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She Is Strong

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She Is Strong

Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to George Johnson for making this possible.

She Is Strong

By Tanya Elwood

Do you remember the teen years, when invincibility and adventure were like an everyday occurrence? For me, these years consisted of rock-climbing with friends, hiking up at the Wells Grey Falls, and rafting on the rapids of the North Thompson. Rafting was one of my favorite activities because raging water had always fascinated me; I was enthralled with its power: white caps, her thunderous roars, and thrashing debris; sometimes she would rip entire trees by their roots and carry them away to an unknown place. She was a force to be reckoned with; I adored her, and her ability to control every living thing around her, including us. I couldn't wait for the dry heat of summer when my mother would bring us to the river.

Teaching us the rules of 'work before play', my mother never allowed a trip to the beach unless the list of daily chores were complete: laundry swinging in the pine-filled air, dishes sparkling and placed in their stack, floors vacuumed and hand-washed with care, gardens weeded and watered, and lawns trimmed and mowed. As the oldest of five, I felt as though I carried the larger portion of responsibility, and for me, these breaks to the beach provided rejuvenation, and a spiritual connection to God and His creations. I enjoyed the quiet times, soaking up the sun and hearing the water gushing by, but my favorite thing was when friends would arrive and we would head out on a rafting trip. We were invincible, extreme adrenalin junkies. Although we knew the river's powers, we had a mutual respect for her. She allowed us to play on her, and we just had to understand her rules: there were none. At any time, she could switch the current, hurl you towards a boulder, send a tree your way, or grab you with the undertow and pull you down. We would have to be quick; always ready to move with her. Acknowledging this, we would jump on our vessels and head down river. What a rush. Life jackets? No way. It was the eighties. I'm not sure that life jackets were even a thing - definitely not helmets - you didn't even need them to ride a bike.

My excitement for adventure soared: rock climbing, forestry fire fighting, trail building, falling trees, overnight wilderness hiking, horseback riding and mountain biking. I was an adventurous country girl, but I longed to be independent and move to the city. I was tired of cleaning chicken poop off the local eggs, and skimming the cream from gallon jars of fresh cow's milk. I decided it was time to explore bigger things – Kamloops. I loved the conveniences of shopping, cafés, restaurants, and theatres. Also, the hills were close. I loved hiking and smelling the pleasant aroma of sagebrush and evergreen. But, I soon became homesick. The initial lure of the city was overshadowed with loneliness. I wanted someone to share my dreams and life with.

I lived with three female roommates, but the outdoors was not their forte: reading or partying was their thing. Now I was tiring of the uninvited party guests, late night calls for a ride home, unkempt rooms, and their entitlement to the groceries that were supposed to last a week. However crazy this living arrangement was, it did serve a purpose, because one of those late-night calls resulted in the introduction to a man who changed my future.

In the spring of 1995, at 2am, I awoke to a phone call for yet another ride. I resentfully ventured to Yuk Yuk's nightclub to pick-up my roommate, but after I arrived, I was glad for the call because that is where I met my husband. I was immediately mesmerized with his steel blue eyes, and blonde hair, but more importantly, I was pleasantly shocked by his antics. I couldn't stop laughing, and I didn't want to leave. When he asked me out for coffee, I couldn't resist. The next evening, we chin wagged at Tim Horton's from 7pm until 5am. He was a business student at UCC, and he was an impulsive, "out of the box" thinker. I loved the way he saw things – everything was an opportunity. A broken-down car was a chance to spend time with his father fixing it; no employment and no money in the bank provided the possibility to start a business.

Our third date was at a tiny café, tucked away in a motel. He reached across the table and put my hands in his, and then he sweetly and hesitantly said: "I know you're the one I'm going to marry." This should have been shocking, but his bright blue eyes and his honest words paralyzed my logic. Without hesitation, I replied: "That's crazy, because I know you're the guy I'm going to marry." The romance was insane, and we knew it. Just as the North Thompson captivated me, I was taken in by his spontaneity and charisma. I couldn't wait to be with him. His passion for

life was what I had thirsted for and I was overjoyed to have found a partner to explore with, and to enjoy life with. We married within that year and four years later we had a beautiful baby girl.

She was a real spitfire who loved to be with us. She despised being away from us for any length of time. Dropping her off in the church nursery was horrible. Inevitably, every Sunday, our number would flash behind the pastor's pulpit and we would panic, embarrassing ourselves as we scooted through the aisles, tripping over feet, rushing to rescue our tearful child. It didn't take long before she had us trained – we were soon taking turns volunteering in the nursery. Loving her was easy, but parenting was difficult. Her passion for exploring was beautiful to see; she was carefree and innocent, but she had inherited our daredevil mentalities. Running ahead was her style, and after a near miss with a vehicle, and a case of the missing child in the mall, a collar was purchased. Nasty looks were the norm, and each one felt like a dagger; it was hard, but knowing she was safe was all that mattered to us.

My adventurous spirit was beginning to diminish as the anxiety that harm could come to my daughter was always at the forefront. I aspired to share the outdoors with her, but the fear of “what if” continued to prevail. With each new mommy moment, paranoia blanketed my thoughts and a heaviness continued to stifle my spirit. I relied on any excuses that would excuse me from outdoor activities: we have the flu; it's too cold and besides, there's a storm warning you know; we're just having a snow day. However, the summer always came. This was a time of guilt for me. Why wasn't I sharing the great experiences I had as a child? Why was I allowing my anxieties to dictate my actions? I needed to spend time with my daughter and let her see the outside world.

One July, we decided to head out on a road trip. We had just finished a long cold winter and spring, and we were experiencing a welcome warm spell; however, that meant the river, that ran alongside the highway, was unusually high for this time of year. It was muddy and full of debris. I wasn't sure if I had ever seen her this swollen. I could smell home getting closer with each mile: pine, and birch, the smoke of a forest fire burning in the area – I'm even certain I could smell the potato salad that my mama had mentioned she was making. This was what we needed: some time in the valley of Vavenby, sharing our daughter with the grandparents, and family, relaxing and watching her play.

But when we arrived, the group was antsy and had already decided that a rafting trip would be neat. I was reluctant but I didn't want to show it. As a strong, independent woman, the oldest of five, and the oldest cousin, I had a reputation to maintain; I couldn't let the team down. We began preparations: phoning people from the church to muster up life jackets (they were a thing now), driving around town to pick up two skidder tubes and two yellow dinghies, and gathering snacks and drinks for the afternoon of fun. Eight of us headed out for the trip – two of whom were five years old, my daughter and my niece. Their big blue eyes starred at us, so innocent, relying on the protection of their parents. I had a feeling this rafting trip was a bad idea. I wrestled with my thoughts and concluded that it was my anxiety that was, once again, debilitating my desire to enjoy life. I didn't want to let fear hold me back anymore.

We piled in the trucks and headed up the road. The river looked mad: she twisted and turned, hissing mist and hurling words of caution. She was acting crazy. It was like she was trying to warn us. I wasn't going to listen. This was what I had worked so hard to fight against – my crazy thoughts. We would be fine; besides, we had life jackets and rope. When we arrived, I had a thought that we should connect the devices so no one would float away or go past the pick-up point. This was *the mistake* that nearly cost our lives.

We tied the boats using a long rope, fastened the lifejackets, secured our spots on the floatation devices, and pushed off the slippery rocks and began our trek. Over the drumming of the water, laughter could be heard, no words, just unharnessed laughter. We were having a blast. The earthy smell of the riverbanks hosted a flood of childhood memories. Suddenly guilt arose. Why had I been such a prude lately? Why was I so worried all the time? This was no way to raise a child. My daughter and her cousin were bouncing up and down, giggling and smiling. They were having such a good time. I needed to lighten up, for the sake of my girl.

I could see my husband in the boat just ahead. He was with my mom. What was she saying? Her hands were flailing; she was frantic. Something ahead? What, I can't see. Is that a boat upside down? A tree? A, a, rock... A gigantic boulder, firmly planted in the middle of the North Thompson, splitting the river into two, pushing trees to either side. Quick! Everyone paddle. Go to the right, everyone, paddle to the right. Harder, paddle. It was too late. We were heading straight for that rock. My Mom and hubby in one boat, my sister and daughter in

another, I and my brother-in-law each on a tube, and my cousin and his daughter in the last vessel: three boats and two skidder tubes.

The river thrashed us around, violently whipping us up and down. White caps sprayed our faces and it was difficult to catch a breath. The anticipation of the rock catching the rope was gut-wrenching. My muscles tightened as the rock snagged the rope. I soared through the air, landing on the stinging, ice cold water. Like a bag of bricks, I sank down. The current pulled me under, holding me victim. I needed air. I heard my Mom in a distant-muffled voice yell, “No, not my Tanya”. I was breathless, unable to fight the rage of the river. She showed me I was not in control. I needed to listen if I wanted to thrive. I surrendered and prayed, “Lord, please help us.” Peace. A calm, warming sensation embraced me. Strong arms wrapped around me and I felt God’s presence in the water. I felt as though the omniscient power heaved me towards the shore.

Winded and shaking, I saw my brother-in-law scampering up the riverbank. I assumed he was going to get help. I floated in and out of consciousness. Whimsical images danced through my mind. I could feel my husband stroking my hair, and the voice of my daughter singing *Twinkle Twinkle* was angelic. I awoke, still shivering. In the distance, I could see my husband, daughter, mom, sister, cousin, and niece. They were all still in the river. I am not sure how, but my husband and mother were standing on the rock, holding onto the rope. Just then, the boat, with my sister and daughter, collided into the rock, bursting the rubber dingy; it disappeared. My baby disappeared. I screamed, pleaded with God again, “Please, save my daughter”!

I could see her head floating up, then down. She struggled. My husband and mother stood on the rock and threw the rope to my sister, who caught it and pulled herself and Madison into the back eddy. They could breathe for a minute, although the water was ice cold. My sister, a fitness trainer, a triathlete, and a health enthusiast, used her strength to throw the distraught five-year-old up to her Dad. He quickly placed her in the dingy. My sister then used her upper strength to catapult herself onto the rock. They were safe on the rock, with our child in the dinghy.

Their attention shifted to my cousin and his daughter who were floating on a skidder tube, but still attached to the mangled rope. Pulling and fighting against the brutality of the current, the group managed to heave the last two onto the rock. Scared and bewildered, they

began to climb into the last boat, but just as they thought it was under control, the river made another move. The water grabbed the dingy, with my daughter, and she began floating away. My husband dove in and dug the paddle deep into the river, but the water pushed him back towards center. Finally, after a hard fight, he was able to paddle towards the rocky shore and they were safe. I ran to hold them. We were overwhelmed with a gamut of emotions: nervous laughter, crying, anger, fear. My niece, sister, mom, and cousin were still stranded. We watched, helplessly. They were drenched, using every muscle to straddle the boulder. They huddled and shared words of encouragement.

My mother, an optimist to her core, diverted their thoughts with details about supper prep and the delicious potato salad awaiting their return. My husband, the spontaneous opportunist, frantically ran up and down the shore, attempting to MacGyver an apparatus that would save them – but nothing could be done, except to wait. It felt like a long time before my brother-in-law returned. It had been about forty-five minutes. He frantically spewed the news, breathing heavily between the words. A team of search and rescuers was being dispatched from Clearwater, and they would soon be on their way. Relief and comfort swarmed my body. Finally, some hope. I needed to relay this message to the others. They were barely hanging on; their bodies squished together by the constant force of the water on them. Hypothermia would soon set in, if it hadn't already. Holding onto each other, they rested their heads on each other's backs. This rescue news was imperative; they needed it now more than ever. The water was deafening; no human voices could be heard. Maybe they would see hand signals.

We jumped up and down, screaming until we were dizzy. Finally, my mom peered over. I flung my arm in a circular motion, hoping the years of family charades would pay off, they did; my mom lit up. Her arms locked tight to my sister, she looked up to the sky and motioned her head in a loop. She understood; the helicopter would soon be there. We waited for another hour. I remember feeling an intolerable weight pushing down on my shoulders; we were losing hope. My cousin and sister were dosing in and out of consciousness, and at times, falling towards one side, which jolted them back into consciousness. They were hypothermic. I looked up to the sky. Where was the helicopter? Where was God? Why was this taking so long? Why wasn't God helping us in our hour of need?

But, just as our hope was fading, search and rescue arrived - in a kayak; that's right, a kayak. We could not believe our eyes. A mint green, inflatable kayak, floating down the river. I assumed that it was another fool challenging the river; however, when the kayak did a one-eighty and rested in the back eddy of the boulder, I knew this guy was serious. He appeared to be middle-aged, with dark hair. He was tall, and he was wearing a red search and rescue life vest that showed his chiselled, muscular arms. I felt a sense of assurance. His panache was mesmerizing to watch. His upper body twisted and turned to maneuver the oars, effortlessly slicing through the water. He commanded the river and she respected him.

One stroke at a time, he soared down the river, contorted his kayak in a fancy half-turn, and then rested in the back-eddy. First, he returned my niece, and then my cousin to shore, where they huddled and cried, elated to embrace the ground. The kayak returned for my sister, who was feeling the effects of hypothermia. She clung tightly to the rescuer as he brought her to the shore. Then her husband held her in his arms, and she relished his embrace.

Mama was last to have her triumphant ride to safety. The kayaker fought one more time against the current, soared down towards the rock, and performed his fancy maneuver into the eddy. His stealth and finesse was amazing to watch. Those of us on shore were overcome with emotion as he floated our mother towards the shore.

We were all relieved to be safe, and to have the family on ground. Tears flowed, and the uncontrollable realization of what we had just encountered, hit hard. Most of us were shaking, crying, and overwhelmed – but not for long. My mom, who always sees the bright side of things, charismatically said, “Who’s ready for that Barbeque? I’m starved.” We drove home buzzed, as adrenaline and disbelief welled up in me. I gazed out the window and watched the majestic life source roar beside me. She was mighty, and responsible for many things: sustenance for people, nourishment for trees, home for the salmon, and the veins of the Interior. Her responsibilities were vast, and she was to be respected.

She was strong. She inspired me to embrace my inner strengths: to work through my anxieties, to be an adventurous mom, and to make the best of each day. I owed this to my daughter.

Over my thoughts, I heard the chatter – everyone was awestruck that search and rescue had sent a kayak. We laughed, and then, without hesitation, my husband said, “Where do you think you could find one of those inflatable boats? I think they would be awesome. What do you think, Hun?” I shrugged my shoulders and sighed: “As long as we’re not on the river, I guess, but for now, let’s go home and eat.”