Rapids

Tim Parks

A STOPPER

This isn't the right world, he told her. For us. He unrolled a sleeping bag and laid down on the planks. Be strong, he said. Earlier, immediately on their return, they had tried out the stretch downstream from Sand in Taufers. Filthy cities, Clive muttered. Michela looked taller and slimmer in her wetsuit beneath the large backdrop of the Alps, if possible even younger. Filthy Milanese, he insisted, pulling tight his spraydeck. Old misanthrope! she laughed. She was happy. It was right to go, she said, I don't regret it at all, but great to be back.

So it was. They seal-launched from the bank. The river was high. It slid solid beneath the bridge. She knew she loved him and so was thinking only of the practical arrangements: the campsite, the pitches, the food, the equipment. This is the big day. These are her duties. I hope they don't bring any basket cases, she called. Clive was already away downstream. He broke in and out of the swift flow. The merest hint of an eddy was refuge enough. He was so stable on the flood. He used so few paddle strokes, so little energy. Michela darted behind. She was aware that basket case was his expression. She was aware of emulating his deft certainty in the strong water. It's not my element yet. Clive broke out again. His yellow boat slewed to stop with its prow in only a handkerchief of stillness behind the lure of something submerged. The river tugged by. Move off! she called. The current was faster. Make room! He shook his head. He was laughing. The eddy was too small for two. Meanie! Now she must take the rapids first.

Suddenly alone, the river's horizon comes to meet you. There's a certain glassiness to it and as the roar swells the water grows more compact, it pulls more earnestly. The mountains around and above are quite still. Already you are past the point of no return. You must choose your spot. Michela knows the right place, slightly left of centre. But just before the plunge, she sees it has changed in their week away. The river is constantly changing. A rock has gone under.A heavy log is caught in the larger boil of the stopper. Perhaps still in the spell of last week's drama, or half focused on the group that will arrive this evening, she tries at the last second to change her line. She isn't used to leading. It's a mistake. The surface is already curving down. The pull is fierce. She throws in a sharp paddle stroke on the right to avoid the log, tries to straighten on the left. But already she's in the quick of it. Not quite in line with the current, the kayak is sucked abruptly back into the stopper, sideways to the flood.

For a second the young woman allows the elements to take over.A moment's inattention is more than enough.The water pounds on the spraydeck, forcing her head down into the rush. Her helmet bangs on the log.The red kayak spins on its axis. Her face is under now, in the foam. Again the helmet grates. But Michela is calm and lucid. She is always calm when it actually happens, when she's gone below

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and the world is blurred and swirling dark. She has her paddle gripped tight. As the stopper spins her up, head downstream, she leans out across the water to block the rotation, the bottom of the boat exposed now in the drumming cascade of the fall. At once she's steady, held in the churn of the stopper, but with her face just above water, her arms reaching to scull for support on the troubled surface. The log bangs and bangs on the hull. She's stuck.

There's someone shouting now, but the roar of the rapid is too loud. She glances up. Clive is already there in the eddy she was headed for. He's watching her. He beckons. He's so near. Slide out this way! Her boat is pointing towards him. Beyond its prow the stopper runs on for a couple of yards or so, a line of transparent water pouring over a ledge of rock to spin white beneath the surface. Every piece of flotsam dragged down the river is held there, for hours, perhaps for weeks, turned and turned in this liquid trap.The water flows on, but not the driftwood. Or the coke cans. Or even a dead rat, or sheep. Michela is caught. It's all she can do to keep her head above water.

Just beyond the stopper is the complete stillness of the eddy where she should be, sheltered by a spur of rock. Clive is grinning, beckoning, motioning to show how she can use the paddle to edge along the line of foam. She knows that of course. In theory. But in this position she can't get the boat to move. It won't budge. The underside grinds against the rock and the log. The water drums. And she can't hear Clive's voice either, if only because her right ear is actually in the icy water. The river is snowmelt. I must be strong, she thinks. But now she sees he's about to toss a line. He's passed it round a sapling on the bank and is waiting for her to understand. The throw-bag falls exactly over her arms. She grasps the line quickly with her left, twists it round a wrist, almost loses her precarious balance, then has it passed round the paddle and is gripping tight. Cautiously, Clive starts to tug. He seems to be savouring the resistance of the stopper, balancing the two pulls exactly, the water, the rope. Inch by inch, the boat slides along the ledge of the fall, approaching the eddy. Then it rocks free so suddenly that the girl capsizes and has to swing the paddle wide to roll up, drenched.

Idiot! Clive laughs.

All at once Michela can hear again.The world is calm and still and warm, unusually warm for the mountains.There are flies and river-bank smells. Only a couple of yards away, the roar of the crashing water seems remote and unimportant.

You should see your face, he says.

If you'd led the way, it wouldn't have happened.

You can't always be following me. Actually, you did brilliantly. He's smiling at her, water glinting on his thick beard, his eyes narrow against the sun. It's not easy to come out of a spin. Most people would have pulled the deck and swum.

Why didn't you leave the eddy to me?

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There was room for three!

There was not!

You didn't try.

She would have liked to kiss him now, he was so steady with his wet beard, glinting eyes, thick forearms, but Clive is already shifting his boat round hers to move into the stream. By the way, he asked, how do you say eddy in Italian?

I told you, no one speaks Italian in this part of Italy.

I just want to know, so I can sound knowledgeable if people ask.

La morta, she said.You say entrare in morta.

With one stroke he was in the stopper. A simple move of the hips lifted the underside of the boat to meet the falling water pouring over the ledge.At once the hull locked in, trapped in the tension between fall and reflux. Now he was in the same position she had been, though facing the other way. It looked easy.With long strokes that seemed to caress the surface of the water downstream of the boat, he moved slowly to the other side and popped out.He motioned for her to try. Michela shook her head and pulled into the flow below the fall. Evidently they would have to start the weaker paddlers further down.

The group arrived towards eight. They had driven all the way from England. Michela was waiting at the gate. Michela loves English people. Michela loves all things English and despite having lived only six months in the country Michela speaks and writes a near-perfect English.The fact that it isn't perfect is a torment to her.You have no accent, Clive explains: To be perfect, people would have to know where in England you come from. Michela comes from Brescia. She doesn't want Clive to learn Italian. It won't be necessary. Not in the South Tyrol. Her destiny is England and English. She feels this deeply. To become truly strong, she must leave Italy. They are only here because English people like to go abroad for their holidays, because the South Tyrol is so unspoiled and beautiful. Is there anywhere unspoiled in Europe aside from the Alps? They are only here for the summers. Then they'll go back to England. I don't like to speak Italian, she told him. I hate my mother tongue. I hate this country. Clive was thinking about other things. When not on the water, he is troubled, concerned. He is checking a kit bag, or looking through paperwork. Michela likes the impression he gives of always thinking, always foreseeing and forestalling some accident. It's an important moment in their lives. This is the first group they have brought here.They have made an investment.

Weren't there supposed to be thirteen of you? The van bounces on the rutted track turning into the campsite. It's a dirty white. The driver hits the horn in celebration. Am I driving carefully? asks a sticker on the back.There's a phone number and the name of a county council. The trailer with all the camping equipment and a couple of personalised kayaks bumps and trundles behind.Then people are spilling onto the grass, shouting, laughing, shaking hands. Mandy, Keith,Adam. Who's got the bloody

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trailer key? Who's got the duty list? Sugar! A tall chinless man in early middle age is trying to make a call from his mobile. At once Michela is excited, but anxious. The English are never quite the English she would like them to be, the English as she thinks of them when they are not there. One of the men is decidedly paunchy. It's their language she loves. Mandy too turns out to be robust and squat. They are shaking hands. Miserable crick in the neck! the older woman complains. She wears a shabby smock and clutches a digital camera. The boy who runs into her is in his gormless early teens. Clot! Mandy tells him abruptly. Her accent is unmistakably South London.You're on the cooking tent,Adam.Water canisters, please! Out of the e-mail and into the wetsuit, laughs the fatter, older man. I'm Keith. He grasps Michela's hand with both of his. His eyes are glassy and jolly. Mandy takes a photo. One for the website. Weren't there supposed to be thirteen of you? The girl asks again. Two coming separately, Keith explains. Already on holiday somewhere down south. Lucky sods.

The campsite is a cosmopolitan patchwork.The van moves slowly through a chequer of tents and chalets, the clutter of washing lines, cooking equipment, loud cries in Dutch, in Spanish, of children playing ball. Three grim teenagers are sitting around African drums, transmitting a nervous rhythm to the twilight. Suddenly the forests above are black, the mountains stark. We've got the pitches nearest the river, Michela explains. Furthest from the loos, a spindly girl moans.

Speech! Keith announces as soon as the van has stopped. Men and women, kids and kayakers, lend me your lobes! So here we are in Wopland at last. Okay, it's been a long journey, I know, we've had a couple of sense-of-humour breakdowns, it's only natch, but what we need now is maximum co-op-er-ay-shun! It's nearly dark.We're going to have to move fast. From this moment on nobody thinks of themselves until the kitchen tent is up, the van unpacked, the water canisters filled and supper under way. Is that clear? We before me, okay? Thine before mine. Then you can put up your own tents and get yourselves sorted. Remember: this is not, repeat not a holiday; it's a community experience, right! As soon as we're all done and we've eaten we'll have the evening meeting and plan out tomorrow's activities. Oh, and don't forget to prepare your nominations for Wally of the Day!

As he finished speaking – and an Indian boy was already on top of the van furiously undoing tie-ropes – Michela saw Clive emerge from their chalet. His face more than ever expressed a contained, manly perplexity, a faint smile at the corner of the bearded mouth. Long time no see, he said, shaking hands with his old teacher. Wonderful place you found for us, Keith enthused. As the last light shrank behind the peaks, the valley was suddenly chill. How's the river? High, Clive said. The glaciers are melting. Mallet please! someone was shouting. Mall-et!

Sorry to be so silent, Vince told his daughter. Once again the autostrada had come to a standstill. These are his first words of the drive. The air-conditioning hummed. The girl was changing CDs. Head down, lips pursed she looked at him sidelong, half smiled. What's there to say? she asked. He felt ashamed.You've put up with Florence, he said. Now you get your fun, see some friends. Louise laughed: I liked Florence!

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Then the car was shaken with an urgent rhythm. May I? She turned it up even louder. He nodded. He hated the music. It was shameful that he had nothing to say to her. Nothing has been said about Gloria. His daughter was staring intently, tapping on her knees. The landscape trembled with heat. For at least a mile ahead the cars glittered stationary, as if a great river sweeping down from the Apennines had solidified in the summer haze.The planet is burning up, he thought. An asset long since amortised. He felt quite untouched, shivery.

Swaying her head, his daughter smiled, still with a faint hint of compassion. She is thinking of her mother, he decided. How can a holiday like this do anything but make us think of her? Yet it isn't really Gloria I am thinking of. He knew that. It was to do with Gloria, but it wasn't her. I don't see Gloria. He was suddenly anxious. I don't hear Gloria's voice when I remember the things she said. You think of nothing at all, he told himself. But so intensely. Life had not prepared him for this.

The pulse of the music became an obsessive repetition, a hectic running on the spot.The car throbbed.The song went on long beyond the point where you'd heard enough. The traffic stewed. Abruptly Louise turned the volume down: There is one thing though: if we're camping, how am I supposed to recharge my phone? Vince was gripping the steering wheel, willing the cars to move. Dad? Sorry, what was that? How am I supposed to recharge my phone? In what sense? We're camping, there won't be plugs.

He looked at her. No idea, he said. He managed a smile. Do without it for a week. Live free. Dad! She shook her head and turned up the volume again. Only now did he notice she was cradling her mobile in one hand, as if expecting some vital call. She has been fondling her mobile all week, he thought. I haven't even made fun of her. All at once the fierce drumming of the car stereo was challenged by the sound of a distant siren speeding along the emergency lane. Somebody has died, he decided. Someone won't be going home.

Michela felt keenly how different tonight's meeting was. Still, she had no presentiment of what was about to happen. Last week she and Clive had slept in the squalor of a centro sociale in Milan; more than two hundred people were spread across the floor of an abandoned warehouse. Many were smoking dope.There were angry speeches and chants, which she translated more or less for Clive. Sometimes someone stood up and spoke in English, or French, or German.They were speeches punctuated with slogans that everybody could repeat, whatever their language. Michela wasn't sure if she was enjoying it, but felt keenly that they were right to be here. They shared a cause. Everything precious was under threat. Some final barrier was about to come down, some crucial dam would burst releasing the final great wave of destruction.They must be strong to resist.They must protest. She joined in the chants. There were people of all colours and nations, mainly young, all scandalised. Our world is a scandal, somebody stood to say. Quite probably it will end in our lifetime.

Clive rolled his cigarettes. Despite the crowding, the intense heat, they had managed to make love every night, a slow, strong, silent love.We are two torrents flowing together in the dark, she whispered. During the meetings she sat between his legs.

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She had never felt more protected. Her man was solid, solemn. Free trade is just the free transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich, a young man explained. Loans are theft! It is criminal to ask for interest payments from the starving! It is lunatic to cut down the forests and burn more and more oil!

People clapped and cheered. Everywhere they went throughout the week they were met by the same impenetrable line of riot shields and truncheons. Police vans blocked the entrance to a square. Helmeted men with teargas launchers sprouted from hatches above. The heat was oppressive.Thirty-eight degrees. On the Thursday they tried to force the cordon round Palazzo Marino as President Bush arrived.They assumed it was President Bush. Usually so calm, Clive heaved wildly behind a thick Plexiglas screen they had made to push against the police. He was beside himself. Issa! the Italians shouted. Heave! Issa! Issa! Scores of photographers were crammed into a specially protected paddock. Heave!

The crowd surged. Some of the men had balaclavas, or motorcycle helmets. When the police counter-charged, two demonstrators were killed.That is: a barrier collapsed alongside the road and a dozen or so people were forced under the wheels of an oncoming tram.There was a chaos of sirens and scuffles. They had a policeman on the ground. That could easily have been us, Clive shouted. It could have been you! He was angry beyond anything she had seen before. They've fucked everything up, he kept repeating, everything. A rump re-formed across the street by La Scala. Multinational murderers! they chanted. No surrender!

For perhaps twenty minutes the situation was out of control. Michela felt proud of her man. We shall not be moved, he sang. She pulled him away from the truncheons. Dozens were being dragged to police vans. That evening the dormitory was alive with angry debate till three or four in the morning. Thunder rumbled across the city. A teenager with a guitar sang a song:You can't bomb your way to peace, Mr President. His amplifier was faulty. Clive bought some dope.To forget, he said. It was expensive in the strict economy of their lives.They still had equipment to purchase before heading back to the mountains. The jeep needed new tyres. Michela's mother had offered no help.They were poor and in debt. Michela stroked his high forehead, his straggly hair. I am living intensely, she told herself. Let me stroke you, she said as he lay on his back, smoking in the dark. His body was rigid. He is crying, she thought.

But this evening in the South Tyrol, Keith, the English group leader with the glassy eyes, the paunch, invited all the kayakers to say who they were and why they'd come on this trip and what they expected to get out of it.They were sitting in a circle on the hard dusty ground between pine trees and guy-ropes. Only one or two had seats. The others shifted on their hams. Starting on my left, Keith said. He was warm and avuncular. I know most of you know each other, but some don't. He had a fold-up canvas chair with wooden arms. Come on, don't be shy.

I'm Amelia. This was a wiry girl with bony white legs. I live just outside Maidenhead. The accent was moneyed. I did my three-star paddler with Waterworld last month. I love kayaking and can't wait to get some experience on white water. She seemed to have finished, then as if some explanation were required added. Oh,

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I'm fifteen. All right! someone cheered. Amelia forgot to say, Keith intervened, that she won the Girl Scouts Southern Counties Speed Kayaking competition last year. The girl looked at the ground. Aren't we modest, Mandy shouted. Then her camera flashed.

In a deadpan voice, rolling gum in her mouth, the fat, freckled girl beside Amelia said very quickly:Caroline, fifteen, from Gillingham, hoping to have a good holiday because I love the water and all.

Name's Phil, announced the gormless boy beside Caroline. His eyelids drooped. He too was chewing. Love playing on the water, like, but I've only done weirs n'all so I'm hoping I'll get on something well fast and dangerous. Never been to Italy before. I've done some surf, though. Like off Broadstairs.Wicked. That's it. In the sudden silence, everybody tittered. Phil seemed puzzled. He has a thick lower lip over a broad chin.Then he raised a fist and shouted: Chuck me in the rapids and I'll go for it! Again someone yelled, All-righty, sir! Respect! said Amelia solemnly.

Keith had to intervene: Fun aside, kids, this trip is not about playing. White water is serious. Okay Phil? The first skill we have to develop is looking out for each other.Making sure no one gets hurt.Too true, Mandy said. I want people constantly watching to see that someone else is not in trouble. Constantly, is that clear? You're always checking that everyone else is okay. That's how a group survives when things get dangerous. Never forget that your personal safety depends on other people looking out for you.We don't want to lose anyone.

It was dark now. A small gas lamp was hung on the lower branch of a pine.The next voice to speak came from a lean, chinless man in his late thirties. He was fingering a mobile. My name's Adam. As you probably all know, I'm a leveltwo instructor at Waterworld. I'm hoping to improve my skills here and move up to level three, though obviously my main job is to instruct those of you who haven't been on white water before. Anyway, I hope I'll be part of giving you all a good and useful time, so that you have something to take home with you. He turned the mobile round and round in his hand.

Thanks Adam.

Already a sort of embarrassed routine was creeping into these introductions, but Keith seemed to savour this, as if the very embarrassment had a social function. Mint anyone? offered the Indian boy.All the youngsters reached. I'm Mark, said one of them, sitting back. The voice was barely loud enough to be heard. Adam's me dad. There was a silence. You could say a bit more than that, suggested the father. I'm, like, seventeen, you know? And I've come to do my best. Is that all? Adam asked again. What am I supposed to say? the boy wanted to know. Even sitting, he was lanky and awkward. His long hair fell on his face. I'm here, like. He seemed belligerent. And I'll do my best. Oh, I love camping, he added.

Tom? Keith put in quickly.

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Yes, I'm Tom. I'm twenty-one.This voice was deeper, the face immediately handsome in the dim light. Every feature was even and warm and strongly moulded, the teeth sharp and white, the hair polished, eyes bright. I study at the LSE. Haven't had a paddle in my hands for a few years now, but some other folks let me down for the holiday we were going to take, so at the last minute I signed up for this. Now I'm here I can't wait to get on the water.

Tom didn't say, but he rows for his university, Keith announced.

You all know me, Mandy said. She was opposite Keith. They exchanged glances. This must be the twentieth trip I've been on, and I'm telling you, after you've done all the admin you feel you deserve to be here. I'm the first-aid person and the menu planner, so any complaints, cuts or bruises or special requests this way. I'm also the trip photographer. She held up the camera, pointed it Keith's way, and set off the flash. So if you have to do anything idiotic, do it in front of me so you can look stupid on the website. And here's hoping this trip will be as exciting as all the others.

Three boys spoke now in quick succession. I'm Maximilian, but you're allowed to call me Max. Come to develop my skills and have a shot at my four-star and it's not true I'll be trying to avoid the washing-up. Oddly, this boy was wearing a proper shirt. Emerald green. And proper grey flannel trousers. He sat on his own camp stool. If anybody's heard snoring, folks, it's not me!

No one laughed.

I'm Brian. Same as Max really. Oh, I'm sixteen. So's Max. Come for the obvious reasons: drink, drugs, sex and underwater swimming. The boy stopped and blushed.

Be just like being at home then, Keith said generously.

Sex! Gormless Phil sniggered. Our Brian, sex!

Quiet kids, Adam protested.

I'm Amal. The Indian's voice was embarrassingly highpitched. I love Waterworld. It's like a family for me. I'm seventeen. I've done plenty of white water in an open canoe – I did the Canadian trip – but this is my first time in a kayak. I'm sure it'll be a doddle.

Bloody open-canoeists, Max said.

Then in the straining light with the sound of low drums still beating in the fresh alpine air and the moths circling the gas lamp, attention shifted to Michela.There was a short pause; it was the first time perhaps that people had had a chance to see what a beautiful creature she is. Her black hair is cropped tight around a white, perfect oval face where the eyes are steady and dark. I'm Michela, but please call me Micky. Me and Clive here have been setting up this trip for you.We've scouted the rivers which are not traditionally much used for kayaking, so we won't have any problems with traffic.We've sorted out what level is what and who can go where. Or Clive has.

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He's also selected and bought fifteen good Pyranhas and all the equipment, so this is quite a big moment for us. I've mainly been doing things like booking the campsite, accounts, paperwork and so on. We really care about your having a good experience in a beautiful environment, leaving it as you found it and hoping it will change you for the better.

She stopped. Hear, hear! Keith said.You English? Caroline asked. The fat girl was squatting on her haunches, elbows on her thick knees, chin on hands, chewing. Michela hesitated: I'm Italian, she said, and turning quickly to Clive she asked him what he wanted to add.

As the others also turn, they find themselves looking at a powerful man with a thick beard and broad forehead. I was one of Keith's first pupils years back, he says. His thinning blonde hair is shoulder-length. And I survived to tell the tale. Somebody titters. Clive sits cross-legged, hands forward as if warming himself at a trekker's fire. I've always thought kayaking was more than a sport. I mean, more than playing squash or tennis or something. It teaches you to respect nature, to read it carefully and understand it. One day your life may depend on how well you read the river. Then, when you spend time by the river and on the river, you can't help but understand how dull and squalid a lot of so-called civilised life is.That's why Michela and I have been trying to make it our job to get people involved. He paused.

Anything else? Keith asked.Want to give us some kind of idea about what we'll be doing?

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