

THE ROCK

15 August 2022—Hot. Excruciatingly hot. I'd been mowing the fields and weed-eating the stream and shoveling mulch, T-shirt and jeans and boots mud-splattered and weed-streaked, soaked and heavy with sweat, smelling like a stagnant farm pond of snapping turtles and tadpoles. I'd been raking and smoothing out the eight tons of new gravel on the driveway and spreading the two tons of fresh stone dust in the shed. I'd been hammering case-hardened nails through oak boards into brick-hard locust posts, preparing for the September 10th wedding of Eliza Whitman Smithwick and Jeremy Lee Windham here at Prospect Farm, and had driven the ten minutes over to Gunpowder Falls, hiked a mile down the trail alongside the river, turned myself around, as if to step down a long ladder, and, facing the steep bank, slide-stepped down the old blackened railroad stones, grabbing and clutching vines and branches.

Finally reaching the path—a gauntlet lined on both sides with long, wagging multiflora rose tentacles armed with vicious thorns, I beat back the multiflora rose with a stick, made my way to the rock.

My strength rock. My meditation rock. My at-one-with-the-universe rock: a promontory set in the bank with several large outcroppings around it where Paddy, Andrew and I used to come on summer days, leap into the fast-moving water.

Now, years later, I step on the most comfortable, least angular, surface of the hot rock. Hundreds of tiny scarlet ant-like insects suddenly appear, then scurry out of sight. I drop my towel onto the

surface. Carefully, crab-step down to the flattened, shield-like section that protrudes into the water. Ease myself off its mossy surface into the current. I dive. Surface. Dig into the onrushing current.

I'm doing the crawl, falling into a rhythm, up past the long, partially submerged, barkless log on which I had seen a four-foot, red-ringed water snake sunning itself last week. Keeping my legs straight, I kick hard.

The cold penetrates my outer layer of skin. Fingers tingle. Tips feel like frozen crystals. Feet—tingles in my toes. I pick up the pace, kick harder, stroke faster. Farther and farther up the river. Drift back to the tilted stone shield. Climb out. Very stiffly climb out. I am creaky. This is almost funny. What has happened? I used to scamper up this rock right behind the boys. Forty-one then. Seventy-one now. I'm glad no one is watching. I scuttle on hands and feet to the top of the rock.

Seated, I cross my legs. Close eyes. I am vibrating, shivering from the inside. The sounds of the river and trees and insects hum through my body. The skies are darkening, a wall of heavy leaden clouds is rolling in. My body is wildly awake, skin so cold it feels like it's burning. I'm enveloped in a layer of low-grade fiery skin while inside all of me is suddenly incredibly tight, tightening, cold. Fingers—blue. Feet—blue. Heart pumping, thumping. I sit still. A part of the rock, of the river, of the sky, of the trees.

Across the river and above the tree-lined bank, the sky is now one solid depthless backdrop of cobalt blue. It's late in the afternoon, the sun is low. There's just enough space, a long horizontal swath, under the blue backdrop and above the green of the trees, for the sun to angle its last flickering rays onto the water, the rock, me. My heart is walloping against the sides my ribcage. I stand. I am suddenly shocked and pay attention. Thw-WOMP – Thw-WOMP – Thw-WOMP ... For a second, I worry. Can it handle this? Will it explode? Have I overdone it? Could I suddenly be struck down, out here, on this rock, miles from anyone?

I stand and wait. It subsides. It settles.

WAR'S OVER, COME HOME

Andrew is all right. He is sending me thoughts. “I’m OK, Dad.” Each word rings clearly through the rippling and plashing of water, rustling of leaves, and *eeeking* of insects.

We’ve been receiving text messages from a retired law enforcement officer in the Southwest. He had spotted a tall homeless man pushing a bicycle and had been reminded of postings a few years ago on Facebook. He googled Missing Persons, found the Facebook Page, saw Paddy’s phone number, called Paddy.

“I was going for a walk one day, not far from where I live, and ran into his camp. He’d made a workout circuit and you could see the half-mile loop where he ran.”

He asked Paddy what he could talk to Andrew about. “Movies,” Paddy answered.

“OK, that’s good. I’d like to see if he needs any parts for the bike.



Andrew, August 2022.

We have a program in town for vets in a community bike shop. You can learn how to build your own bike. I'll ask him."

"Anything he really likes?" he asked Paddy. "Could I bring him something to eat? It looks like he has good gear, maybe he'd like some fresh socks and a washcloth? Or, a new set of panniers?" He sent Paddy a shot he'd taken of Andrew. Long sleeve high-visibility green T-shirt. Fully packed bicycle. Neatly trimmed beard. Ponytail! He's gained twenty to thirty pounds of muscle. I could see and feel his thickened chest and the heft of his biceps and arms through his T-shirt.

Soon, Paddy set us up on a conference call with our new-found ally. Ansley developed a good relationship with him, and now, just the other day, he sent us a video he took from his car of Andrew walking his bicycle, loaded with tent, sleeping bag and gear, down the road, closer and closer, then, for a split second, looking directly into the car before walking past.

Everything is going to be all right. Andrew is alive and physically healthy—robustly so. And what the hell, slow down this video. Yes—his eyes have a twinkle to them and isn't that the beginnings of a grin? It won't be long now.

Paddy and Graham drove out once, with their trail bikes, and searched. No luck.

Eliza and Jeremy flew out once and searched. No luck.

Patience. Must have patience. Soon, Ansley and I will fly out. We will search. We will have luck.

A long-beaked, angular great blue heron pushes off from the narrow beach alongside the rapids above me, tucks in his long legs. It rises effortlessly, gracefully, flaps its wings seemingly in slow motion, once, twice, then is up, on its flight path, swooping downriver ten feet off the water towards me, past me, and gliding downriver, with only a few beats of its wings, out of sight.



Andrew Smithwick as a five-year-old celebrating life and chasing seagulls on the beach of Chincoteague Island, Virginia.