The Room Of Doom

I nearly drowned my teenage son in The Room of Doom. I rigged twin sets of oars because he wanted to learn how to row white-water rivers and he sat behind me on the cataraft. It looked like a giant blue and yellow dragonfly.

The river was running at the level most likely to flip your boat and drown you. I told him, “Get ready for the ride of your life.”

He grinned innocently and gave me a thumbs-up.

A person should stop and scout when you hear a deep roar ahead. But I had run Westwater Canyon over 40 times at all water levels and didn’t bother.

We skated to the left of Razor Rock and dropped off the ledge into Skull Rapid. From the corner of my eye, I caught the flash of a blue oar circulating in the Room of Doom. Skull is a chute-like rapid with a huge tail, smashing straight into what they call the Rock of Shock. It splits the Colorado River – half flushes into a large bowl where it circulates like a giant toilet. It's called The Room of Doom because now and then a boat gets sucked into it and they can’t get out. I heard about a rafter who sat in it for several days until the rangers motored down to rescue him. At this level, a two-foot-high ridge of water forms between the bowl and the main channel which pushes everything back into the room. Periodically the toilet flushes and flips you. They call it Skull Rapid because people have died there.

The rest of the Colorado River rushes downstream in a monstrous flume. A long eddy forms 25 yards below the Rock of Shock on the opposite bank.

If you know what you're doing, you skate to the left of Razor Rock, which rips rafts in half, take three backstrokes, and let the wave bursting off the Rock of Shock carry you into the main current. Then you catch the eddy on river left and float up to watch the other rafters come through Skull Rapid to perform a rescue if needed.

We made a perfect run and then watched other rafters negotiate Skull Rapid. I got a good look at the new fiberglass oar circulating in the room of doom.

Pointing, I asked my son, "Do you want to go for it?"

He said, "Sure."

We took about four powerful oar strokes into the center of the river. Rafters sitting in the eddy yelled, "What the hell are you doing?!"

We were committed and I stood to put everything I had into it. Abruptly, we slammed into the Rock of Shock. We hovered, our right oars pinned on the cliff. The raft shook and I thought, *Should I pull with my left oar and get us into the Room of Doom or should I push to get us into the main current?* Unexpectedly, we flipped upside down.

Pitching into the river was like being tossed into a giant Maytag washer, and I knew why Skull Rapid was known for drownings. I fought for the surface, terrified. *My son might drown!* I felt his foot graze my arm, an oar slapped me, and I was forced down, tumbling deeper. My face got planted in the sand. I was on the bottom. It was dark. I rolled over and pushed against the sand with my feet and shot up. I saw light through the bubbles, but the roiling water grabbed and plummeted me, then plunged my somersaulting body back down. I was out of air. It was black all around. I felt oddly peaceful. "Guess I'm gonna die."

Reflexively, I grabbed the front of my life jacket and surrendered.

Whoosh, I popped to the surface and inhaled the cleanest, freshest breath of air of my life. Right next to me, my son's head came up. I gasped with relief. His face was white and terrified as he struggled for air. I grabbed his hand and shoved him toward the waiting rafts, then looked for my boat. It was upside down, but one of our party had snagged it. It felt like the river gods had forgiven my sins, and got my feet downstream. Hanging onto the front of my lifejacket, I let the current take me to the cataraft.

After we had it upright and lashed back together, I had a firm grip on the sage advice that experienced guides gave, "When you're tossed out of the raft in the middle of angry rapids, don't fight it. Keep your head, hang onto the front of your life jacket, get your feet downstream, and then let the current take you. At some point, you can eddy out. Otherwise, you'll exhaust yourself, inhale water and The Room of Doom will get you."

I thought, *If you're too brave and greedy, life might just drown you in its rapids.*