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Essay #2: Writing Place

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River of No Return

More often than not, I would find myself sitting upon a large stone at the bed of the Salmon River with my sketchbook and pencils. Sometimes it was simply to relax and beat the summer heat while other times it was to take a break and get away from whatever has me worried or in a depressed mood. From my spot, I could sit and listen to nature’s call and if I were to somehow fall in, that section of the river was calm enough for me to swim to safety. I would sketch the scenery or whatever caught my eye as the wind blew through my long, curly brown hair and I listen to the rushing waters, the chirps of songbirds and Mountain Bluebirds, and the cries of Falcons, Vultures, and Bald Eagles. Sometimes I’d even catch sight of a hummingbird as it would go about the honeysuckles and sego lily.

Over many years, the river has carried rafts and boats and swept them away with no point of them returning once they reached the canyon ever since the first settlers arrived, earning its name as the River of No Return. There were even a few unfortunate souls that ended up in a shallow end or their bodies never recovered, never to be seen again. Yet I was not afraid to be swept away, as I would dip my feet into the river, the icy chill a striking contrast against the rays of the summer sun.

The majority of the river is surrounded by tall trees of Douglas Fir with rough, dark brown bark and prickly moss green needles. Those that rested close to or on the bed would end up standing through heavy murky waters from snow that had melted from the mountains during the spring. There were even a few times where the waters would rise high enough to reach and flood any of the homes that were built beside it. At a few different points, one can come across the sheer canyon walls that will shadow the river. The earthly tones of brown and tan overlap one another, creating a stone smoothed down by erosion. Some spots making holes for birds, such as Cliff Swallows, to dwell and nest without fear of the thieving fox and egg snatchers at the shores below. Rapids of blue and white roar by, turning against the riverbed, flowing north and through the land almost like a snake with its scales that glistened from the sun’s rays.

During the late summer season, it became the ideal time to go whitewater rafting. It was quite possibly the biggest attraction for tourists, the locals even more so. I would always get excited whenever my family planned a rafting trip and I would practically bounce about like a playful dog, even when the time came that I had to get a life vest on for safety reasons. It was an easy trip in which everyone aboard the large inflated raft will talk about and enjoy each other’s company. Whenever we got to a slow-moving break, it became the ideal time to jump in and swim, sometimes catching a glimpse at the salmon and trout that migrated through the waters. And throughout the trip, there was a good chance of catching a glimpse of various wildlife that would stroll by the river, mostly cattle, but there would be moose and whitetail deer every once in a while. It also made a great time for bird watchers to catch sight of migrating birds that would come by such as Great Blue Herons, Killdeers, Spotted Sandpipers, and Kingfishers.

It was also around this time of the season when the local teens took part in spending time at the river, which was jumping off the bridge and diving into the river. It certainly seemed like fun, at least from I can tell as no one got seriously hurt as far as I knew, but I never took part of it myself. For one thing, I was a bit cautious around others during this time and didn’t think it was a good idea as I feared that there might be a chance that things won’t end well. For another, my mom absolutely forbide me and my siblings to even attempt it unless we wanted to be grounded until we were thirty. She was always precautious when it came to our safety around the river and made as wear our life jackets whenever to took a trip or just went out to swim. I always found it a bit annoying as a kid, but it wasn’t until later that I learned that someone she knew as a teen had broken their arm one jump while an adult had been swept away and found dead a few days later. Either way, I never took my chances and stayed on the safe side.

Strangely enough, as a kid, I imagined that the river would be a great story teller. When I learned that it was formed sometime around a billion years ago, I thought it might tell what sort of creatures or travelers came by its waters. It could tell about the natives that lived by its shores and the explores that came through, such as the Nez Percé, Lewis and Clark, Sacajawea, or Theodore Roosevelt. My child mind would ask all about those people of long ago and want to know about all the tales and if they were true. After a few years, I would probably have asked the river about the lives that were lost within its waters; who they were, how they died, and what happened to their remains. It would have been a good chance that I wouldn’t like the answers, but at the same time I would want to know. Perhaps if the river spoke, it would guide the victims safely through its waters or at the very least guided others to where the bodies were so that the unfortunate ones could find rest.

I was with Ian, who was my best friend since fourth grade and knew how easily I tended to worry about things, the last time I was by the river. It was only a few days after we graduated from high school, still on our high of freedom from the confines of public school, but not as wild or amped up as our fellow graduates, whom would party almost like there was no tomorrow. We were sitting at one of the picnic tables stationed beside the river as we played cards when my mind began to wander to the move taking place in two days. I wondered if this new town had a roaring clearwater river like the one we were sitting beside at this moment. I wondered if the waters there would be clear with salmon and trout swimming through its streams or if it was tarnished by pollution and industry. Were there any canyons and Douglas fir beside it, or even rolling green hills and mountains? Would the town be quiet and quaint or too loud and modern? Now that I wondered, would there be any sort of sign of nature or was the entire area completely industrial with tall buildings and concrete?

It was strange to think that this wouldn’t be home for much longer; it felt wrong. No other place could ever catch the feeling of home for me. No other place could capture the beauty of a simplistic little town in surrounded by life of all sizes. No other place would hold precious memories shared between friends and family or even have the same comfortable atmosphere as home.

Luckily, I was able to snap out of my thoughts and calm my worries thanks in part to the river. I’m not sure why, but it always had that effect on me. It was as if it was washing away my worries and it allowed me to take a moment to relax. The river was calm, yet powerful. It can roar like a lion and slam large pieces of wood against stone to be smashed into pieces, yet it could also be the gentle rocking of a mother with her precious baby in her arms. It can race across canyons and mountains, but also glide slowly through valleys and meadows. It was the calm before the storm.

And for that moment, I did relax. I was able to bring myself back to the present and focus my attention back onto my best friend and our card game, which I was quickly losing at. We didn’t have much time left together, but it was best to make it count. To have another memory that would be looked back on and cherished.