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### **Serendipity on the Wapsi**

**Boring:** adjective: dull, flat, insipid, irksome, lifeless, monotonous, mundane, plebeian, prosaic, repetitious, stale, stuffy, threadbare, tiresome, unexciting, unvaried, vapid. I sit in one of the many cluttered corners of my aunt's antique shop on a typically quiet Friday night in small town Iowa. As I yawn, I can feel the dust settle on my tongue while I flip through an ancient thesaurus, finding the word on my mind: boring. Finished with my search, I remove my glass of sweet tea from its crocheted doily and wash the grime from my teeth while glaring at the portrait of a Victorian lady hanging on the garish floral wallpaper.

I wander out onto main street and watch the traffic pass through the only stoplight in town while I ponder how my once eventful Friday nights had morphed into evenings in an antique store. I had just moved from a bustling suburb of the nation's capitol to my mother's hokey hometown of Mount Vernon, Iowa. I realize that the most exciting event since the move will be tomorrow's family float down the Wapsipinicon River. I sigh dejectedly at this realization, and trudge back towards the painted lady that houses the shop. Little do I know that during this trip downstream I will learn to appreciate the simplicity and beauty of Iowa life far more than the constant bustling activity of the city.

I sleep in late that morning, tired from being kept awake due to the incessant shrill horn of the train, a rolling alarm clock most of the natives had learned to drown out. I grudgingly throw on a tattered t-shirt over my bikini, and climb the stairs to find the caravan already forming on the street in front of our tiny dated home. Six of my mother's eight siblings live in town, and they arrive with their respective families in tow, along

with mountains of snacks, extra clothing, and tubes stuffed into the back of their mini-vans. It seems to me that we are to embark on an aquatic Oregon Trail; the tubes will serve as our covered wagons, and the huge amount of extra provisions will trail behind our mile-long string of travelers.

My family of six climbs into our own clown car of a mini van to begin the forty-five minute drive to our entrance point on the river. As always, my father decides to take the scenic route, traveling on curvy back roads lined by corn and bean fields, as opposed to the straight interstates cutting through the Heartland. Dust flies up behind us as we wind around on the gravel roads, and pass a barn painted with a two-story tall replica of the famous painting “American Gothic.” The couple’s eyes contemplate a landscape similar to Grant Wood’s paintings of Iowa: gentle rolling hills covered with fields of rich dark soil, broken up by occasional foliage, set against the backdrop of a cloudless azure sky. We emerge from the sea of fields and whiz by a limestone church with faded stained glass windows. The limestone was quarried just across the river in a town aptly named Stone City.

A mile later, we park the car in a lot next to the river. Most of the relatives have already arrived, and I’m bombarded by the pleasant sounds of my younger cousins shouting in excitement and the adults chatting. There is waist-high prairie grass here, the tips are as soft as cotton and it caresses my thighs as I walk through. I am surrounded by my family blowing up their tubes, films of spit covering the inside of the plastic as their cheeks puff up like chipmunks hoarding their evening meal. I smile at this comparison and tilt my head up to the warm sun, grateful that the bipolar Iowa weather decided to grant us the cloudless heat as opposed to yesterday’s cool foggy haze. I stumble down to

the river's bank to a chorus of cheerful greetings from the crowd. The water gently rushes over my toes, and it occurs to me that the river is the only thing in this state that seems to be in a hurry. The sticks and fallen leaves that float by remind me of the traffic in Virginia, traveling as fast as possible as if being pushed along by some higher power.

I am startled by the mad rush into the river, the family eagerly seeking refuge from the heat. I join the peals of laughter as I begin my trip with a splash, after tripping on the rocky bottom and falling. We float beneath a crumbling bridge, probably built by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Depression, carved with charming inscriptions of the people who visited in the past. I laugh at the contrast between these messages and the vulgar graffiti of the cities out east, and begin to enjoy this more pleasant reading material.

After the initial excitement, everyone begins to settle into a unique rhythm. I allow myself to drift a little farther back from the main cluster of tubes, and find myself entranced by the natural beauty. Green trees line the banks, some branches bowing into the water and changing the visible path of the current. I tilt my head back into the water, letting my hair flow back from my face as I listen to the calls of birds, now muted by the water in my ears. My feet brush against the mossy rocks lining the bottom, and I relax a little too deeply, opening my mouth to a gulp of water. But instead of being repulsed by the muddy water, I taste the thousands of years of serenity, constancy, and beauty that seem to be the essence of the river.

Hours pass as I travel in this manner, or maybe it is just fifteen minutes. Time is irrelevant in this place, exempt from clocks and appointments. We begin to drift into the more densely populated stretch of the Wapsi, and catch glimpses of little homes tucked

into the greenery. Fishing poles and tackle boxes are left at the bottom of bobbing fishing boats tied loosely to shore, their owners trusting the morality of strangers the current carries by.

We encounter the first of these humble river folk a couple bends later. Current flows around a shirtless man waist-deep in the water, who reels in his line once he sees us approaching. He raises his bronze arm in greeting, his calloused hand extended in an invitation to stay a while. The adults of the party anchor their legs to the bottom, and begin a lengthy discussion over the Stone City Art Colony. His face is rough and unshaven and he smells of sweat and soil. There is nothing outwardly extraordinary about this man. I would have passed him on a crowded street in Virginia without even making eye contact. Yet there is something undeniably attractive about his friendliness and openness.

The conversation lulls, and each member of our group individually shakes his hand before we continue on our watery path. The smack of a jumping walleye re-entering its home draws our attention farther down the river where we spot a rope swing. The younger cousins clamber up the banks with shouts of delight, and take turns swinging out and dropping into the deep patch. The rope's owners, alerted by the whoops and screams, wander onto the bank reminding us to be careful. I finally take my turn at the swing. While suspended in the air, I am caught off guard by the subsequent suspension of time. The raucous sounds of my family fade, while I breathe deeper and feel a sense of belonging and wonderment. The stillness is shattered as I hit the water, and I gasp for air as I return to the surface and to the surface reality.

We continue our journey, and too soon it is over. I sit on the bank as my family begins deflating the tubes, whooshes of air rushing from our exhausted transport. I remove some of the leaves from the water, and watch as they dry on a rock. The colors that were so bright in the water fade, the brilliancy the river had brought to them gone now that they are displaced. The rumble of cars starting their engines begins, and I collect the leaves before walking to the car. The leaves I have taken will eventually crack and crumble, leaving behind any of the river's power it had been able to maintain. Like the leaves, I am beautiful here. The longer I stay by the river, the less I feel beauty anywhere else is even remotely significant. As the sun droops beneath the limestone structures of Stone City, I silently pray that regardless of where life leads me, the resiliency and beauty of Iowa and its rivers will never leave me.