

River

by Chris Rose

My name is Kate Connor. I am a river guide. I live in Colorado. Colorado is a state in America which takes its name from the long, wide, green river that runs through it. I live by the river. My job is to take groups of people along the river. Usually we use small boats or rafts. The people who I guide along the river come from the city. They are usually groups of businessmen who come from New York or Chicago or Los Angeles, places where they work all the time and never see mountains or

This year, the river has dried up. There is no water. I look out of my window every day and walk down to the river, or rather, I walk down to where the river used to be. There wasn't enough rain this spring, and it has been a hot summer. The river is now just one thin, green trickle of water. You couldn't sail a raft in this. You couldn't even sail a child's paper boat down this river.

The river is never what it seems. The river changes. Every day there is less water. Today I went down to the river and there wasn't even the thin green trickle. There were just stones and dust at the bottom of where the river used to be.

I have always wanted to be by rivers. I grew up next to the river, where my father worked. When I was a child and other children wanted to be astronauts or football stars or supermodels, all I wanted to do was work on the river. I wanted to work on a tugboat on the Hudson or the Mersey or the Thames. I wanted to catch fish in the Loire or the Volga or the Rhine. I wanted to swim in the Ganges or the Amazon or the Mississippi. I wanted to take rafts across the wild white waters of the long, strong Colorado river.

Today, a man came to my house. I didn't recognise him at first, until he reminded me who he was. "I'm Joel", he said. "Don't you remember me?" I didn't remember his face, though I remembered his name. He had changed a lot. I guess he changed because of what happened last summer.

Last summer Joel was one of a group of people who came to Colorado from Pennsylvania. The people were all colleagues from work. They came to the river to go rafting because they thought it would be a good idea. A week rafting on the white water of the river, they thought, would build up their interpersonal skills. It would make them work as a team. On the river they would get to know each other better. Then they could go back to their office in the city and work better together.

"It's good to see you again!" said Joel.
"You look different" I said to Joel. He smiled.
"Better or worse?"
"Not better or worse. Just different."

Last summer I took Joel and his colleagues down to the river for five days of whitewater rafting. Whitewater rafting is the most difficult thing you can do on the river. Usually people who have no experience of rivers just want to go camping, or perhaps fishing, or perhaps just swim in one of the places where the water is wide, tranquil and calm. These people wanted to do something dangerous, something that they thought would test them, and make them better people. Something which would make them work together better.

"What have you come back for?" I said to Joel.
"I came back to see the river" he said. I pointed to where the river used to be and smiled.
"It's gone" I said. "There's nothing to see."
He shrugged.
"The river wasn't the only thing I wanted to see again" he said.

There is no sound at night anymore. For all my life I have gone to sleep and woken up with the rushing sound of the water in my ears. Now I just hear silence, and the tiny sounds of the trees in the wind. I hope that the wind will bring clouds which will bring rain which will bring the river back to me.

The first day with Joel and his colleagues was good. The weather was clear and warm, the river gentle. I told the people all about the safety precautions they had to take. I made sure they could all swim well. I made sure they all had life jackets. I made sure they all knew what to do if there was an accident or an emergency. We spent a day learning how to use the rafts. We sailed them on slow, gentle water.

That night there was a big storm. We were all asleep in our tents, though, and there was no problem.

The next morning, on the second day, the sun was shining again, and everything looked fine. They all wanted to go out on the river again. I told them that this was not a good idea. I told them that even though the weather looked fine, a storm in the night meant that the water in the river would be stronger and faster. People who were not experts should not go out on the river on the day after a storm. Even if the weather looks fine, the river is still angry.

They insisted.

“We’re paying you!” said one woman. “You have to do what we tell you!”

We went out again on the dangerous, angry river. I made sure that everyone had their life jackets on. I made sure again that they knew what to do if there was an accident. At first it was exciting – everyone was laughing and shouting because the water was much louder and faster than the day before. There was so much noise, I couldn’t tell when the laughter became screaming.

“He’s gone under!” shouted one woman. “He’s under the water and he hasn’t come up again!” Joel had fallen off the raft. Usually, people come back up immediately, but not Joel. It was possible to see his body being pushed about by the wild angry river. His body moved from one side of the river to the other.

There was only one thing to do. I jumped into the water and pulled Joel onto the raft, then moved the raft to the solid bank of the river. I pulled him off the raft and on to the solid land. Joel was not breathing. I thought he was dead. I opened his mouth and gave him artificial respiration. He still did not breathe. I pushed on his heart and he breathed in and opened his eyes. He looked surprised to be alive.

Last night I lay awake listening to the silence where the river used to be. I listened to the trees in the wind. I didn’t know what to say to Joel. I didn’t know if I should tell him to go back to the city and his office, or ask him to stay here with me.

The wind grew louder. I heard the sound of rain falling. The sound grew louder.

This morning Joel came into my room.

“I came back here to see you” he said. “I came back here because you saved my life. I was dead, and then I was alive again.”

Outside the rain was pouring down. I could already hear the river. The river was alive again.

Joel didn’t know why I told him to go back to his job and his office in Pennsylvania. I didn’t need to tell him.

I live by the river, and just like the river, I can change too.