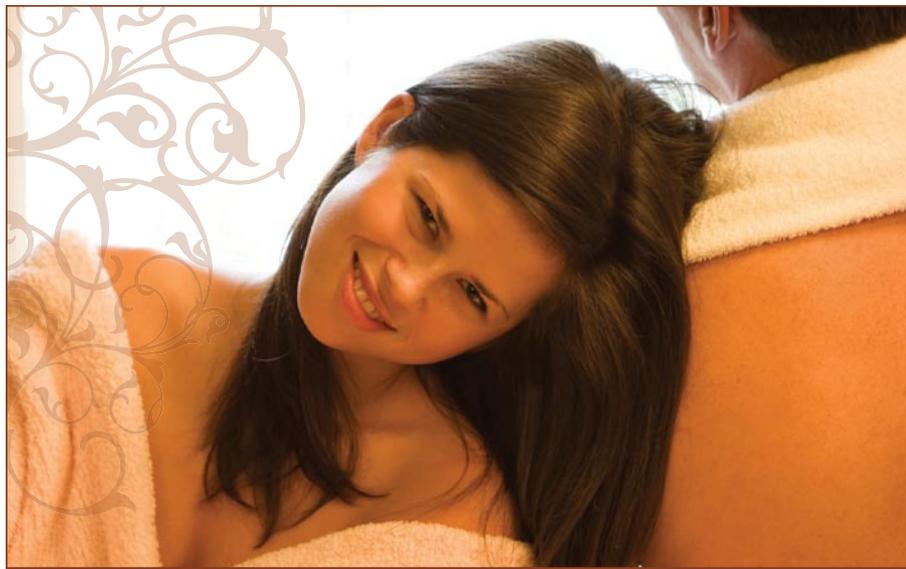
Brooke stood up, walked to the porch, lay down in the sun, and closed her eyes.

What is forgiveness? She asked herself questions like this at night, lying in bed, her hands resting gently on her belly. *How could she ever forgive herself?* Forgiving someone else was easy. Forgiving herself seemed like an impossible task. Would the forgiving really just end up being a forgetting? Would time simply wash it all away? And what of this new life growing inside? At night, she would close her eyes and look at the face of her pain. Its expression was featureless. It was a bright round face with no mouth and no eyes, dimpled with craters.

On the third night, she lay in the upstairs bed sweating, weighted by the stifling heat and haunted by the sound of the loons. Thomas had visited her in her dreams again and had surprised her with something. He was laughing. He was happy. She crept down the creaky stairs to the living room,

silently closed the screen door behind her, and walked down the gravel path to the dock, which jutted 15 feet out into the water. A kayak rested at the end of the dock, its blue bottom glowing in the light of a full moon.

She removed her clothes and knelt at the water's edge, swirling her fingers in the cool inky water 6 inches below her. She tried looking deeper, but could only see the reflection of herself next to the shimmering moon. She stood up, and without thinking, dove into the fresh inky blackness, ripples of moonlight sliding toward shore. When she surfaced, she could taste the sweet lake water and an autumn coolness replaced the feeling of the summer heat. She swam to the shallows, walked up the slippery stairs and dressed, then continued to sit on the worn boards, just staring out across the water, as if looking for something amidst the sparkling lights on the distant shore. She looked down and noticed again that the reflection of the full moon was wavering on the surface of the lake at the edge of the dock. She swirled her toes in its glow. **BSJ**



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