

The Adventures of a Yellow Tube (and the Girl Who Lost It)

by Annie Krug
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A couple of weeks ago, I went "tubing" for the first (and maybe last) time. Let me paint the serene pre-tubing picture for you: My best friend Tania and I are on the last day of a 4-day stint in Colorado during a girl's road trip, staying at my uncle's house in downtown Boulder. It is a breezy summer day and, after a few nice hours of kayaking and swimming in the Boulder reservoir with my cousins Gino and Joe, we are on our way back to the house. I am still feeling the lull of the soft wakes stirred up by motorboats when someone suggests that we go tubing. Reflecting on my earlier roadside glimpse of inner tubers lazing down the river, I decide it would be a relaxing end to an active day. I'm game.

The guy renting inner tubes by the roadside looks like the Colorado equivalent of a native San Diego surfer. Laid-back in cargo shorts and flip-flops and with a dog sleeping at his feet, he collects our cash and gives us seven pages of disclaimers to sign. (Surely, this is a little much for such a leisurely ride! I think.) He then leaps to the busywork of blowing up our "pro tubes" (which are a racy yellow, not to be confused with the black oblong tubes that Gino insists are crap. "All the people that I've seen make it were in those yellow tubes," he says. Make it?).

With our tubes, the four of us start our walk down to the river. Every ten feet or so, Gino (who, at this point, is still my favorite cousin) looks back at Tania and I and says, meaningfully, "I can't believe you guys are doing this." Thinking that he's trying to psyche me out (and being familiar with this boy tactic, growing up as a tomboy), I respond with a sarcastic smile that suggests I'm not buying it and that I'm ready for my champagne-brunch of a river ride.

We get in the water. I don't know how cold it is, but I have swum in colder ocean water, so I'm not deterred. Not exactly sure how to approach the tube, I fall back into it until my butt is vacuum-sucked into the hole in the middle. Okay. I'm set. As I'm shoving off, I have a clear view of Tania being taken by the river current and then-is that a 4-foot drop down rocky rapids? Yes it is. And that's also an empty tube. Before I can think, an odd shape excites my peripheral vision. One of Tania's flip-flops is floating in the water beside me. I reach for it, but now the current has me and I'm hurtling through the water, making my way rapidly to that first drop.

There are people lounging on the riverbanks-college students mostly- drinking beers, the young women in bikinis of carefully subdued colors, the young men looking like they just stepped out of an Eagles concert in the early seventies. They barely blink as I glide by. But out of the air I hear someone say, as a half-bored afterthought, "Keep your butt up." This advice comes just at the moment of no return, and I quickly lean back in the tube as it goes down the drop. I make it. As I circle in the whitewater, I think, I can do this. No problem.

By this time, Tania is back in her tube and the boys are down the river ahead of us. All of a sudden I'm no longer in the current, but slowly floating toward the riverbank. Okay, so I probably don't look like a local. Just as I had seen, before I left San Diego, a man in the ocean wearing a full wetsuit, goggles and flippers bodyboarding as I swam in my two-piece a few yards from him, and chuckled at the unnecessary paraphernalia. But he seemed to be having fun, so in the way of a true Californian, I thought, "It's all good."

I am hoping to receive this same altruistic response from the Boulder locals at the sight of me using my flip-flops to row myself back into the path of the current. Sure I look like an idiot. But when am I ever going to be here, doing this, again? Besides, I count on the fact that if I see any of these people again, people look far different wet than they do dry. A life by the beach has taught me that. That and the fact that you can't tame water; you can only keep your head protected. And, as I'm now learning, your butt up.

I'm in the current again, and floating speedily towards the second of what I now realize is a series of boulder-clad drops. I relax, remembering that as long as I lean back and keep my butt up, I'm good as gold. Attempting this position, I go down the second drop. Immediately, I feel the tube slip from beneath me and see swirling water above me. After a surprisingly long time under water, I surface only to find that the chasm between my tube and me is increasing by the second. And I'm still moving. Fast. I turn my attention from the tube behind me and look ahead. A third drop, no more than 20 feet away. Desperately, I try to brace my legs against rocks the way a birthing mother braces herself while pushing. But I'm not finding a stronghold against the current, and I realize that I'm going down this next drop "commando."

Without the tube, the drop is quicker. Perhaps because my well-hydrated skin glides faster over moss-covered boulders than yellow plastic does. At this point, I catch the attention of some of the college students on the riverbank. No longer do they seem bored, as the sight of my white legs thrust vertically in the air must have awakened their interest. "Ooohhh." I hear someone say, a wince in their voice. I'm down the drop, but my momentum is up and I'm just getting started. The current has me and won't let up. As I hit boulders at top speed with my knees, shins, and elbows, I realize why Gino was amazed that I had agreed to do this. With what little consciousness I have left, I am wondering the same thing. That and who Gino's runner-up is for the position of my favorite cousin.

My tube! It appears miraculously beside me, as my body gouges it's way along the river bottom. I grab it and wriggle into it only long enough to hit the third drop, this one with an almost cabaret-like feel to it, swirling in a horizontal pattern. Once again, I'm shot out of my tube. By now, I have given up on directing my own fate and am now at the mercy of the river. On the heels of this realization arrives another: I'm not moving. The current has released me from its cruel 12-year-old schoolyard bully grip! I stand up and see that my knee is bleeding, the skin ribboned as if it had been whipped. "I'm too old for this. I'm almost thirty! I don't have to prove anything to anyone," I say, partially kidding and partially out of tired realization, exiting the water.

Like war veterans, Tania and I (now wet and bloody) make our way down the riverside on foot, to meet the boys. Coming out of the water, they cheerfully assure us that after that last drop (the one that almost resulted in my short-term memory loss), it was a smooth ride. So that's what I had glimpsed when I saw tubers floating by the roadside: the aftermath of the river of death. Those tubers probably looked calm because they were unconscious.

Gino catches a glimpse of my knee. "Whoa Annie, that looks gnarly." The tomboy kicks in, and I reply, "It's not bad. That was fun!" And, oddly enough, it was fun. Besides, had I seen what I was in for before we went, I may not have gone. And, to be honest, I'm proud that I at least tried it. Like life (and here's the moral, kids), I had a few ungraceful falls, and maybe I didn't completely master it. But I still did it.

By now, tubeless and almost to our car, we meet a group of teenage girls with rented tubes. One of the girls asks us, "How is it?" I look at these skinny girls and wonder how much more it would hurt to do what I did without all the built-in padding. But I also know that if I scare them, I will be cheating them out of a worthwhile adventure. So, giving them my biggest and warmest smile, I say, "Keep your butt up."