In the summer of 2021, I had messaged Ben, one of my brother's friends and asked if he was willing to teach me how to whitewater kayak. He was a fan of teaching people the sport and within minutes a message showed up on my phone screen, “Yes!”. Later that week we went to a local whitewater park where I practiced my rolls, paddling and balance in the calm waters of Quinn’s Pond. After two sessions spent in the blazing heat sweating in neoprene he decided I was ready for the Class III rapids of the Upper Main of the Payette river. At this point I had fully absorbed that kayaking was dangerous, but I never thought it would have a ripple effect throughout my life for years to come.

We loaded up the boats in the bed of his white Ford pick up, I squeezed my way into my swimsuit, farmer jane and stuffed my hair under a hat. We made our way out to Horseshoe Bend then past it where the treeline meets the Payette. I rolled down my window and was enjoying the fresh pine air, but it did next to nothing to calm my nerves as the river I was about to paddle accompanied us along our drive roaring just below the road to my left. I peered down at the rapids hungrily swallowing up massive boulders and racing around the river’s turns. I thought about how suffocating it was to find myself upside down, blind and without a chance for air in the still waters of the pond and how desperately I didn’t want to experience that in the frigid and chaotic churning of the Payette.

Eventually the heavy tires of the truck crunched to a slow halt over the gravelly parking lot at Banks. I felt my pulse increase as I got dressed- each item bringing me closer to my first run on a real rapid. It was sweltering under all the layers of neoprene, the baggy fabric of my splash guard and the thick padding of my helmet, but I wasn’t sure if all my sweating was more attributable to my anxiety or the summer heat. I sat on the stern of my Dagger Vertigo and shaded myself under a nearby pine while I waited for Ben, twirling the handle of my paddle against my thighs in an effort to ground myself by a simple physical sensation. It wasn't long before we had dragged our boats to the river bank, squeezed ourselves into our respective cockpits and stretched the brims of our spray skirts around their edges.

We paddled across a small class 1 rapid to get to an eddy near a small bank where Ben practiced some rolls and talked to me about the river and what to expect. He told me to follow his lines and to wear my nose plugs as we went over the rapids to make the experience of potentially swimming more pleasant. We left the eddy, and as the current swept my kayak faster and faster downstream I thought to myself “there’s no quitting now, the only way out is to make it down this entire river” I focused on that thought, anxious but determined to make it through this run with everything I had. We quickly approached the first rapid- Go Left, a rapid named by the local river guides because if you didn’t go left you would get fired as the line to the right was exceptionally more dangerous. Ben got to the tongue of the rapid and he paddled ahead of me. As we got to the crest, I remember being stunned by the sheer drop of the river and the massive waves that were to meet us at the end. I descended into the rapid and paddled like hell to avoid the massive boulder and subsequent “hole” to the right of my kayak. I felt like the river could swallow me whole with one single misstep. Once I slid past the boulder I was met with massive waves that crashed wildly and seemingly unsystematically against the sides of my kayak, sometimes burying the entire boat for brief moments at a time while I paddled hard to stay upright. The water was incredibly loud as it crashed over and all around me. Eventually I pushed through the last of the wave train and felt a rush unlike anything else. I was afraid, but I liked the fear. I liked the way the river made me feel small, I liked facing something so massive and making it through. I felt so much closer to nature than I ever had.

With my newly gained albeit unfounded confidence we pressed through several more rapids until we got to one called Mike’s Hole. A rapid before it was called Mike’s Mouth and I was told they were named as such because “Mike’s mouth chews you up and Mike’s Hole spits you out”. As is probably evident by now, the names of rapids usually aren’t chosen to offer the paddler any assurances. As we approached the top of Mike’s Hole, Ben told me that it was very important to follow his line or I would get flipped behind a boulder and stuck in the infamous hole below it. At this point I have neglected to mention that Ben was 6’3” and a very experienced paddler. By contrast I am 5’2” and the kayak I was in was borrowed from Ben’s collection. He had given me his Jackson Zen, a high volume creeker boat that sacrificed agility for stability. Ben was in his small blunt Jackson Fun, a lower volume playboat he intentionally bought a size too small to achieve maximum maneuverability. He took a line down the tongue of the rapid that shot straight towards the hole, but carved away from it right at the last second. I watched him as he pressed through with agility and skill. I felt my heart pounding as my kayak tipped over the plunge. I attempted the same line, but was unable to get my boat to turn abruptly as he had done, very quickly I realized I was not going to make the turn and I was headed straight for the very hole I was specifically warned not to fall into. The water in a hole is turbulent and highly aerated and paddling through them is challenging because your paddle cannot get enough drag against the water making it a technical feat to try and get out of it. I struggled against the rapid as my boat rocked wildly. Suddenly I felt a sense that it wasn’t going to be long before I went over. I already had very little faith in my ability to roll myself back up let alone in cold turbulent water. I realized that my best bet for rescue was to alert Ben, who was paddling downstream ahead of me, that I was going under before I lost the chance. I remember yelling “Ben!” and trying not to be concerned by the look of fear in his eyes as he saw me and quickly began to paddle upstream to prepare for a potential rescue. I managed to take in a new breath before going under.

The water was rocking my body violently as I tried to keep control of my paddle and press it to the left side of my boat to attempt a roll. I straightened my arms and tried my roll as I had practiced, but I was disoriented and I could feel my boat swirling above the surface of the water and taking my lower body with me. I had failed. I repositioned myself, reattempted and failed again. I went to plan b, and surrendered my paddle to the river and bent forward to feel for the little black handle at the far end of the cockpit that was keeping my legs and torso stuck inside my plastic prison. I opened my eyes and all I could see was a wall of white foam. I knew that the vacuum effect of the sealed cockpit would help me eject quickly and that my pfd would send me right to the surface as it had done during my practice at the whitewater park.The kayak released and too floated somewhere downstream, but I did not resurface. Instead I was quickly drug down deeper into the hole. I panicked, this was not supposed to happen. I could feel my back being pressed hard against a boulder then I felt my body move down deeper still. I sensed a change of direction and felt my body suddenly being pushed up, but held somewhere just below the surface. I attempted to orient myself in order to swim for air, but I was sucked down again in the same pattern as before. I was being recirculated. With every cycle I could feel the lactic acid building in my blood and my heart beating harder and harder; I was running out of air.

I had limited knowledge of swift water self-rescue but I tried what few things I knew in an attempt to break the cycle. I swam down as hard as I could but again I was recirculated in the same pattern. I tried to relax my body completely but that only seemed to make it easier to stay in the loop. I knew that the last resort was to remove my pdf and consequently my helmet, but I was not ready because I knew that if that failed I would be in an even more fatal position than I currently was. I decided to try something else first. I knew the cycle by now and decided that the next time I felt my back press against the boulder I would give everything to try and press against it and swim as hard as I could in an attempt to get out of the hole. I waited through the second half of the brutal cycle and when it came time, I reached my hands behind me and placed my feet against the rock and lunged forward as hard as I could, my arms heavy from the lack of oxygen in my blood. I felt my legs finally level out with my body as I paddled: I had achieved my goal.

I greedily took in a large breath of air and swam against the current towards Ben. I had located and grabbed my kayak by the handles, noting that the pads had been ripped out of place and were dangling outside of the cockpit. I pressed against the current clinging to my kayak until I reached the stern of Ben’s boat. Now holding myself between my both kayaks I was waiting for Ben to pull me to the side of the river, but my heart sank when he yelled over his shoulder that we were headed over another rapid. I held on tight and focused on keeping my feet at the surface of the water to avoid being sucked down or getting a foot stuck between some rocks. I choked on the waves, but was happy to be getting any oxygen at all. Eventually we made it to the side of a river where I could sit on a rock and truly catch my breath. Ben looked at me and said he had never seen anyone get recirculated in Mike’s Hole and that he was terrified. But he sprinkled in that I now earned the right to do the Brown Claw, a symbol of comradery amongst kayakers. He asked me how I felt, I was euphoric. I remembered thinking in the rapid that I might die that day and I had thought to myself that I wished I had spent my short life differently. I remember wishing I had painted more and spent more time with loved ones. I wished I had stopped worrying about doing everything the “right way” and focused on doing things my way instead. It was a gift to be flooded with all of these realizations that day on the river. It reshaped how I viewed my entire life and as a recovering perfectionist it inspires me to try and squeeze every bit of authenticity and enjoyment out of life, even if it means my path has some bumps and bends in the road. I am happy to say I made it back on that river 2 days later.