

american whitewater

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- Cover Photo: The cover photo is Steve Barnard (the stranger Davison Collins Met after the incident, see Blackness on Bald Rock, page 04 in the March/April 1999 magazine. Photo by Davison Collins. Left inset from the Palguine. Photo by John Moran Right inset photo Dick Bertran at Hydro on the Watauga by Julie Keller©



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youngsters the basics... how to ferry, catch eddies, and surf holes. Before you know it, the kids are trying to teach mom and dad to cartwheel. That's always good for a laugh.

Most of these kids get good fast. And when kids get good at something, it makes them feel good about themselves. I knew a kid who tried hard but never made the honor roll or an all-star team. But, she turned into a really hot boater. Whitewater worked miracles for her confidence and self-esteem.

Quite often by the time whitewater kids are 15 or 16 they are better than their parents are. This doesn't seem to bother most parents; their pride in their children dwarfs their own egos. Of course, the kids love to see mom and dad take an occasional aquatic trashing. What kid wouldn't? But when the parents accept these whitewater misadventures good-naturedly, their kids learn a lot about vulnerability and good sportsmanship.

For better or worse, some parents are determined to turn their kids into world class athletes. I have reservations about that. I don't think a parent should project his or her own unrealized fantasies on a child, unless, by some happy coincidence, that child truly shares the dream. That having been said, the odds that a kid will rise to the top in competitive whitewater, be it in racing, hair boating or rodeo, are surely a lot better than for other more traditional sports, such as track, basketball, or football. There are fifty million parents out there who pray that their sons will step into Bret Favre's shoes. There just aren't that many dreaming that their daughters will inherit Cathy Hearn's booties! A committed kid who works hard is far more likely to make it to a world championship in a kayak than on ice skates or snow skis.

For one thing, kids don't have to be big to excel in whitewater. That certainly isn't true for many sports. Whitewater is about ability, not size. Another plus to whitewater is that boating kids rarely sustain serious spinal injuries... the kinds that cripple hundreds of high school athletes every year. Although many people perceive whitewater recreation to be dangerous, there have been very few fatalities involving minors. Ask Charlie Walbridge if you don't believe me. And kids who develop an interest in whitewater can realistically hope to continue to pursue it throughout their adult lives. How many fifty-year-olds do you know who still do gymnastics, twirl batons, or play football? But I'll bet you know plenty of fifty-year-old boaters. Lots of them are damned good! Some of them are teaching their grandchildren to boat.

Whitewater boating teaches kids a lot about responsibility. Whitewater kids quickly learn that shuttles must be set, boats must be loaded, and that you have to look out for other people on the river. They learn what it is like to be, to some degree, responsible for the safety of others. I know several 16 and 17 year olds that cruise into Friendsville alone

on hot summer days, looking for companions to paddle the Upper Yough. The regulars know who they are and they are always welcome because they are fun to be around, are self-reliant, and they know how to act. During the drive to the put-in they listen to our Bob Dylan tapes. Later, while running shuttle, we listen to their Wallflowers CDs. I'm sure this happens on rivers all over the country.

When kids paddle whitewater they learn to stay cool when things get tense and they learn how to get themselves out of trouble. They learn that sometimes it is appropriate to challenge their fears and that sometimes it is better to walk away. They learn to make their own decisions and to set limits for themselves. And they learn not to whine when they are cold, wet, and hungry.

Involvement in whitewater can also teach kids the value of money. Whitewater gear is moderately priced. Really. Not so expensive as to be out of reach, but expensive enough to encourage kids to take care of their gear, especially if they have to help buy it. I know several teens that desperately wanted a new rodeo or creek boat. They were the children of teachers, doctors, and lawyers. Sure, their parents could have bought those boats, but, wisely, they didn't. They let the kids work for them. Hey, you are bound to appreciate that

Mr. Clean more if you had to flip a few hundred thousand burgers to get it!

All things considered, there are lots of good reasons why we at American Whitewater think whitewater and kids go together. That is why we have been publishing more and more stories by and about young boaters, including our Kidzcorner section. We want to do everything we can to attract youngsters to the sport. After all, paddling with kids can be a lot of fun. They keep the sport fresh. More importantly, when we encourage youngsters to appreciate the magic and beauty of whitewater, we are helping to create the river stewards of tomorrow.

Bob Gedekoh

Correction!

The Most Beautiful Angel in July/August American Whitewater was written by Chuck McHenry. His name was mistakenly left off the credits. We are sorry for any inconvenience or embarrassment this may have caused.

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The Most Beautiful Angel

I had suspected that this would be a first descent. I'd read no reports on this creek, and the villagers at the put-in had never seen a kayak. The best *topo* map I could find showed altitude lines of 100 meters, which was too large a scale to be anything better than sketchy. However, it looked like a manageable descent. I'd done a lot of other creeks in the region and while they'd had their share of Class V, they'd all been doable. Mostly they averaged in the 60-meter per click range. This one seemed no different except for a kilo-long canyon, with straight vertical walls. It would have been great to have scouted via airplane but I didn't have the cash. I figured I could do it, though. It was an approximation, but I reckoned it only dropped about 50 meters—quite a bit less gradient than the rest of the creek.

I would have liked to have had a companion, but my partner at the mission didn't know a paddle from an oar, and we were situated so deep in the boonies that it was rare we even saw anyone other than the native Indians. So there I was, soloing an unnamed creek, and digging the whole scene in the middle of the jungle.

I'd just set up my video camera to record my run of this really fine 30-footer into a deep pool when out of the blue this kayak came boofing over the edge without so much as scouting it. He did a perfect 45-degree entry—no spinal compression, no deep dive bouncing off the bottom. I doubt he even got water in his eyes.

When "he" paddled up to me I noticed right away that it wasn't a "he" at all. She gave me a great big smile and a howdy-do.

"Where in hell did you come from?" I asked incredulously as I gazed into deep, violet-black eyes.

"I've been working in the uplands, just upstream from here," she replied. "I'm kind of a nurse . . . you hear about the cholera outbreak on the VaChama Rancheros? Damn, it's horrible, and I'm smack dab in the middle of it. I had to take a few days off, get away and boat my favorite river before I lost my mind. It's getting really depressing up there. We ran completely out of medical supplies a few weeks ago and we couldn't get anymore. There's just simply nothing left for me to do at this point. Most have already died, and those who haven't, don't need my services."

"Wow, sounds terrible," I sympathized. "So you've done this creek before," I asked, wanting to change the subject.

"Sure, quite a few times," she laughed, as a little "first descent" sign in my brainsprouted wings and flew away.

"Did you arrange a shuttle?" I asked.

"Never worry about it. I usually find a way to get to where I'm going, I know a lot of people."

"Well, you can share my shuttle," I offered. "I've got a driver going to meet me at the take-out tomorrow and I wouldn't mind tagging along with someone who knows the river."

"You got a deal," she replied. "Let's go."

The next few hours were extraordinary. I'd never seen anyone paddle as well as she did, and she had the lines cold. On the rare occasions we scouted, mostly for my sake. She'd go ahead and do the rapid to demonstrate the line and then get out to set up safety for me. I can't say it helped my ego much. I'd always thought of myself as an upper echelon boater. Back in the states it was usually me doing the lead and looking out for everyone else . . . but that's how it goes. You get to thinking you're really hot, and along comes someone who just blows your doors off and plants you right back in reality.

We ate lunch on a large flat rock, in the shade of the jungle canopy. Up river roared the tail end of an extended Class V+ that I had scouted, gotten dry-in-the-mouth, knee-shaking nervous, and walked. She had pulled off the most inspiring run I think I've ever seen. The rapid started with a must-make 10 foot drop that you had to boof to literally fall into a one boat eddy on river right. From there the river raced down a 40 foot slide, angled about 45 degrees, all pouring violently into an undercut wall on river right.

She did a perfect boof and then popped out of that eddy paddling like mad, trying to ferry left as she entered the slide. The current was too strong and it became obvious that she was going to get sucked into the undercut. She continued her ferry, pointing slightly upstream, and left as the stern of her boat actually disappeared under the ledge. She rode 10 or 15 meters like this, back to the wall, as her bow slowly rose higher and her stern was sucked deeper into the undercut. Suddenly she did a purposeful upstream flip

while reaching out with her paddle to catch downstream current. Holding her breath, she rode the next 10 meters under the ledge, got spit out at the bottom and rolled up. Her only comment was: "Shoot! I have to do that every time. Just once I'd like to run that rapid upright!"

I had just stood there with my mouth gaping. It had been, bar-none, the most intimidating run I'd ever seen in my life and she acted like it was nothing.

During the rest of lunch I soon discovered that she'd not only been boating most of her life, but she'd also missed very few countries in the world. She was multilingual, and seemed to be on friendly terms with the locals wherever she went. She spoke animatedly about her favorite rivers—some of which I'd never heard of. I was so fascinated that I was a bit disappointed when it was time to hit the river again.

For the rest of the day I was in boating heaven, and all my cylinders were firing. We were on a warm, isolated, jungle creek and the rapids were all Class IV. With her in the lead, scouting was unnecessary. We just did a lot of eddy-hopping, surfing and playing down long, continuous boulder gardens. Big lizards sunned themselves on boulders while monkeys chattered from the trees. Sloths were everywhere, and we often startled groups of parrots, sending them squawking and flapping away. The stinging flies that had bothered me so much in the morning were gone. There even seemed to be a cool breeze blowing downstream; how could it get any better?

By late afternoon we came to the start of the gorge. All I could see was a horizon line beyond which steep, perfectly smooth perpendicular walls rose up on either side of the river. I got out of my boat and peered over the edge. I threw a few rocks in the pool and it looked deep enough, but even still I was considering roping my boat down when I heard her come up beside me.

"This is an easy 40-footer into a deep pool. All you have to do is punch out just a little so you don't get caught in the backwash and you'll be ok. Just below is a perfect campsite where we can spend the night."

I really liked the way she said "we." It was either the thought of us camping together or the horizon line in front of me, but some hormone was pumping. I was stoked. For the



first time all day I went first, solely on her advice. I went right down the middle, popped that final big stroke on the power side, buried my paddle in the current to control my angle of flight and totally screwed up. My paddle hit a rock on the lip and I literally fell over the edge. I crashed into the water 40 feet below with a thud, face stinging from the slap. The current escorted me to the bottom of the where I was then introduced to various rocks and debris. My paddle was ripped from my hands and I bounced along through the blackness for far too long. I pulled my rip cord and bailed out almost too late. My lungs were bursting.

The next thing I remembered I was laying in blessed sunlight! I was in the pool, lazily floating with various gear strewn all about. My boat was doing rodeo in the falls until it blew an airbag, sunk and came up downstream. I only barely looked up in time to see her fly.

She was an angel, silhouetted in the evening sun; her boat seemed to drift down through the spray, well beyond the waterfall. Her near side paddle swept through the air in a perfect arc, the spray catching the setting sunlight to form a very distinct rainbow, which literally followed her down to the water. She landed softly, surrounded by all this color and spray. She popped up immediately and laughed with her pleasure. She helped

me round up my gear and pulled me onto a sandy shore, nestled against the cliff walls, next to the pool. I couldn't help but notice that we were in a cauldron. There was no way out without full climbing gear. We were now committed to running the canyon.

"What will we be facing tomorrow?" I asked trying not to betray my nervousness, looking pensively down the narrow gorge, hearing the roar it made as it dropped down and disappeared around an un-scoutable corner.

"Not much actually," she said. "Two Class V's and all the rest III and IV. After what you did today, you won't have any trouble with it."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

She had me stow the dry food I'd brought. She had a steak large enough to share, and two bottles of vino from Chile. Once out of her gear I could see she was absolutely stunning. I know it's a cliché but I actually pinched myself.

The steaks were medium rare, the wine at its peak from a very good year. The sun was setting and the stars were already starting to pierce the royal blue blanket of the deepening sky. An ominous rumble, barely audible, reverberated from somewhere far up river, a jungle squall too far away to deserve even a second's attention. How could I possibly have noticed? I was entranced. She was talking

about her favorite rapids on the Gaulley: Lost Paddle, Insignificant, and the cool surfing wave above Initiation. On the Ocoee she liked Diamond splitter and Grumpy's . . . Maze on the Russell Fork . . . Crack in the Rock on the Chatooga . . . Home Sweet Jesus on the Lower Meadow.

I'm not familiar with that many western rivers, but I remember her saying she liked Sunshine in the Royal Gorge, and Pine Creek. She reeled off rapids on the American and the Crystal, and several Washington and Idaho rivers.

Then she mentioned paddling the S. Fork of the Payette with Walt . . .

I've never been accused of being fast on the uptake, but at this point something began to click; my other brain cell started firing.

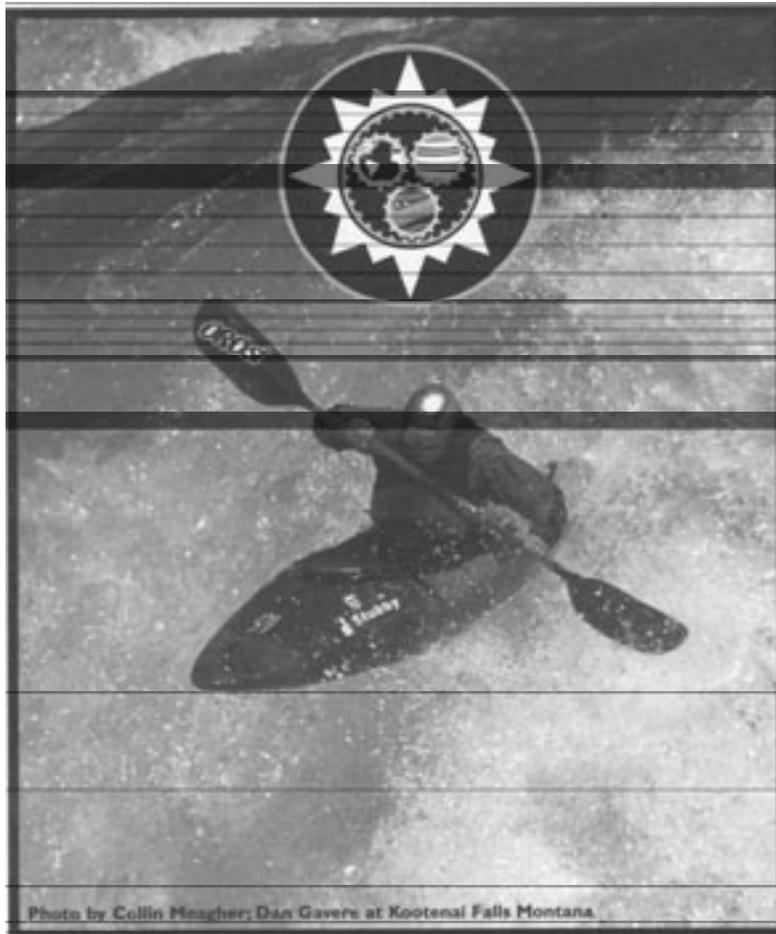
"That was a long time ago. How old are you?"

"That's not a question you ask a lady," she giggled, almost coyly, "but I'm much older than I look." (There was that rumble from up river again.)

I was beginning to see that all of her favorite rapids had one thing in common . . .

"Have you ever done Niagara Falls?" I asked with a grimace.

"Only once, with a C-1er. That silly boy wasn't even wearing a life jacket," she replied



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Photo by Collin Maagher; Dan Gavers at Kootenai Falls Montana



laughing, eyes sparkling with nostalgic spark.

There was a whirling, sucking vacuum of blackness in my mind. I felt faint and dizzy and I don't know where it came from but I just blurted out "You paddle like an angel."

She laughed again and looking at me sideways said, "Before daddy kicked me out of the house, he used to call me his most beautiful angel."

The rumble up river again, slightly louder.

I was weak, my brain felt liked it had popped. I was thinking in fifty directions at once and there was that damn rumble again.

"Do you know what that rumbling is?" I asked.

"Of course, it's a cloudburst," She replied vibrantly. "The water will reach here by the morning. It's going to be really exciting tomorrow!" She tossed her hair back in her joy and giggled.

"What happens down there?" I asked, pointing downstream into the gorge.

"Ooooooh, Class VI," she said with a frown, "unboatable . . . all that water in this tiny canyon. You don't even want to start thinking about what 5 meters of water is going to do in there."

"What are we going to do?" I asked, "we can't climb out of here!"

"Oh, I'll probably get a good trashing tomorrow, but I know I'll be able to paddle out," she said, looking at me with just a hint of pity,

"but I don't think you're going to be able to manage it"

I stared at her for long moments. My brain just didn't want to believe what she'd just said. "The most beautiful angel," I thought to myself. "For god's sake, I'm a missionary. Why can't I remember my bible? Michael? St. Peter? Gabriel?" Then it came to me.

"You ever meet a guy named Ezekial?" I asked.

"Now there's an old fogey if I ever met one," she said. "You can't imagine some of the awful things that old lecher wanted me to do."

As she was saying this it was like the moon shifted in its orbit just a split second and showed her face in a different light. I saw an unguarded, indescribable expression. There was hopelessness, despair, and terror. And then a moment later she was all smiles and sweetness again, and nothing seemed to matter, and all these impressions just seemed to melt away, and they just didn't seem important anymore. The only residual effect was a faint smell of sulfur on the wind and goose bumps on a warm jungle night.

I looked across the campfire, into those deep, velvet eyes. She raised her wineglass in a toast and then suddenly pouted. "Oh, you're going to have trouble sleeping tonight, aren't you? You know I can help you. I can make the night pass quickly. I can make you forget

about everything — and I can do it all night."

I looked up river as the thunder peeled again. This time I could see a tiny sliver of sky illuminate. I thought of her offer and found myself fighting the urge to accept it. "Wouldn't that be called consorting," I asked.

She laughed that vibrant, heavenly laugh, tipped her glass to me, then sipped wine with luscious, delicate lips. "You're trapped in one dilly of a philosophical corner now aren't you?" she said. "I can tell you that I have absolutely no reason to lie to you, and that it's not consorting, but would you allow yourself to believe me?"

She was right — it was a pointless question.

"You lured me into this didn't you?" I asked.

"No, that's not how it works." She replied. "If I hadn't come along, would you have done anything differently? All I did was show up at the right time to boat with you. Plus, if I remember right, it was you who wanted to boat with me"

I thought about it. She was right. I'd planned before to camp at the head of the gorge. If she hadn't come along I probably would have camped on this very spot.

"I can't directly intervene or make decisions," She said. "I can't make anyone do anything they don't want to do. And even if I could, there wouldn't be any point to it.

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Rick Gusic's latest film, "Silent Thunder: The Legend of Team C" is rolling across the country, and the accolades are pouring in:

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Sometimes, however, I make the things people wouldn't normally do become very, very attractive. That's kind of my job. It's really the artistry that makes it all so interesting don't you agree?"

"Okay, I understand that. So far I've been totally accountable for everything I've done but what happens tomorrow? Can you help me?" Despite my best effort, my voice was trembling. "If I'm swimming, can I accept a tow to shore? If you offer me your hand or a rope, can I take it?" I almost pleaded.

"Of course you can. We're partners on this river and I'll do everything humanly possible to help you. You may have some awful, pre-conceived ideas about me and how I operate, but I wouldn't just let you drown! But, of course, you just asked another pointless question with an answer you won't allow yourself to believe?" she said, laughing again. She paused a moment, looking conspiratorially serious, as if she was letting me in on a little secret that only we could share. "We both know that I can totally save you. I can arrange it so that you paddle out of this gorge feeling downwind of daisies — but it involves certain obligations."

"So if you save me, I'm going to owe you quite a bit, aren't I?"

"That's the way daddy says it has to work," she replied, her eyes sparkling with pleasant, happy, all-is-well joy. "But you're really a nice guy. I just deep-down hope it doesn't come to that."

So now I sit at the campfire, staring across it at the most alluring woman I've ever seen. Lightening intensifies and the smell of warm jungle rain is in the air. I can't help but imagine how she'll look wet. Looking downriver the lightening flashes and illuminates the gaping maw of the gorge. Looking at her smile, at those eyes I get so lost in, at the wine on her lips, admiring every breath that she takes, I see her laugh and open the second bottle of wine, and refill my glass.

I think of tomorrow and how this little patch of sand will disappear under the rising river. I think of my mortal destiny coming tomorrow in the shape of a 5-meter wall of water. I think of how I'll get into my boat to face a gorge I can't possibly survive. I think of things at the mission that won't get done. I think of the shuttle driver who will wonder what happened. I think of how the wine is in my head and why I'm trying to convince myself that consorting isn't that serious a sin. Mostly I think of her. She IS the most beautiful angel, and she can make the night pass quickly . . .

As If It Were Nothing

Come on...

laughing and having fun

I want to see you

run some waterfalls

for me

while I ride

this little wave

I want to see you

coming

over the edge

flying

through the air

wet and glistening

in the sun

while I ride

this little wave

an eighteen or twenty foot

drop will do

on the river

and rushing

it's all up to you

I want to see you

splash down

and go deep

all the way under

and come

back up again

smiling

as if it were

nothing,

nothing at all.

Amanda Selvy,
Oak Ridge, Tennessee

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