EXIT

By Shelley “Shark Bait” Nolden

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The cold water strikes me like a hammer, with such force that I can hear it pounding. The hydraulic hole at the bottom of Nantahala Falls must’ve flipped me over upon impact. I botched the run down the rapids, but that disappointment will become irrelevant if I fail to free myself from this kayak. I yearn to scream, yet I must hold my breath. Even if I were to open my eyes, I would see nothing. I’m suspended in a vortex that overpowers my senses. I don’t know which way is up. I have 45, maybe 60 seconds to figure it out, or I will die.

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Dr. Green is standing at the foot of my hospital bed. I try to focus on his words, despite the opiate that has numbed me. He’s talking to my husband, Rob, and my mother—not me. I don’t understand the medical terminology, but I comprehend: “She may die within the week.” Yesterday morning, my husband dropped me off at the Emergency Room entrance, and I gave my 18-month-old daughter, secured in her car seat, only a peck on the cheek. It hadn’t occurred to me that the cause of the pain in my left side might prevent me from ever seeing her again.

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Four days before capsizing in the basin of the waterfall, I received my first kayaking lesson on Fanta Lake in Bryson City, North Carolina. The flat water mirrored the emerald green pine and deciduous trees that blanket the Great Smokey Mountains. The other young adults and I, outfitted in red waterproof jackets, purple life vests, and aqua blue helmets, huddled around the First Descents staff and local guides. We embodied the energy and spirit that flowed through the wilderness around us.

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Ten days before meeting Dr. Green, I arrived at a routine, 20-week prenatal ultrasound appointment excited to see the tiny limbs that had begun poking me. The technician slid her wand over my gel-coated belly and squinted at the computer screen that faced away from me. She said that she could see the baby well enough; I could visit the restroom to relieve my bladder.

I returned to the examining room, and gastric acid surged up my throat. It had been a trick. The technician had summoned Dr. Lancaster, who was frantically flipping through my chart. Her long, black hair hid her face. She wouldn't answer my questions. There must be a defect, I thought. A missing chamber of the heart, Down syndrome, whatever it is, we'll cherish this baby. "Tell me what's wrong."

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On the shore of Fanta Lake, 50-something guides nicknamed Greystoke, wearing only a black Speedo that showcased his muscular abdomen, and silver-haired Big Papa, in a faded T- shirt and swim trunks, explained the "wet exit," a critical survival skill. During the following days of our week-long camp, we would be kayaking the Little Tennessee River, Tuckasegee River, and Nantahala River and Falls. As the first volunteer to try the maneuver, I climbed into my orange Remix, and tucked in the elastic hem of the spray skirt, its waist snug around my torso, along the rim of the kayak. Connected to my vessel, I scooted off the gravel beach and paddled over to Big Papa, standing in waist-deep water.

"One, two," he said. I took a deep breath. "Three." He rolled me over into the stillness.

The silent darkness allowed me to focus on my weightless body, upside down in the cool water. I estimated that I had sufficient oxygen to remain attached to my boat for another 10-15 seconds. In control of the situation, I prolonged the experience before pulling the grab loop on my spray skirt that would release its hem, and me, from the kayak.

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"Shelley, the baby doesn't have a heartbeat." Dr. Lancaster gripped my hand.

No. Not possible. I was a healthy 31-year-old, who power walks with hand weights, and eats lots of organic vegetables. And most importantly: "You're wrong. I felt our baby kicking yesterday. I emailed Rob. Ask him."

The technician turned off the ultrasound machine, and with it, my hopes. On the examining table, I attempted to curl into the fetal position but was thwarted by my pregnant figure. Dr. Lancaster asked for Rob's whereabouts.

Late, caught in traffic, and I'd told him the wrong time. How could we have known this would be the one appointment where late was not better than never?

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An hour before capsizing, from the walkway above the rocky border of the river, I listened to Greystoke outline the best routes through the boulders, drop-offs, and log jams that precede Nantahala Falls. This final course for the camp would test our skills and grit. He concluded his lecture, and my new friends walked back to our kayaks upstream.

I remained against the railing, the water thrashing below me. I unzipped a pocket of my waterproof jacket and removed a small rock. The day before, our counselor had instructed each of us to write with a Sharpie on a stone from the riverbed and throw it into the stream. I'd saved mine for today. From the walkway, I hurled it into the violent rapids.

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Our baby should've been born in a delivery room; not been ripped from me during a dilation and curettage procedure at an abortion clinic. When I'd asked Dr. Lancaster about the extraction, which her practice wouldn't perform, she'd told me not to research it on the Internet. I haven't.

The clinic's hidden within a nondescript, brown brick building along a downtown street. No activists had gathered for the Friday afternoon pre-op appointments. We'd been warned that Saturday morning, the day of the abortions, they would crowd the sidewalk. Rob opened the door, and my parents, who'd flown in from Wisconsin, each put an arm around me. A man behind bullet-proof glass, with bicep muscles that bulged beneath his taut black skin, directed us up a steep flight of linoleum stairs to the waiting room.

After registering, a technician drew blood from my arm. He pricked my finger and timed how long it took my blood to clot the pinhole. Two minutes. I'd failed the test.

I met with Dr. Koznik for a final ultrasound. He confirmed that the baby was deceased and checked my lab results. "Your platelet count is low, probably from the baby altering your blood composition, though I've never seen it happen this quickly." He rubbed one temple, stretching and smoothing the nearby wrinkles. "This could be a problem. We'll check your levels again in the morning."

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To summon my courage for this final challenge, and to enjoy the moment, I paused in my kayak at the edge of the concrete ramp. Across the calm channel, white blossoms of mountain laurel, against a backdrop of vibrant green foliage, bobbed in a gentle breeze.

I drew in the pure smell. A stick floating on the water met the small waves that signaled the beginning of the rapids. I leaned forward, shifting my weight toward the bow of my vessel, and slid into the river.

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The morning of the procedure, Rob dropped my dad and me off at the entrance to the brown brick building, so that I wouldn't have to pass the chanting protestors and their posters with images of discarded fetuses. Before I could reach the door, a woman my age thrust a leaflet at me.

"My baby's already dead." The security guard motioned for us to climb the stairs. "Why did you say that to her?" my dad asked. "You didn't have to tell her anything." "Yes, Dad, I did." The waiting room was packed, like a Saturday morning at the DMV. A technician drew a vial of blood from my arm and instructed me to go down to the basement, change into a gown, and put my clothes in a locker.

I sat with the other women dressed in blue surgical garb and waited. My mother had stayed home with Alyssa. Most likely, they were making scrambled eggs, my daughter unaware that she'd lost someone who might've been her best friend. I yearned to console her, even though it was me who needed comforting. A nurse handed me a paper cup with two round pills to induce labor. They would give me the chills and cause contractions, she said, but I'd be anesthetized before it got too bad.

I shivered and cried uncontrollably. A nurse led me to a recovery area with cots and draped a blanket over me. She sat in a chair, gripped my fingers with her pale hand, and told me that she understood my loss; her 20-something son had been murdered, and the killer had been released from prison after a two-year sentence.

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With the confidence of an Olympian, I paddled toward a series of waves, or "wave train," that would lead me to rougher water. The current strengthened and swept me toward the start of the first rapid. I paddled toward Billboard Rock, a large flat boulder reaching into the river from the left bank. Flanking the obstruction allowed me to stay within the wave train that bypassed a hydraulic hole, the depression that follows a drop-off and acts as a swirling vortex. If caught in one, it's nearly impossible for a beginner not to tip over.

The first hydraulic hole that I'd missed would not be the last before calm water. I continued digging my paddle into the waves and using my hips and abdominal muscles to maintain my kayak's balance. I looked downriver to determine my next maneuver.

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In the basement of the abortion clinic, I waited for the results of the blood tests that

would serve as clearance for my turn in the operating room. The contractions started. I couldn't focus on the ultimate prize of a healthy baby to help me endure the tremors that shook my body.

Dr. Koznik approached my cot. "Something's not right in your blood. In all my years, I've never seen this before. We need to move you to the ER, where we can have a hematologist and blood transfusions on hand." He leaned down to look me in the eyes. "There may be something else wrong with you."

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I neared the final turn before the raging falls and tore with my paddle at the water on my left side, leaning into my effort. While on the walkway above, I'd determined that approaching the final, Class III rapid from the inside curve of the river provided my best chance of success. In case I couldn't bank the turn, I'd also memorized the wave train that rippled through a slot between two large square boulders on the right and a triangular rock barely breaching the surface in the middle of the river.

This would be my first descent, and I needed to nail it.

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In the lobby of the hospital, my dad explained my condition to the receptionist, who called a transport. A man, whistling an unrecognizable tune, pushed me in a wheelchair to the maternity ward. "No," I told a woman who'd pinned stork buttons to the string of her I.D. badge. "My baby is dead." A contraction ripped through me, and I gritted my teeth and stared at the nearest object—a poster espousing the benefits of breastfeeding.

The chipper man moved me from the maternity ward back to the ER. I begged for an epidural, but a doctor said no, I might bleed out from the needle insertion. If a needle could kill me, how would I survive the D&C?

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The stampeding current whipped me past the last bend, into the middle of the river instead of my coveted position nearer the left bank. I aimed for the slot between the triangular rock and pair of square boulders, but the surging water pushed me to the left of my target. I was paddling between the two easier routes through the falls, and directly toward the drop-off that finished in the massive hydraulic hole.

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When I woke from the procedure, my mother told me she loved me. Her grandchild had been a girl. I wondered if she'd had the beginnings of the full head of black hair with which I'd been born. I'll never know.

The doctors decided I should be kept overnight at the hospital for observation. A social worker visited my room and left three booklets on grieving a lost pregnancy, one of which was intended for the father. I read that first, wishing Rob was beside me. During the night, I woke with pain in my left side. By morning, my face was swollen. Despite these ailments, the doctors discharged me.

At home, my mom urged me to nap. Thoughts of our lost daughter were more sleep-disrupting than a newborn's demands. We named her Lily Elizabeth, and I clung to the white knit sweater that I'd intended for her to wear home from the hospital. Alyssa's presence cheered me, but I felt guilt over having failed to give her a sister. Over the next four days, the physical pain in my left side and further swelling of my face hindered our efforts to mourn Lily. We visited a doctor, who referred us to another, who referred us to another, who didn't have an answer. Four o'clock Thursday morning, I woke Rob and told him that he needed to take me to the ER.

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The force of the current prevented me from back-paddling and resetting my course. It swept me toward the thundering falls on the left. I should've kept my bow perpendicular to the drop-off. Instead, I veered right and reached the ledge parallel to it—the worst possible position.

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Ten hours after arriving at the ER, a hematologist introduced herself to Rob and me. In a soft voice, with an Indian accent, she said, "You have acute promylecytic leukemia." *What does that mean?* My lack of familiarity with the term softened the initial impact of the diagnosis. But once Dr. Singali had explained that it's a type of blood cancer, I got it: leukemia had killed my daughter, and was trying to kill me. The doctors who'd been involved with the procedure to remove Lily had attributed my bad blood to the breakdown of her sweet, little body. The lily is a symbol of purity and beauty. We'd given her a fitting name, for she had been perfect.

My body, however, was now far from perfect. *How could this happen to me, to us?* I couldn't process the fear, as acute and debilitating as my disease, so I asked for more pain medicine that would help ease me into oblivion.

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The frigid, pummeling water slaps me in the face, a pronouncement that I've reached the basin of Nantahala Falls, upside down. My first descent had happened so fast that I'd missed it, but the froth, darkness, and lack of oxygen prolong the aftermath. Practicing the wet exit on a placid lake hadn't prepared me for the disorientating forces that make this escape seem so impossible. The noise from the falls rattles my core. Only a 40-second supply of oxygen remains in my lungs. For the first time in my life, I fear

water.

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Dr. Green is explaining to Rob and my mother that the tumor bone marrow cells are producing white blood cells that aren't maturing into normal adult cells. These immature cells are crowding out the other white blood cells, including the platelets. My blood cannot clot.

It's the day after my diagnosis. Given the severe nature of my disease and risk of internal bleeding, an ambulance had transported me to this more sophisticated cancer center that afternoon.

"Are my chances better since I'm only 31?" This reminds everyone I'm still here, for now.

"I had a woman in here two years ago, about your age," Dr. Green says. "She complained of a headache. Two hours later, she was dead. Try not to move, at all." When I need to use the bathroom, he instructs, I should hit the call button, and a nurse will hold my arm during the walk across the room and help me sit down on the toilet.

A nurse attaches a yellow "Slip Risk" bracelet around my wrist and slides yellow socks with thick rubber grip soles onto my feet.

I stare at Dr. Green's navy blue tie, avoiding the fear in Rob's and my mom's blue eyes that would intensify my own. "I need to see Alyssa."

"Unfortunately, that's not possible. If she bumps you, it could kill you." The doctor taps his chin. "Let's get you through the next week. Most of the patients who die from this disease do so in the first week. Once you're no longer at risk of internal bleeding, she can visit before the chemo wipes out your immune system."

I cannot go seven days without being with my daughter.

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The churning of water around me keeps me disoriented. Every second that passes brings me closer to suffocating. I must find the grab loop that once pulled, will detach my skirt from the kayak, allowing me to reach the surface, and breathe again. Even if I could force my eyes open, it would be too dark to see. I must discern whether the pummeling from Nantahala Falls is coming from above or below me.

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At the end of the third day at the cancer center, I extend a shaking, bruise-mottled arm for a nurse to insert an I.V. needle for my first dose of chemotherapy. Each needle since

the first prick preceding the removal of Lily has caused a two-inch welt from internal bleeding. Dana searches my arms for a clear spot, pricking me several times, and declares that she can't find an undamaged vein. If the toxin enters my flesh through a hole in my vein, it'll burn my arm. The staff concludes that the intentional poisoning will be delayed until tomorrow. I'm too rattled to sleep.

Morning creeps in, and a veteran doctor instructs me to roll onto my belly. He finds an untouched vein on the underside of my arm. A nurse enters wearing a purple hazmat suit. She attaches a brilliant, red-orange vial to the needle and pushes the plunger in miniscule increments. The Anthracycline sears its way into my bloodstream, and the pumping of my heart disburses it throughout my body. I'll receive three more doses, and will progressively weaken as the drug destroys my bone marrow, and hopefully with it the cancer. In about three weeks, once my blood cell counts have been reduced to zero, my bone marrow should begin to rebuild itself, reproducing my immune system in the process.

I look out the window, searching for a distraction from the burning sensation. Soon the buds will return to the tree branches. I won't smell spring this year. It'll pass while I'm confined to this sterile hospital wing.

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I wave my hand through the water in an arc above my head, and touch nothing. I must be head down, surrounded by invisible dangers. My hand might catch in a crevice, or a surge might smack my head into a rock. Folding my body towards my legs within the kayak will bring me to the grab loop, but my instincts scream to move away from the boat. Twenty seconds left. My lungs sizzle.

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I log into Skype to watch my baby girl, who's too young to pay attention to me on the screen. Alyssa toddles between her play kitchen and bead maze table. Her disinterest in me is a blessing, for my face remains swollen and my right eye has hemorrhaged, coating my cornea and vision in a haze of blood.

Books, drawing pads, even the television remote control, sit untouched by my bedside. I spend hours staring at the get-well cards and 8"x10" photographs of Alyssa taped to the walls. My parents and Rob come often. Sometimes we talk, other times we rest. One afternoon, my dad manages to choke out a request: If I die, could I please be buried near their home, rather than on the East coast, so that he can visit me?

Yes, dad, that's fine. I've made no arrangements to the contrary.

I don't have discussions like this with my mother. We're both Scrabble players. Life had become so busy in recent years; we hadn't played each other much. The bedside hours

present the perfect opportunity, but I can't muster the energy required for the trial-and-error process of reordering tiles on a tray. To pass the time, she plays Words with Friends on her iPad with my younger brother. I miss the clicking of the tiles, and wish I could be stronger for her. My parents shouldn't have to watch my decline.

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The oxygen deprivation is causing a tingling sensation, threatening to dull my wits, but I strain to concentrate. Since my head is below my body in the water, my movements to find the grab loop need to be counterintuitive. Instead of reaching down, toward the rocks at the bottom of the plunge basin, I reach up. Like a boxing opponent, the force of the waterfall counters my effort.

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Eight days after my diagnosis, Dr. Green delivers the news: "Your daughter may visit tomorrow." The minutes tick past in slow motion. Will she still treat me like her Mommy?

Finally, Rob calls me from the parking garage. Alyssa's so close I hear her babbling of simple phrases in my head. Using my I.V. pole as a walking aid, I inch down the hall to the family visiting room and collapse into a chair to wait.

My husband and daughter enter as a unit. Rob's role as single parent has increased her attachment to him. I hold out my arms, but Alyssa doesn't run to me. It's only been nine days since I saw her last, but it's too long, or the hospital setting is too foreign. For Rob's sake, I pretend her rejection doesn't hurt.

He knows it does, so he sets a pile of blocks on my lap, which draws Alyssa to me. She leans against me to play, and I relish her accidental touch. We need these minutes together, yet they're almost unbearable.

My next stretch of isolation, as my body continues to degrade, will be longer, and I'll become even less relevant to her daily life. Thirty minutes pass, and I return to my room and shut the door. I cry a waterfall of tears.

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I fight back against the pummeling, for I must survive. My hand connects with the fabric spray skirt around my waist, and I smack along it, feeling for the nylon ribbon. I can't have more than 10 seconds of oxygen left. I can't find the loop. I will die. I can't move fast enough.

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Six days after Alyssa's visit, acute pain in my right side wakes me during the night. I ask

for intravenous Dilaudid for immediate relief, but the narcotic fails. The physical pain intensifies my anguish over losing Lily and missing Alyssa. My daughter's growing up without me. What new words has she learned? Does she still ask for me? I don't want her to feel my absence, yet selfishly, I worry that she'll forget me.

Morning takes a month to arrive. Dr. Monroe conducts the daily assessment, and I describe the pain. He loosens his tie and tells the nurse to schedule a CT scan at 2:00 p.m. He looks at his chart and at my face, twisted in agony. "Let's make that noon."

He returns in the late afternoon, during Rob's visit. The scan showed clotting in my liver, and blood in my lungs—two opposing complications that are hard to resolve concurrently. The doctor continues talking, and I watch my husband consume jellybeans from a two pound bag that had been in an Easter basket from my mom. Today is Good Friday, but not good for me. They wheel me down to an operating room to perform a bronchoscopy.

A probe is shoved down my esophagus. I gag, but no one cares; my failing lungs are more important than my discomfort. The scope is removed, and a doctor announces that my vital signs are dropping. I'm whisked to the Intensive Care Unit. An oxygen tube is inserted into my nose.

Rob holds my hand. In his other hand, he's gripping the bag of jelly beans. Dr. Monroe debriefs the I.C.U. staff on my condition. "Since we can't treat both her lungs and her liver at the same time, we'll focus on saving her lungs."

The group disburses, and Dr. Monroe joins us. I might not make it through the night, he says to Rob, not to me.

I'm mesmerized by how any individual can devour jellybeans at such a swift pace. Rob may eat the entire bag before dawn.

A nurse introduces herself, and I ask, "Am I going to die?" Instead of offering reassurance, she begins to cry and steps away to compose herself. I try to think about jellybeans. Red, yellow, green, I'm terrified. I ask for more pain medicine; my side really is throbbing. Rob unfolds a blanket and lays down on a recliner next to me. I love you, I say. He doesn't repeat the phrase, but I know he's thinking it, even if he's too afraid that saying it might mean good-bye.

The elderly patients around us gasp with each breath. The place feels like a waiting room for death. I try to console myself that if I die this night, I'll be with Lily, in heaven. Rob will take care of Alyssa, and I'll take care of Lily. The blood in my lungs, threatening to suffocate me, causes me to cough. *God, please let me live*. I'm scared to fall asleep, in case He doesn't answer.

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In the cold dark, I find the loop and yank the spray skirt from the rim of the kayak. The river rips the boat off of me, freeing my legs. My life vest pulls me to the surface. Light hits my eyes before air hits my lungs. The first intake isn't enough. I gasp for another, and another.

Like an angel, a hand grabs my lifejacket from above, and I bump against Big Papa's yellow kayak. He and two other professionals, who'd been waiting along the edge of the water basin, focused on my safety, had sprinted toward me as soon as I'd capsized.

"Breathe, it's okay, breathe." He keeps my body positioned so that my face points at the

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Bright light fills my vision. I blink to adjust to the glare. Sunlight shines through the window. I gasp from the realization that I made it through the night. I push the call button for the nurse. "Am I okay?"

"Yes, sweetie, you've stabilized. We're moving you back up to the eighth floor, though we need to keep you on oxygen and blood thinners."

Consumed by relief, I cannot manage a response. As the trembling subsides, I whisper,

Thank you, God.

The following morning, Easter Sunday, I log into Skype. Rob and my mom help Alyssa hunt for eggs in our backyard. The view bounces around as Rob, carrying the laptop, follows her to the stone wall across our lawn. She opens a pink plastic egg and pops the Cheddar Bunny into her cute mouth. It's a beautiful morning. The grass must smell sweet; the open sky must look limitless; my daughter's embrace must feel warm.

I will recover, and see her again. I survived the first week. I survived my I.C.U. encounter. I miss Lily, but I'll be with her again, much later. She died so that her sister could have a mother, for her passing resulted in the doctors diagnosing me in time to save me. We owe it to her to live full lives. The 8 x 10 photographs on my walls show only the beginnings of the happy times our family will have together until we're reunited with Lily.

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Big Papa holds my lifejacket to keep me next to his kayak, and we're swept down the river. Gasping for more oxygen, I keep my feet at the surface, pointed downstream, as we'd been taught. He releases me near a rubber raft that's been intentionally stranded on a rock outcropping. A counselor grabs both shoulders of my vest and hauls me over the side. Like a fish, I flop into the bottom.

Three weeks earlier, on the one-year anniversary of my first test result that showed I'd achieved remission status, my boss sat down across from my desk. "You should go on one of these First Descents trips for young adult cancer survivors."

After spending 40 nights in the hospital during the onset and initial treatment of my disease, I never wanted to be apart from Alyssa again. The fear of my daughter losing me was keeping me in a constant state of risk aversion. I signed up for the camp with trepidation.

In the bottom of the raft, my breathing returns to its regular cadence. I remove my helmet and feel the sun on my cold, wet face. My first descent may have been flawed, but it proved my ability to really live. It took Alyssa two weeks post my return from the hospital to resume her old rhythm with me. I'm sure she's missing me now, but I'll be home soon.

In my jacket pocket is a second rock. Whereas the first rock had been jagged, covered with cruel cancer words, this rock is heart-shaped. It bears the initials of my family members in purple permanent ink. This one I'm keeping. I start laughing, and can't stop. Finally, I say, "I want to tackle those rapids again."

About Shelley Nolden

Shelley Nolden is a mother, a wife, a financial analyst, and a writer. In March 2011, Shelley was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia (AML), subtype 3 (APL). Shelley is currently in remission and receiving treatments to maintain that status. Like the rest of the Cancer Club, Shelley is trying to adjust to her new reality while keeping a positive mindset. Read more at www.shelleynolden.blogspot.com.