



**“Mountain Eagle” by Terry MacDonald
4' x 2' Oil paint with palette knife.**

The River Sky

Rivers live lives like our own.

Born trickles high in mountain wilderness, they run free in their younger days, sing in crystalline voices, swim and play with new fishes.

Gathering speed and size, they become wild with youthful power. Their waters spread, their song lengthens. They increase their influence by carving deeper channels, dragging rocks toward the sea, wrestling with aging salmon fighting to return to the gravels of their birth.

Here, in white-water froth, a river is at its most dangerous--roaring defiance at the sky, full of itself, sure of its immortality. Only later does the deluge broaden and mellow, finally spilling silently into the salty next-life of the sea.

The Skykomish River is born high in the Cascade Mountains of north central Washington—truly God's Country. One look at its birthplace and you see why they call this 'The Great Northwest.'

The High Cascades encompass thousands of square miles of forests groomed by the Lord's own comb. Knife-edged granite buttresses overlook broad, colorful valleys abounding with wildlife and raging watersheds. One of these is the Skykomish River, or simply 'The Sky.'

Most of the year, The Sky is home to softly falling rain and snow, bald eagles wintering away from their Alaskan aeries, beavers oblivious to all but their jobs; gently leaping deer and stealthy fox move through the trees on verdant slopes above waters swimming with steelhead trout and the fishermen trying to snag them. The scene includes any humans lucky enough to own cabins in the high country.

In Spring, though, the whole pace of the river increases. Massive snows from higher up begin to melt and tumble, bringing the level of the river to a fast flood. Wildlife focuses on new families; seasonal foliage throws out its bloom. And river-rafters come screaming through the rapids, right into the absolute maw of the Sky--a scary stretch known as Boulder Drop. Most rafters ford this section of the river. Some don't. Some die.

They are strange looking creatures, these rafters, wearing black rubber suits and bright colored life-vests, hair dripping in disarray. Riding waves, they smile and bray and whoop like banshees astride inflated nylon barges. The animals on the banks look at these maniacs, sniff condescendingly, and go about their business. They could jump into the river, too, but why? Humans are the strangest creatures.

River rafting exploded as a consumer sport in the mid-1970s. Newly capitalized yuppies and struggling '60s survivors suddenly had disposable income, plenty of slack time, and were looking for thrills beyond their condos and sports cars. Whitewater rafting offered a wilderness experience, bald eagle vistas in backwater moments, and a lunch break! Heck, it was romantic--like the African Queen without a boiler; plus, nobody shoots at you from the shore.

My first professionally run rafting experience was with a Seattle company named the ZigZag River Runners. The radio station where I was working at the time decided it might be cool to take a few hundred listeners and raft the Wenatchee River east of the Cascades.

The Wenatchee is the Eastern Washington mirror of the Skykomish. The sources of both rivers are very close, high up in Stevens Pass--the Wenatchee flowing east to the Columbia, the Sky flowing west into Puget Sound. To get to the Wenatchee from Seattle, you drive Highway 2 over Stevens Pass right up the Skykomish River valley.

Alongside the Sky just below the little town of Index, you pass by Boulder Drop. It is one dangerous stretch of rapids; for a half mile, the riverbed bulges

with rocks the size of Vermont. OK, I exaggerate; hyperbole is my life. Still, we're talking giant, brooding boulders--the kind that churn the waters and eat rafters alive. They almost ate me twice, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

First, an introduction to river rafting with Rich Berkau and the ZigZag River Runners.

The management at KYYX decided to promote a rafting trip, which of course involved a substantial commercial buy from ZigZag. More than one hundred fifty listeners came with us. Evidently, there is never a shortage of crazy danger-seekers willing to pay to play with their lives.

We were to rendezvous in Leavenworth, below the Icicle Creek Bridge over the Wenatchee--our put-in point. Here we met up with Rich Berkau and the company's complete lineup of professional guides.

Rich Berkau was ZigZag's chief guide, and soon became a very good friend. A thin olive-skinned guy of northern Italian heritage whose favorite pastimes included sticking a chew between his cheek and gums, Rich was a helluva river man. He is just about the most gregarious individual I've ever met. He had a unique talent of being able to put eight complete strangers in a boat and turn them into fast friends by the end of the trip.

I once went to a Seattle Sonics game with Rich; at halftime we stood courtside, drinking beers. During those fifteen minutes, over three hundred people came up and said hello to Rich. He had taken each of them on the river, and they had never forgotten it. Damnedest thing I've ever seen. I've gone out in public with him several times over the years, and the same thing always

happens. He scared 'em, thrilled 'em, and brought 'em back alive. They loved him for it.

ZigZag River Runners prided themselves in never having lost a client. Heck of a selling point. Folks didn't seem bothered by the fact that rivers kill people. Wasn't that part of the thrill to a generation searching to skirt boredom? If you couldn't die doing it, what fun was it?

The danger in the sport was one of the reasons ZigZag existed--and the reason Rich Berkau and the guides on each of the twenty boats gave all participants a serious safety lecture.

"All right, fun seekers," Rich began, "you're all here to have a good time, right? Good. Well, our job is to show you a good time, safely. You're all responsible to help achieve both goals. This river is high with melt-off right now, so we'll have a real fun ride today. Each of you, though, has to remember that the speed and quantity of the water are so awesome that a stupid mistake can cost you your life. Got that? Cost you your life! Don't worry. Just follow the precautions I'm about to teach you, and you'll be fine.

"First, you each have on a life-vest. Keep them on. Keep them buckled. They will bring you to the surface in the unlikely event that you fall in. If you do fall in, the main thing to remember is to get your feet downstream. Feet downstream. Got it? That way, you can fend off any rocks that come your way with your legs rather than your head. That would be better, huh?

"Your second piece of equipment is your paddle. Do not use it as a weapon in the water fights to come. Also, if someone does fall in and gets away

from the boat, be careful if you use it trying to retrieve them. You can brain them, and they won't like you. If someone falls in, I will maneuver the boat to him or her; the person sitting in the position across from them should jump to the other side and pull them back into the boat. Use the webbing on the back of their vest. Got that? Good.

"With this bucket," he said, holding aloft a black rubber cylinder, "one of you will bail water whenever I ask. Don't stop bailing until I tell you to rest. Isn't dictatorship great? Sorry I can't provide you with one of those old Roman slave-ship drum-beaters. You'll have to find your own rhythm."

He then took us out into a slack-water eddy and taught us how to control the boat using various paddling combinations. There was a command for each.

"'Forward' means everybody paddles forward on both sides of the boat.

"'Stop' means everybody stops.

"'Back-paddle' is the exact opposite of forward.

"'Left turn'--everyone on the right side paddles forward while everyone on the left side back-paddles.

"'Right turn'--everyone on the left side paddles forward while everyone on the right side back-paddles.

"The only other command that you will hear is critically important. If we hit a wave without our weight correctly distributed, it could be a big problem. For instance, if we go up against a rock with the front of the boat, you will hear me call 'Up front!' At that command, everybody moves immediately toward the front of the boat. If we get hung up on a rock to the right, we'll need to get water under

the left side of the boat, so I'll call 'Get right.' All of you will shift right. The basic idea is that wherever we shift the weight, that side of the boat will go down, and the other will be lifted up. We can't practice these commands, but on the bigger waves today, you'll have to be prepared to shift weight and balance the boat."

We practiced responding to commands until our Captain was satisfied, then started down the Wenatchee. It would be an all-day, twelve-mile trip featuring hundreds of rapids, two scary drop-offs, and an absolute flood of laughter.

ZigZag River Runners and the many other rafting companies plying these waters have named every major rapid along the Wenatchee. They are fun, appropriate appellations--each describing a visible characteristic, or named after a person who fell overboard in that particular rapid. 'Granny's Rapids,' 'Elevator,' 'Acid Test,' 'Gut Bucket,' and the king of the river--'Drunkard's Drop,' are some of the more colorful. 'Drunkard's Drop' makes your head swim when you consider that someone floated inebriated into that twelve-foot high, two-headed monster; it lends a new depth of meaning to the phrase 'head over heels drunk.'

'Drunkard's Drop' was also the scene of a near hit on the future insurability of our radio station that particular Saturday. The day had been gorgeous, the river a treat, our listeners delighted with the unfolding adventure. Then we entered a final dangerous section capped by the roaring twin rollers.

The crew in the raft behind ours was anchored by one of the newer guides, who reacted milliseconds too late in shifting her people forward to avoid

capsizing. Over it went and out they flew; the boat blew over like a hydroplane on Lake Washington, the guide and eight listeners so much airborne flotsam.

Among the suddenly freezing floaters was an older guy who immediately lost both his uppers and his lowers.

You might wonder, as we did, why a 60-something was on a rafting trip with a rock 'n roll radio station. OK, a soft-rocker. It could be that soft-rock appeals to those facing life with empty gums, I don't know. After his boat-mates couldn't get him in the raft for more than a half-mile, we wished he had stuck with Al Martino, Lawrence Welk and Wayne Newton records. When they finally did rescue him, he came up toothless and sputtering, purple with hypothermia.

"My God! That's the most exciting thing that's ever happened to me in my life!"

He had enjoyed his near-death experience, couldn't stop talking about it. We wished he would forget it before he returned to Seattle and talked to a lawyer; but he never gave us any problem. He even wrote us a fan letter--the main points being thanks for a great time, and he didn't mind waiting two whole weeks for a new set of dentures.

With that, the station's insurance agent and company lawyer both flashed big toothy grins.

What an introduction to a sport! I had to have more. The thrill, the fun, the danger! If you could lose your teeth and still love the sport, it was for me. I wanted to fall in and come up gasping for air. I wanted to stare down the tunnel of mortality and look for the light on the other side. I wanted to lose my dentures

in the whitewater of life—to try and figure a way to sneak by Old Man Death, tweak his nose, nip at his heels, and pinch his butt a few times before he carried me off.

In the following years, I became a big aficionado of rafting. Friends and I played in the Spring runoff on the Suiattle, Skagit, Skykomish and Wenatchee. We read about great rafting adventures in South America, Alaska, even the Himalayas. We didn't need to go there, didn't have the time. We could enjoy rafting as good as it gets right there in Washington State; one of the reasons it's so great to live in the Northwest is you're only a couple of hours from these thrills.

Probably our most hilarious jaunt was in the Spring of '88, when we put together an entire boat of crazies to independently accompany a ZigZag cruise of the Wenatchee. It was a perfect June day, with just the right mix of sparkling weather and a perfectly matched crew. At lunch, Rich Berkau barbecued hamburgers which, we are convinced, quickly led to our mental demise.

Somebody must have slipped silly mushrooms into the skillet, the kind that Alice in Wonderland ate, because before long, our faces were purple, our eyes maniacal, and by the end of the day, we had laughed ourselves absolutely stupid. We were completely crazy, finally turning the boat over so we could paddle the long, smooth, last stretch of the river upside-down. We sang, we danced, we jumped over the side for the sheer rush of the icy water enveloping us. Normal rafters who passed us by rowed quickly away on the off-chance the insanity was viral.

Our bellies hurt for a week from the laughing.

Two later excursions, however, slowed and for years stopped my infatuation with river rafting. The first we'll call 'The Great Flood,' the second 'The Message from God.' Though separated by several years, they both unfolded in Boulder Drop on the Skykomish River.

The Sky. Beautiful and brutal. Pristine and perilous.

Boulder Drop at high water is one of the few stretches of high Class 4 rapids in the state of Washington. The other Northwest monster that comes immediately to mind is Tumwater Canyon on the Wenatchee, which is Class 5 most all the time.

Boulder Drop sits in the middle of a right dogleg in the Sky just below the confluence of the north and south forks of the river, between the towns of Startup and Index. It is the depository where, in great floods over the millennia, the river has deposited two-story-house-sized boulders. The giant stones are now jammed together, stuck in this array for a few thousand years. Get thrown into Boulder Drop at flood stage, and there is a good chance you aren't going any further.

I'm not sure what it is about me and initiations, but the first time I floated the Skykomish, I almost died.

Onboard with Rich Berkau and me were Alice and Trudy, two young women who had never been rafting. Bob and Ted were two young men out on the river hoping to meet two young women who had never been rafting. In front of them on either side were my physical therapist from Providence Hospital and her husband.

We were one of six ZigZag boats on this trip. It was late Spring, 1981, my second year of rafting. My physical therapist had just given me back use of my left shoulder, which was severely injured in a 1300-foot fall on Mt. Rainier that past winter. As is many times the case with people who give you back the use of part of your body, I had fallen in love with this woman. It was simply a 'thank-you-note' love. She was madly devoted to her husband, and had no idea I worshipped her for restoring my shoulder. For me, it was a pure, nearly religious infatuation. I don't even remember her name years downstream; the religion has evidently faded.

Up front on the left, across from me, was my friend Mike Conforto--owner of Pacific Nautilus Fitness Centers.

In the mid-70s Mike played linebacker at Penn State University for the legendary Joe Paterno. "Only second string," he would say, not mentioning that being second string linebacker at Penn State (AKA Linebacker U.) meant you were an elite athlete who often relieved future NFL Hall-of-Famers.

Mike is one of the nicest linebackers you'll ever meet. He eventually married Tracy Ruiz, the Olympic Gold Medal synchronized swimming champion and another certified wonderful person. They are now undoubtedly raising a family of higher evolved physical specimens somewhere in Florida; I only hope the kids got their parents' hearts.

Mike had never been rafting, so Rich faced a crew of seven rookies and a sophomore as we dropped the boat into the upper Sky near the Forest Service fish hatchery. A determined rain enfolded us, cutting visibility to about fifty yards.

The clouds would vanish several hundred feet below, but the rain was just the edge of a deluge descending from high up in the Cascades. We couldn't see it, but the river was flooding up there, coming at us quick-time as we set out for fun.

"This rain will give way in a bit," Rich guessed correctly. It didn't change what was going on upstream, but the weather did improve markedly within our first half-mile.

We were off for the banked waves of the Skykomish, nine floating crazies on a five-senses feast.

We all wore our official river-rafting rubber suit. No wonder you act crazy rafting; you look like a sea lion wearing a mask. You've got booties on your feet, rubber helmets when it's cold. Your hands are the only other skin showing, unless you are wearing scuba gloves.

Some folks look good in rubber suits. Some folks don't. Tracy Ruiz, for instance, undoubtedly still looks fantastic in a rubber suit. Mike did, too. I can say so unjealously, despite how I look in a rubber suit.

I would hereby like to dedicate the rest of this particular story to Mike Conforto's shoulders. This is no latent gay thing; Mike Conforto and I are knee-jerk heterosexuals.

It was his shoulders, you see, which led to our disaster.

This is not a criticism of Mike Conforto. The only problem with his shoulders was that they were too strong.

When the rain came back harder than ever a mile into the trip, Rich Berkau noticed copious debris floating by, headed downstream faster than we were. Whole trees began to compete with us for the waves. Small animals screamed ashore. These were not good signs.

The river had gone to flood stage beneath us, and Rich realized we were much further downstream than he had thought. He began to hear the unmistakable roar of Boulder Drop, closer downstream than he wished. We came around a corner, and God! We were there.

Rich immediately cried, "Listen, guys, we need to get to the left bank as soon as we can. I need you to hit it really hard, got it? To the left bank, and step on it!"

The tone in Rich's voice told us our predicament. We'd been getting danger messages for the last half hour. We expected farmhouses to start floating by, terrified cows on the roof.

Hit it we did. The eight of us together could have done well in the Duke Kahanamoku Canoe Race in Hawaii. Unfortunately, Mike Conforto and his linebacker shoulders were on the left front of the boat. This means Mike Conforto and his shoulders were inexorably pushing us to the right, for on the other side of the boat were me and my decidedly non-linebacker shoulders.

To the right we veered, not reaching the left bank fast enough. We had traveled the last two miles in less than four minutes. We were being sucked into Boulder Drop--seven rookies, a sophomore and a guide who ten seconds later lost his rudder when our raft spun into a vortex.

The slow-motion camera clicked away as Mike Conforto and his shoulders were thrown out of the boat and into the raging Boulder Drop. He disappeared in the foam, then fought to the surface for breath. Given the depth of the emergency, and my non-linebacker shoulders, I am quite proud that I leaped over and got him back in the boat. Hey, I may be a goof, and the master of misadventure, but keep me around when the chips are down. I grabbed Mr. Magnificent by the webbing, and pulled him aboard. A couple of seconds more and Tracy Ruiz would not be a Conforto today.

We spun to the right around the biggest boulder on the left side of the channel and headed into a main strait leading to a three-foot waterfall, which at 13,000 cubic feet a second sounded like a little Niagara in a big bad mood.

One thought flashed through my mind. "This is the reward I give my physical therapist?"

Looking three yards ahead in terror, I saw a large rock submerged not six inches under the water. As the raft shot past the rock's peak, I grabbed for an upstream depression with my dangling foot, and caught it! We came to a halt, the river ripping by along the raft.

"What is that?" Rich screamed from the back.

"I've got a foothold!" I screamed in reply.

"Hold it. We're evacuating!" With that, he took the ship's stern-line, and leaping onto the giant boulder beside us, tied the rope to the base of a small tree growing out the granite top. Alice and Trudy, Bob and Ted, and my physical therapist and her husband were more than happy to join him.

The top three and a half feet of the rock was completely exposed. It was momentarily a magic island for us; we weren't going to be thrown any farther into Boulder Drop. We were secure, though still fifty feet from shore with a flood-enraged river screaming around us.

The other ZigZag boats had witnessed our disaster, and safely reached the left bank. They now threw us two lines, put people on rocks downstream to catch us, and yelled for us to jump into the water and pull ourselves hand-over-hand along the lines to shore.

"Jump into that water? You're crazy," screamed Alice and Trudy, Bob and Ted. The idea of this trip had been to meet people, not die with them.

"Gotta happen," yelled Rich. "Come on, it's really not that bad on this side of the boulder. The channel next to shore is always that way. Let's go. You're first, Bob and Ted. Then Alice and Trudy. Go! Go!"

Rich knew he couldn't let us think about what we were doing. My crew mates did great; all right, Alice and Trudy were horrified, but they got to shore really fast because of the fear.

My physical therapist and her husband, who had been cool throughout the saga, each grabbed hold of the lifelines and dove into the water. Before a count of three, they were standing in shallow water on their way to a towel. It was a classic rescue done right.

Rich and I were alone on the boulder; he smiled at me.

“You know, MacDonald, this is all your fault. First Charity Mountain, then the fall on Rainier. You are jinxed. But I love you.” With that, he dove into the water and pulled himself to safety.

Because I was the heaviest, I was the last to leave. I tied the two lines around my wrists, and dove into the water. Before I had traveled twenty-five feet downstream, I was pulled ashore like an oversized steelhead.

Thank you, Jesus!

Saved! Redeemed again by the Grace of God! The angels sang, and the Big Voice in the Sky probably intoned, ‘Go and sin no more;’ but was I listening?

Did I turn sensible and hence stay out of the Skykomish? Did I see that river rafting and I are like a vinegar martini straight up with a bad olive?

Nah!

Take up a safer hobby? Macramé, maybe, or canning fruit for winter? Stay home and make the world a safer place?

What, and miss all that fun?

Life is too short to let a brush with death scare you into stopping. Do you want to sit inside while the rivers run white, and the rafters celebrate? I think not.

Berkau and I were on the water together again soon, and for years thereafter. We tried to get smarter, but this has its limits. Humans are human. Mother Nature always exacts an admission price.

Axiom number one in the Art of Misadventure Handbook: “Indulge your wild side and your dumber self will surely show up.”

The Spring thaw of 1986 sent a surge for thrills, bringing us once more to the glorious Skykomish. This time (we'll call it 'The Message from God') saw Rich Berkau leading a boat crewed by me, my friend Steve Sarkowsky, and one of Rich's fellow salesman at Arrow Electric, Bob Cummins, a black guy who couldn't swim.

Rich had married in the years since our first misadventure on the Sky. Marriage means you need a more substantial income than that earned guiding rivers. Rich had become a salesman, and a damned good one.

I digress.

Wait, Terry, you think, four guys is too small a crew for a standard river raft! There wouldn't be enough weight! You are right, of course! We would, however, be in the river with eight full boats from the ZigZag River Runners, including two full-size oar-boats captained by talented, experienced river men.

Oar-boats are a lot safer than standard paddle-rafts, because the sweep radius of the big oars gives you so much more control. Colorado River rafting boats are oar-boats. You can challenge some really big water with an oar-boat, if you are crazy enough to try.

Saturday. May 10, 1986.

The eagles along the Sky huddled beneath their shoulder feathers, waiting out the rain. They were late making that year's journey to the fishing waters of the North. They would soon go; Nature called. Certainly they and the salmon,

above all others, could understand: We were impelled to return to the river! It was an inborn thing.

The eagles shook themselves in disgust. Any fish in the river shared a cold, communal laugh.

We put in below the fish hatchery in a mild downpour. Déjà vu!

Rich gave his obligatory safety lecture, this time with less embellishment and muscle flexing because there were no women onboard. What, he should show off for guys? Not!

We were off!

The river...high. The scenery...magnificent. Yeah, yeah, yeah. We looked good in black rubber. We were young and strong, and gave the impression of being a well-schooled rowing machine. Image is everything. Our brains? Sorry you asked.

Ninety minutes into our journey, the eight ZigZag boats, the two oar boats, and our chronically undermanned raft pulled over to the right bank to view the daunting Boulder Drop. I crawled up on a huge boulder with my pal Steve Sarkowsky. As we got on top of the rock, lightning, thunder, and hail rained down on us.

Steve took one look and asked, "Think it's an omen?"

"Nah," I answered.

A few words about Steve Sarkowsky. I met him at the original Seattle Seahawk public address audition, which he ran and I won. Steve is one of the best pure basketball shooters I've ever seen. He's a lifelong rich kid trying to

make it as a live drummer. Today, he is running a blues club in order to have a place to play.

Steve's a funny guy with a good heart. Receding hairline, dark features, all angles and lines. An athlete who has battled Tourette Syndrome since he was a boy. Once his high school basketball coach said to his team, 'You guys understand what I'm saying? Hell, even a Jew like Sarkowsky can understand what I'm saying!'

Yes, Virginia, some Nazis even coached high school basketball. It was a good place to take out their frustrations.

Steve's Dad, Herman Sarkowsky, built an empire constructing homes in the '50s, started the Portland Trailblazers basketball franchise with two friends, and was the original managing general partner of the NFL's Seattle Seahawks. Steve's mother is Faye Sarkowsky, along with the late Mary Gates one of the all-time shining public spirits in Seattle philanthropy.

As he grew, Steve found it intimidating and frustrating being the son of Herman and Faye Sarkowsky. After college, people interviewing him for jobs would tell him he didn't need the work because he was rich. The Lucky Sperm Club. Those kinds of jokes. Not funny to Steve.

Standing on top of that boulder, though, wondering if a hail storm of Biblical proportions was sign enough to surrender, we laughed, full of ourselves. Much like Noah's neighbors: "It's only water. It'll be over soon."

Rich Berkau joined us on the rock, and muttered something to himself that sounded vaguely Latin. (All of these portents, and not a level head in the house. Could it be rubber suits cut off circulation to the brain?)

“What do you think, Rich?” One of the oar-boat captains asked our fearless leader.

“I wouldn’t want to get stuck in either one of those standing waves down there. Get into one of those bastards, and it’ll wash your jeans ‘til suppertime. You’ll be on permanent spin cycle. Other than that, it looks pretty cool.”

At this, sirens should have gone off in our minds! ‘Other than that, it looks pretty cool?’ Phew! Other than the initial blast and the radiation, atomic testing is pretty cool. Other than the taste, liver and onions is pretty cool. Other than the lack of breath, asphyxiation is pretty cool.

The sirens must have gotten water-logged. We all agreed when the oar-boat captain next said:

“Tell you what--we’ll take both the oar-boats down through there. Over the falls, swing over to the far left, and tie-off on a couple of security points. Just follow our line, and you’ll be fine. If you dip it, we’ll get you.”

Yeah. There you go. If we dip it, they’ll get us. Perfect. Oh for a working siren dehumidifier!

As the seconds ticked by, we should have seen clearly that rubber suits and cold water combine to form a chemical reaction that saps you stupid.

“Tell you what, Rich,” one of the ZigZag paddle-raft guides said to Berkau, “once they get the oar-boats set, why don’t you go down through there first to see if it’s safe. Your crew is a lot more experienced than any of these other people.”

“Good idea,” Rich agreed. Custer had a similar reaction just before he went down into the valley of the Little Bighorn. Nixon liked that taping idea. Caesar went up the Forum steps.

The first oar-boat swung out into the current, and aimed for a three-foot-wide by four-foot-high waterfall a third of the way from the right bank. This would take him right of a dangerous standing wave in the middle of the river.

The falls was not a straight drop, but a foaming forty-five degree chute; it was probably roaring over the top of a submerged boulder. The ride was like being spit forward by the raging Sky.

After navigating this first obstacle, the captain pulled hard left and pushed hard right. His boat turned immediately left, perpendicular to the current. With several strong thrusts, he made it to the left bank, turning a one-eighty to back into an eddy behind an upstream rock. His two passengers immediately tied the stern-line around a tree beside the stream. Security point one--established. The captain stood up, waved his arms, pointed to the route and flashed the victory sign.

At least, it looked like a victory sign.

The second oar-boat followed the exact path, but when it got close to the first, swung downstream and tied off twenty yards below. Their position guarded the entrance to the more dangerous second standing-wave. Here the entire

channel was one continuous churning loop. A body washing into this hydraulic cauldron might get out in the middle of the coming summer.

“Let’s get to it,” Rich enthused, jumping off the promontory boulder. Like lemmings, we followed him.

Sure, let’s get to it. What could go wrong? We were a too small crew in a too big boat riding the river of death with Almighty God above warning us for all He was worth.

“Go back, you fool mortals!” Lightning bolt. “What’s your hurry?” Hailstones the size of small lemons. “Haven’t you heard the one about not tempting Me?” Thunder across the Heavens. The river roared its approval of His premise. “You want I should swallow them, Lord?” Glug, glug, roar, roar!

“You hear anything?” Steve Sarkowsky asked Rich Berkau. Members of the Tribe like Sarkowsky have always been more sensitive to the portents of the all powerful Jehovah. This is why fewer of the Chosen People choose to go down to the white water in boats. Ingrained, ancestral common sense.

“Nah, it’s just the storm,” Berkau answered. Northern Italians have nearly bred out the common-sense-when-confronting-adventure gene.

“Yeah, let’s hit it!” I enthused. We of Scottish blood have lost all sense when it comes to getting cold, wet, and facing mortality. The ancestral coat of arms, when translated, reads: ‘Let’s do anything frigid, wild, and catastrophic.’ Somewhere in my deepest primitive memory, a small voice was probably saying, ‘Too bad we can’t play a round of golf in conditions like this.’ Or,

'So what if the English have a thousand horses and armor! Let's take 'em with spears and bows!'

Bob Cummins, the black guy who couldn't swim, was saying to himself, 'I can't swim! Why am I goin' down there?' His level of common sense approached Steve Sarkowsky's, but they held their fears in check. Both were overcome by that ultimate joke of a God who loves a good laugh: Macho, testosterone-soaked stupidity. 'Yeah, here we go! Let's show this river a thing or two!'

The Sky roared in delight as we pushed the raft out into its rage. Thirteen-thousand cubic feet a second it laughed! Haha! It had us now. All we could do was hope it would let us go after having its fun.

Steve was on the front left, Bob on the front right. I was back right, with Rich running a feeble rudder in the mid-stern.

"O.K., as soon as we're over the falls, we have to do a really hard turn left! Got it?" We barely heard Berkau's screams over the oncoming disaster. We simply nodded, and stared down the maddening deluge right at an onrushing mortality looking to swallow us. "We need to go straight across the fall line of the river, right at that first oar boat! Here we go!"

The raft buckled as we shot into the maw of the four-foot waterfall. The roar of the river was deafening. It seemed to guzzle us alive. We were in the wave, part of the wave, at the mercy of the wave. Then we were falling. I looked over Steve's head, a good two feet below me, and saw boulders downstream that we were hoping to miss with a quick left turn.

As we crashed into the river at the bottom of the falls, the raft actually bent like a book trying to close. For a short moment, as the Sky screamed hungrily, Steve and Bob were the vessel's only engine. Rich and I were completely out of touch with the water, staring straight ahead into the bottom of the boat. It was like riding the retracting blade of a Swiss army knife being slammed shut by a disgusted, sodden Swiss soldier wondering why the Hell he was in the Army. Switzerland is pacifist, for God's sake!

As the Skykomish River pulled the raft into a whirlpool, we briefly regained control. We were over the falls! We turned hard left! We'd done it! I raised my oar in premature victory.

I say premature victory because we were quickly confronted by the reason for the oar-boat captain's earlier 'victory sign.' It was not a victory sign at all, but a warning. Unseen from above, a ferocious standing-wave rose like a demonic dash in the middle of our path. Whereas the torque from the oar-boat was able to pull around it, we were not going to be so lucky.

We were thrown right across it. Then we were simply thrown, like a helpless leaf in the rain, like wet scrap-paper in the wind. Our lack of weight, and even greater lack of sense, was about to try and kill us, drag us under, drown us like rats jumping off the Titanic.

Somewhere in the Heavens, a ghost-ship's band played 'Nearer My God to Thee' in dirge time as our ill-fated raft tilted onto its upstream side and flew over our heads.

A slow countdown to doom began to play as the four of us splashed into the diabolical Skykomish.

One.

I had been on the back right of the raft. As the boat flipped, I was tossed over Rich and into the flood. My glasses were ripped off, and I was blinded by slashing current. Other doomed flotsam streamed by at hypersonic speed. Adrenaline raced ice-cold terror to my heart. Terror won.

Going over, I had reached behind me and grabbed the retaining line encircling the boat. The river roared angrily at my feeble attempts to survive; I was convinced it couldn't tear the raft free of my grip.

Sputtering, I came to the surface before the count of two. The oar-boat was right there, ready for the rescue! They grabbed me and hauled me aboard.

"Let go of the raft!" they screamed. "Let go of the raft! If there's someone under there, you're drowning them. You've got to let the second oar-boat get them! Let go of the raft!"

It seemed totally illogical that I should let go of the security of that retaining line, but I reluctantly released it. I was safe! I was saved! Thank you, Jesus!

Immediately, the adrenaline and the cold hit my extremities not covered by rubber. My hands nearly exploded in pain and shock. It felt as if my heart was pumping iced razor blades into my fingers.

I looked downstream and didn't see any of my three shipmates. The thought zoomed through my mind that if I had just killed Herman Sarkowsky's

only son, he would have well-paid assassins follow me to the ends of the Earth to exact retribution.

Two.

Rich saw the standing-wave before any of us, and had a split-second longer to ponder his coming death. He was going to miss chewing-tobacco, garlic butter, and wine. His wife's fine young breasts. Mmmm...oops, no time for that now. Over we went!

Rich, too, immediately lost his glasses, but gained an albatross. Bob, unable to swim, was over him nearly as fast as the river. In a flash, Bob had Rich's neck in a death-grip. If he was going to drown, he was determined to go down with the captain. Very nautical.

Evidently, Bob had seen somewhere that the dead float, because he was doing his best to strangle his friend Rich. Then he'd get to the surface, wouldn't he?

Rich ripped at Bob's grip and kicked his legs frantically. Miraculously, just after my flash about Herman Sarkowsky's paid assassins, the thrashing Gemini-twins surfaced and were plucked into the second rescue boat.

Bob still would not let go of Rich's neck. It became a retributive move. 'We didn't drown! Now, I'm going to kill you!'

Three.

Steve had been on the front left. Now he was stuck under the boat, and couldn't get out. He tried to push the boat away and escape downstream, but the

raft rushed down on him. He tried to swim upstream to escape on the other side, but the raft pushed him back. The damn thing was about to knock him out!

At that moment, I was pulled from the river, but had yet to release the raft. Arrested, it bounced violently off Steve's head until he blacked out. Somehow, he stayed under the boat, but didn't sink. Coming to, he tried to fight his way out the side toward the rescue boat, but once again was knocked senseless by rampaging rubber.

Meanwhile, the rescue boats and the pounding raft were being drawn toward the giant standing-wave downstream, which if reached guaranteed my premonition about the hordes of Herman Sarkowsky. If Steve got into that wave, we could kiss his poor soggy butt good-bye.

Fortunately, the captain of the second rescue boat now decided it was time to play the old shell game. 'I think the drowning man is under....this one.' Picking up the front-end of the overturned boat, he immediately spied, then plucked Steve from the river by his hair.

The Skykomish screamed in frustration.

We had landed our last fish less than ten feet upstream from the monster hydraulic wave.

We screamed in pained ecstasy over our deliverance. We were saved to raft another day. At least Rich and I were.

It would be another lifetime before Bob Cummins would get into a river again.

And Steve?

He eventually overcame his sheer terror of river rafting. Nearly two years later, he took a placid inner-tube down flat-water on the lower Rogue River in Oregon.

But for six months following his near-death on the River Sky, Steve Sarkowsky couldn't take a shower without breaking into a sweat.

How could you ask for more fun than that?



**“Eagle” by Caroline MacDonald
Oils with palette knife.**



**“River Sky”
By Terry MacDonald
Oils with palette
knife.**