

Sirena Van Schaik

Marguerite R. Dow Canadian Heritage Award

## *The River*

The sky, the rocks, the river—the world was gray, the same as my mood as I follow the family down the rocky terrain. We scramble over large boulders with sharp edges cutting my palms. The burlap sack itchy in my hands as I yank it over the terrain, banging it against my legs. “Be careful, Emma,” Anita says behind me, her long, dark black hair whipping around her face, obscuring the thick, coke-bottle glasses perched on her hawklike nose.

She looks at the river and I follow her gaze. Gray waters churn as white foam races along the surface before the river violently drags it down to its icy depths. The roar of the rapids fills my ears, a cacophony of violence reminding me of home. Shaking my head, I take a deep breath, my stepdad isn’t here, I didn’t need to think of him.

“Saved your life,” strong brown arms wrap around my waist and my heart flutters in my chest...less from fear and more from the teenage boy holding me. At 16, he’s 3 years older than me and his sister, Sarah. His hair, as black as his mother’s, hangs straight past his shoulders. His brown eyes laughing.

“Leave her alone, Jacob,” Sarah snaps, giving me an apologetic shrug. His arms linger around my waist, “Be careful like mom said...we don’t want to lose our little white girl,” he says before letting me go.

Leaning against the boulder, I watch them, feeling out of place with my blonde hair and blue eyes. A longing fills me. I want what they had—the easiness between them as they laugh and joke completely unworried of the river raging below us. I shudder but I’m not sure if its from the cold spray or fear of the water. “Emma,” Anita beckons. “Here are our nets.”

I nod, peering into the shadows of a small inlet where the rapids slowed slightly, white caps meandering around the rocks. A wet, yellow rope stretches across the inlet. “The fish come into the inlet when they need to rest,” Anita squats by the rope as she points to the river.

I watch her calloused hands touch the rope, lifting it, the muscles in her arms twitching from the weight. “Jacob,” Anita says and the boy brushes beside me, “Go check the other side and reset the anchor, I think it’s slipping.”

He shoots me another smile before scrambling down the narrow path around the inlet like a surefooted mountain goat. I watch him. “Aren’t you scared he’ll fall?”

Anita looks up as her son reaches the far side and removes some tools from his waistband to hammer the anchor in, “He knows these rocks, knows the river.”

“And if he falls, it’s his own fault,” Sarah says as she sticks her tongue out at Jacob.

I laugh and Anita shoots her a disapproving glare, “Emma, do you think you can pull the rope?”

I nod, bending toward her as she loosens the rope from the steel loop hammered into the stones, “Wrap the rope around your hands and pull. The river will fight you, but you need to keep pulling.” She looks into my eyes, assessing me before she nods and continues, “Sarah and I will pull the net with you, bagging the fish as we go along.”

I feel the surge of the river vibrating through the rough strands of the rope—it scratches my skin as I wrap it around my hand. I watch for the signal then pull, my muscles screaming at the weight. The river thrashes against it, angry to have to give up its spoils as the first 30-pound

chinook, its silvery scales glistening, emerges from the water. It thrashes, causing the rope to burn my hands as it slips. Gritting my teeth, I pull the rope harder.

Sarah quickly slips the fish from the net and into a sack, we fall into a rhythm that feels natural. Anita sings softly as she works, every now and then telling me how her band has fished from this river for generations. The roar of the river is a backdrop to our scene, almost forgotten in the comfort of the rhythm sweeping me along. Jacob shoots me a smile as he heaves a sack onto his shoulders and then turns to carry it back up the steep bank to the beat-up blue Chevrolet sedan waiting for us above.

I fold into the work. My back and arms screaming from the constant tension of the river. I can feel it pulling at my body as my thoughts are pulled away from me. I am lost in the motions of the work, reminded of the dangers of the Fraser as the spray stings my face like little hornets. My mind wanders to my stepdad; how he let me “play Indian” in exchange for fish. I ignore the doubts flooding through me as I watch this family and know I am not part of it. I see Anita smiling toward me but what am I to her...just a white girl with a horrible family. Did she even need my help when she asked for it or was she just doing it because her daughter was my friend?

I can feel warm tears in my eyes and don't notice how they've moved up the riverside, hauling fish toward the car. The jerk of the rope brings a cry to my lips, “No!” I wrap the rope tighter and plant my feet, bracing myself. The rope jerks harder, the river taking control of the net, violently pulling it back to its cold depths. I gasp as I'm dragged forward with it.

“Emma! Drop the rope!” The trio scream behind me, my feet losing purchase on the stones. Tears stream down my face—it's just me and the river—beckoning me, telling me I don't

have to go home. I could stay, lost under the spray where my stepdad would never find me. I could forget about the angry man waiting at home, forget about pain he inflicted.

The river pulls again, my feet sliding closer, my eyes closing in acceptance. Warmth wraps around my stomach, “Drop the rope,” Jacob’s voice whispers in my ear.

“I can’t...I don’t want to lose it,” I say, the red welts in my palms burning.

“I don’t want to lose you,” he says, and the darker thoughts retreat in my mind. I drop the rope, watching it slide into the river, regret filling my heart.

Anita and Sarah’s arms wrap around us, “I’m sorry,” I sob.

“You silly girl,” Anita murmurs, “Always let go! The river can have the net, it can’t have you.”

The sobs grow stronger, my face buried in her chest until they slow and finally stop. I push away, embarrassed but Anita stands, “That’s enough for today. Jacob, get the rope and retie the net. Sarah and Emma, start hauling the fish to the car.”

And like that, the river is nothing more than a sound and I know that I am worth something more than a little white girl to a family who has brought me to be one of their own.