There seemed to be a change in the air as I arrived at work. A calm breeze was blowing. Something was different. What was it? Labor Day had passed and the guests were gone. That was it. It was becoming fall outside. What a wonderful time of the year when the tourists are no longer here. It was 8:05 in the morning and time for briefing. Everyone gathered in the conference room and the boss came in. He had a particular smile on his face which was strange because he didn’t smile a lot. His first words were “Hey it’s September, everyone is gone, it is time to think about our annual trip to Cataract Canyon. Permits secured, we briefly discussed that morning that we were allowed to bring 16 people with us, however, one of the rangers was required to stay behind to hold down the fort. One of the rangers had been down Cataract so many times, so he said, “You guys have fun and I will stay behind.”

With the 16 chosen, we prepared for the trip. This included boats, groceries, beer, and other assorted goodies that we brought along. It was the middle of the month by now, and we were ready to head down. Everyone took off in separate vehicles to meet at Potash boat ramp, just outside of Moab, Utah. Truck by truck, car by car people began to arrive. Everyone was having a good time, as much as you can at Potash. One porta potty over flowed with crap, but we didn’t mind, we were about to be floating down the river. From Moab to Lake Powell was about 100 miles and we planned it in nine days with two layovers. Additional trucks arrived. For sixteen people, we didn’t know how many cars there would be, except that everyone said they would be there on time. Kicked back in the falling sun, sipping beers, those there first had their boats unloaded, partially inflated, waiting for the rest of the crew because each car had different supplies. This truck had this, that truck had that, and everything needed to be dispersed. Our coolers packed and frozen with dry ice, we had good food, lots of food. Not much happened that evening, as we fought away the black flies that were really, really big. The ones that would bite off your \*\*\*\* when peeing!

Excited for the trip, we decided to get some sleep. The fire that we had made that evening and the smoke that came off of it, helped to keep down the ferocious appetite of the flies. Tents didn’t help they knew how to get in, and then you were stuck with them. Some of us slept under the stars that evening. It was already late, waiting for the first light to come. Some of us got a bit of sleep, the best we could, excited for the trip that was about to happen.

Morning came, and we were greeted by a strong breeze blowing up the river. The flies couldn’t be found. They were hunkered down trying to stay out of the wind. Breakfast was quick that morning as we didn’t have the stove out, we ate what we could, dry food. Everyone was busy loading up boats, carrying coolers, dry boxes, and this one here this one there. We had it figured out, except for the one who was carrying the groover. Ours was advanced, of course the original was an army rectangular ammunition can with sharp edges around the top where a make shift lid would be on. That was the toilet back in the early days. Groovers don’t typically smell, at least the new ones. Whoever was carrying the groover was in charge of setting it up and breaking it down and bringing it back into the boat. The person in charge of groover duties was not in charge of kitchen duties and everyone was happy because setting up the toilet is not the most pleasant experience, especially on day one. They also had the duty of making sure it had a view of the river.

Boats inflated, gear packed away we were ready to push off. It was high noon when we pushed off, the wind had suddenly stopped. The water was calm but cold. The air was warm, the sun was shining. Everyone just floated at their own pace, not really caring what the other boats were doing. This was the ugliest part of the trip, the banks of tamarisk, where the trees lined the river, sucking water at tremendous amounts. Of course the tamarisk is an introduced species meant to keep the banks together, however they have gotten out of control and invaded the western states. We didn’t mind, it was still beautiful. Canyon walls beyond the tamarisk weren’t that high at this point, but they were still beautiful to look at. We arrived at camp around 5 o’clock. Everyone knew their duties but others gathered fire wood. The got the chairs out and were sipping beer and cocktails while joints were being passed around.  
 Tents set up, elaborate kitchen with a large griddle on a stand, a four burner stove, we had a cleaning system. Silverware nicely packed away. There was a menu for every evening, coolers marked to ensure we were cooking the right stuff. Back then we really didn’t have any of those “vegetarian people”, we ate meat. Dinner cooking, sun still shining on us, an elf\*came out of the tent ringing the dinner bell. *(\* the elf was a typo. It should have said “someone”. John and I laughed so hard about it and debated whether to keep the elf as part of the story).* Everyone was hungry at the time and wolfed it down. Clean up happened, nightfall was upon us, and we slept quietly under the stars. There were ten guys and six girls on the trip.

Morning came, everything was packed, and we took off on day two. The water was still flat at this time, but not for long. On day two we reached the confluence with the green river. The cliffs were high now, possibly 800 feet. The green added quite a bit of volume to the flow of the river. There was also a mandatory sign in box near the river on the right, where you logged your trip and selected what campsites you were using. We spent about half hour selecting all of our camp sites, as the other boats just floated by us. Once done, we pushed off again, still flat water but soon there would be rapids. Day two came and went, day three came and went.

We planned two layover days where we would set up and stay the entire next day at the campsite. We picked days that would coincide hikes up the cliffs where we could see the Anasazi, granaries, petroglyphs, and some other beautiful rock formations. Some people went this away, some went that way, as some decided to stay and camp. The layover day was a fun day, we had a massive beach the size of two football fields, with the softest sand you could find anywhere. Later that afternoon, we all got together and had a football match.  
 The particular beach we were playing on was big and wide, however, if we got too close to the edge it was about a ten foot drop. I remember the other team running the ball around the corner close to the edge of the drop off. Someone hit that player hard and over he went, plunging into the freezing water. We laughed as he swam to shore, no life jacket, no safety gear, but, we still laughed. Again, it was camaraderie around the camp fire, a bottle was going around, people were in their own frame of mind as you saw 1 2 3 sneak away and come back.  
 Everyone snuck away because everyone had their own stash of \* to last the whole trip, and no-one was sharing. Mushrooms abounded though, daily, nightly, bags of mushrooms. We had an AA meeting then and no-one came. Hahahaha!  
 We had a fun day later, everyone rested. We packed again on day five and continued down the river. Now we were on the rapids, the water pounding on the boat, the oarsmen directing the craft like it belonged on that water. Rapid after rapid, everybody had clean runs.

The grading of the river was becoming steeper as the Colorado cut deeper into the canyons. More rocks were appearing in the river, rapids growing in size. We pulled over again, after a successful day. Everybody was getting out of their wet suits and enjoying the sun as it was still above the canyon walls. But not for long, as the canyon walls were growing well over a thousand feet. The river was narrowing as it continued to cut and deepen. Again, meals were cooked, delicious steaks were on the grill that evening, and the groover was set up. It always has to be set up at a location that overlooks the river. The guys and I in my boat went out searching for the perfect location. Sometimes the groover would be visual but we would usually find a boulder to stick it behind for a little bit of privacy. This was fancy, square, aluminum and had a rubber gasket. We broke it open and caught a whiff of that great scent, six days of poop. We made sure it was clean and that there were plenty of Hand wipes, heavy duty ones!  
 We walked back to camp, waiting for dinner, and set up the signal that notified a person if there was someone at the groover already. Typically it was some kind of rocks and something from camp. Every night there was a different meaning. Like “Hey, there is a bucket with rocks on the right hand side. When you walk past the groover, you move it to the left side.”  
 The groover team cleaned and disinfected themselves, mainly their hands and arms, even though they were wearing heavy duty rubber gloves when they opened the toilet for the evening. Of course there was a quick rush of girls heading for the groover.   
 Dinner was served and everyone was happy again, tired from running the rapids, and those who weren’t running were tired from holding the boat down.  
 We pushed off on day eight knowing what was ahead of us, some of the biggest, most difficult rapids in Cataract Canyon.  
At this time we were deep into the Cataract, the name chosen a long time ago by other boaters.  
 Throughout the trip we would be bop with other trips, knowing they were going here and we were going there. However, after a number of days, a motor boat would come by us and we would see them below us and then would come by us. We had reached the fiercest rapid in Cataract known as the Big Drops. We could scalp our paths through the carnage of this rapid. We stood on this large lift side, plenty of room for everyone to comfortably sit or stand as we looked down at the torrent of “Big Drop One”.  
 Everyone that was going to oar it had picked their path, and one by one, we watched from the cliff to ensure they made it through. First and second made it safely through, all boats safely through. The big drops were a gnarl of boulders scattered across the river, every shape and size with no real clear pathway. It would take the maneuverability of the boat men and their skill to avoid those holes in the river, the hole is just a big drop. Some you run for fun and some you avoid at all costs. Some holes would flip a 16 foot boat without even thinking. Those are the ones you do not want to go into.  
 Big Drop Two is extremely technical. With truck sized boulders scattered in a pattern that made no sense. Again the first boat took off, maneuvering, working to avoid these big gnarly rocks. Waves were pounding the whole way through with most waves breaking high over the bow of the boat. That’s why you have bow monkeys, which is someone in front holding on, and when the boat hits the water to wave, they time it right so that their body weight pushes forward to give the boat an extra charge. Everyone cleared .We eddied out again to Big Drop Three, the biggest one. Sitting up at the side of the cliff, each boat and their people contemplated how to get through.  
 Suddenly, in the distance, we heard a noise that sounded like an airplane. As we came closer we began to realize that it was not an airplane, it was that motor boat. We were unsure of this boat which had a guide steering from the rear and an older couple sitting up front.  
 We never really spoke to them, but having numerous rangers with us we began to put things together that this was an illegal commercial boating trip. We had talked about it over camp the last few nights, understanding that we would make contact with them and try to get names and information so we could report it to the National Park Service. That’s the way the rangers were there were no ifs ands or buts about it, they followed the law even though we were in a different state. Of course, the rangers had their guns on in a way that you would never see, packed away and inaccessible.  
 At the top of the rapid, the motor boat became lodged on a large boulder. They were stuck and they were fucked.  
 We watched from approximately 25 feet above the river as they bounced the three of them back and forth trying to dislodge. After 15 minutes we were yelling, “Hey you are going to start having to throw gear out of you boat the start lightening it. The old guy didn’t really like that suggestion as they continued to bounce back and forth getting nowhere. There were only three people on each side and their boat looked like it weighed a ton.  
 So the rangers decided to work their way down the side cliff to the river’s edge carrying their throw bags with them. Typically you only have 60 feet of rope, and they were further than that. Tying two throw bags together, we attempted to throw it to their boat and possibly help push and pull them off. First toss we missed; second toss we came up short as the head boatman leaned over and tried to reach the ropes. Attempt after attempt it failed we gave up it wasn’t going to work. Even as we threw the ropes upstream the current would wash them in different directions. Shrugging our shoulders, we climbed up the cliff where everyone was waiting, again we had to tell them they would have to start throwing stuff down the river. The lady finally agreed.

Dry bags, coolers, and a huge wooden box which carried their spare box was thrown into the river. The older man that wasn’t on the trip with us, with his wife, was in the back of the boat furthest from us. We watched him as he was trying to get something that he was going to throw over. It was weird but he had straddled the tube of the boat as he reached inside trying to dislodge something. The next thing we knew, he was gone, sucked under the river. Piercing cries echoed off the walls of the canyon as the girls screamed, “He is going to die he is going to die!”  
 The rear of the boat rushed to the back, as the husband held on to the rope that encompassed the boat. At this point, we could not really see the husband because of the angle the boat was at. The girls were in panic, screaming “I can’t watch this anymore, he is going to die!”

We thought he was already dead. We couldn’t see a body below the boat, so we began to realize that he must be holding on to something. Some of us moved to a position to move to a better angle, and we could see the gentlemen in the water not in the best physical shape. He was going under the water and then being pulled back above and then under and then back above into the rocks below, definitely a place you don’t want to be, a place we felt he could to make it through. There were many holes and rocks below that you did not want to swim into. Again, the eerie echo of screams bounced off the canyon walls.  
 We had one kayaker with us. He decided that he would launch and see if he could be of any assistance. He was a strong young man. He took off, by himself, on another path that was leading him directly to the boat. Now, understand, he didn’t have a kayak paddle, only big webbed gloves. He paddled while underestimating the power of the water. The kayak got swept right past the boat into the jumble of rocks below.

Since he was an expert kayaker, we weren’t too worried as he paddled down and made it down to the bottom on Big Drop Three. He pulled up into the eddy and there was a lot of gear. One of the pieces of stuff he found floating was an old time camcorder, and he began shooting footage of what was happening above.  
 Approx. eight minutes have gone by, while this gentleman fought for his life hanging onto a rope. Miraculously, somehow the man responsible for the trip found the way to pull the husband back into the boat. Sighs of relief overcame everybody.

Now, yes, he was tired, exhausted, and back in the boat. We weren’t sure if he was actually alive. And then we saw his wife move to the back and shake him and we saw him move. Now they were still stuck on the rock, most gear thrown in, we decided to launch boats. We were thinking of trying to ram it and possibly knock it off the rock. The first raft took off and completely missed the boat. Finally it was dislodged by another motor boat and we were ready to continue our trip.

We knew that there were no major rapids below where we were. So we were somewhat comfortable allowing them to continue with the motor they had which was still working, along with any equipment we were able to salvage out of the eddy. This included the dry bags and a couple of food bags and they had some safety equipment also. As they were packing their boat up with this gear, we continued to just enjoy ourselves on that beach. When their boat pulled out of the eddy, we thought that would be the last time we saw these people because they were probably going to motor out and were going to spend the night. So we decided just to camp on the beach where we were. Our beach was a few miles downstream and everyone was getting worked up over the whole scenario.  
 We broke camp, went through the chores setting up the kitchen the groovers, the fire place, and the tents (including some large tents to protect everyone from the sun, especially those in the kitchen). Little tents began to pop up all over the beach. The girls disappeared into their tents, as groups. They were partying and laughing in there so we knew they were okay regarding the incident and no immediate trauma from the incident.

The beach we were at offered some hiking, and most of the guys took off for a hike. Of course the kitchen crew had to stay behind to prepare dinner. That night I believe we were having spaghetti and meat balls and a salad with bread, and they cooked a cake in the oven. Plus we had to get rid of food, we were almost done. So we knew we had at least two and a half hours to hike before dinner was ready so we started climbing up the cliffs. Once we got high enough we saw an Anasazi granary hidden on the rocks. We began to climb up the cliff and when we got to a certain height on the side of the cliff was Maize granary. These are along the Grand Canyon and there were food cases where they storedtheir corn high up on a cliff. They were so high it was baffling how the Anasazi could have even gotten up to the top to reach these granaries!  
 We glanced at our watches and decided it was time to slowly work our way back to camp. We wanted to relax a bit and have a cold one. We couldn’t wait to eat some spaghetti and meat balls not out of a can. No ketchup was there, but there was tomato sauce (inside joke about ketchup on noodles).  
 So dinner turned out perfectly. Others chipped in and helped clean up. We used a traditional three bucket wash in the kitchen. The first bucket was water and it would take the plates and all the dinnerware that was still dirty and it would get rough cleaned in there and you have all the floaters in there. So you want your plate cleaned off with all the gunk. The section bucket was the disinfecting bucket and that was where we did the final good wash to make sure the plates were clean and disinfected. Then we did the third final rinse. We stacked them, let them dry, and packed a few things away but we knew we would need them for breakfast in the morning and they’re ready to use in the morning.  
 After breakfast we loaded the boats, but we didn’t really do a good job so it was all thrown in and not even tied down. We worked our way to our last campsite just below Diamond Creek. That is the official take out for the Grand Canyon trip. It’s very rough road getting up and down.  
 We were at our last camp, everybody was celebrating that we hadn’t run out of beer which is amazing on a trip like this.  
Our last meal for this trip was a simple one. It didn’t even entail using the full kitchen, it was more of a wet dry bowl of various vegetables that still looked edible with fruit and they were stir fried with some rice and nobody knew how it was going to taste but that’s what we had in the coolers. We had a mixture of food.  
 So sleeping that night, we knew that in the morning we would be floating through the obnoxious weed of tamarisk which lines the banks. We were looking for a little motor boat and little Jon boat that would probably sit six people with a pretty powerful engine. Everyone was searching. Sure enough after a while we found it. Inside the motor boat and another big cooler the company had given us unknown to us a bunch of ice cream. Very exciting. We packed up on our final morning just basically throwing stuff in the rafts because there were no rapids to contend with below us. Floating through the jungle of tamarisk the water sucking the plants, we began to look for our Jon boat that would pull us across the lake to the marina. We had five boats so we were comfortable. However when we found the Jon boat, someone needed to get in to keep the drive company. The tamarisk was so thick and the boat blending in with the vegetation made it difficult to spot. However after about an hour we found our boat. Everyone was happy because they were tired and were ready to get off the water. We still had a good bit of beer, smoke, and shrooms left, but that was about it. We were hoping that maybe something was put in the tow boat for us. Suddenly someone yelled, “There it is!” And the five boats plow in the tamarisk.

We knew who the designated driver for the boat would be and he jumped in and checked everything out and spotted the collar that was placed there by the company. Inside, packed in wonderful ice, was beer and ice cream. We took a break there to figure out how we were going to rig the five boats together and attach them to the tow boat so they wouldn’t interfere with the outboard engine. Once that was complete, it was time to start the engine and take off. It would be a slow pull across the lake, probably at least four hours and so everybody said we were ready to go. The captain of the tow boat pulled on the string of the engine and got nothing. Pulled again, pulled again. Still nothing. Pulled again pulled again pulled again, and a little puff of smoke came out of the exhaust. Most people weren’t paying attention to what was going on with the engine of the boat.

Everyone was sitting around and drinking their ice cold beer, commenting, “Wow this is really Ice Cold beer” repeating and repeating, yelling to each other. In the meantime the captain was still pulling in the engine that are thought could, lol and everyone was saying come on little engine you can to do it! Except to no avail.  
 We were able to get the cover off the engine to see what was going on. Well, the first thing we did was take the spark plug out, and it didn’t really look that good, but of course we didn’t have another spark plug. Probably a half hour has passed since the captain started trying to start the boat.

And, you know, he was using the technical terms of an engine, just so everybody understood, “Fuck this engine, son of a bitch it fucking won’t start! God damn it! Shit! “Someone said “fuck you!” I’m having a beer!” “Fuck you I’m having a beer.” Someone yells, “oh yeah having a beer that is going to start the engine for us.” He goes, “I am sorry, but I think we are fucked!” So a few more tries and it was agreed upon that this engine is not going to start. Riding the current out would have probably taken, or gotten us to the lake but we would have lost the current and been drifting aimlessly probably 14 hours away from the marina, so that wasn’t a good plan. Another plan was, well, we could just wait here and when people don’t get their boat back the next day.  
A bunch of people were saying “Hey, I have to get to work tomorrow I have shit to do I can’t just sit here hoping and waiting that another boat comes! So plan B didn’t seem to work. So then plan C came up by one individual.  
 “Hey, I’ll load up with water and food and I will kayak by myself to the marina. We were like “It’s a long ways are you sure?”  
 He said “Yeah I just need water and granola bars and I will be able to do it in like six or so hours”. We were out of choices so even though we didn’t think it was that safe, we loaded the kayak with supplies and sent them off. We watched them until we could no longer see him, and that’s where he entered the mouth of Lake Powell. So we knew that it was going to be a long way for him to bring another boat back, but what could we do. Hiking, not really, we had thousands of acres of tamarisk that we would have to bust through to get to the rock, so everybody was somewhat content, drank their beer, looked through their boats to see what they had for lunch, we still had a good bit of food so we weren’t worried about starving. We played games, sang songs, took dips in the 41 degree river, and waited. We knew what time he left, approximately how long it would take him, how hard he was paddling, what the wind was doing, and how long it would take to drive back. We figured he would be gone and we wouldn’t see him again for probably eight hours.  
 Some people were really bummed out that the other boat didn’t work, wanting to get off the water, stretch, go to the bathroom and the strenuous unpacking the boats, deflating the boats, rolling up the boats, loading the boats, and all the rest of the gear. After about three hours, we heard the faint noise of an outboard engine. We were not even considering it was ours.   
 We exclaimed, “That could not be our boat! It must be another boat for the group behind us!” But as the boat got closer and closer, there was our buddy, at the engine, steering it right towards us. He shows up, and of course we were very happy and somewhat very confused. We were like “How did you get back so quick?”  
 He said you know what, as soon as I broke into power there was a large 30 footer with a family and they rented it from the marina and they were going to stay for three or four nights and I explained the trouble we were having and how we were stuck.  
 He must have been the head of the larger boat, because he said “Hey! I’ll drive you back to the marina. And our friend said, you just left the marina and got this far! “He said “I am not going to leave to leave people stranded!”  
 “So we jumped in the big boat, tied the little boat to the back, and took off for the marina. This boat had engines and it was cruising. And in no time, we found ourselves at the marina. I wanted to give him some money but I didn’t have any so I thanked him profusely and of course they were very pleased to have been able to help us. So I went to the boat garage and told them what had happened to our little boat, and they were like, ‘Oh no! We just serviced that thing last night!’ and we said “no it was stuck and I need another boat right now.”  
 “So the owner of all the boats said ‘Okay, I don’t have a small one left like the one you rented, but I’ll give you this one instead.’ The boat he gave us had twice the engine power, so flying across power, he was back with us at no time at all.”  
 We thanked the guy and tied the rafts into the boat as we were going to tie them onto the broken one. Then off we went. This new boat certainly took hours off of the tow and soon we were back at the marina. Everybody was unloading onto the board walk, life vests off, some towels out, and people were drying off.

Everyone changed, everyone was working hard, and we were able to load the entire trip into the various vehicles we had, in a record time of an hour and a half. Taking some pictures of the group, saying our fare wells, everyone agreed that it was an awesome trip. We started the vehicles, we started heading back to Salida.

*Quote from John after finishing this last sentence on Feb 13, 2023…*

*“Do you think it will win the Pulitzer?”*

The End