

1: Face in the Water

South of Sunbury, there are few who care to swim the Susquehanna River. It is close to a mile wide and is peppered with rocks and gravel bars. From the vantage point of a canoe, the channels around the rocks and gravel bars are obvious and the long stretches of open water are easily traversed. For a swimmer, the long stretches are arduous, and the channels are difficult to find and harder to negotiate. So it is unusual to see anyone swimming alone, far from shore, with no boat nearby to provide assistance.

Donald Murphy did not expect to see anyone on this stretch of river. He had just negotiated the rock ledge below Marysville and was piloting his canoe towards the islands in the middle of the stream. It would be an hour before he would encounter the power boats that hovered around Harrisburg's City Island. Until then, he would enjoy the quiet of the wide river, which was the

purpose of this afternoon outing in July. That quiet came to an abrupt end when he heard the rhythmic splashes of a woman swimming by herself in the middle of the river.

With a skill gained from years of paddling, Donald used a sweep stroke to turn his canoe in the direction of the swimmer. In a minute or two he would be close enough to ask if she needed help. She turned onto her back as he approached and floated in the water. Her breasts rose firm and proud above the surface as she tilted her head back and let the current fan her long dark hair about her shoulders. The woman was completely naked.

Moments passed before Donald could say a word, struck as much by the woman's beauty as her nakedness. He had a long, unsuccessful history with beautiful women, pursuing them with devotion until they went off with someone else. Fantasies of coupling raced through his mind, competing with the logistics of a river rescue.

“Do you need a hand?” he managed after an awkward silence.

The swimmer dropped her floating legs and bobbed beneath the surface. In a moment her head popped up, showing a confident smile that enjoyed the water streaming from her face.

“A ride in your boat would be better,” she said.

“Let me bring the canoe alongside you. You need to wait until I get my feet over the other side. That way, you can get in without landing us both in the water.”

She did not wait, but immediately lifted her full weight onto the gunnel, the upper edge of the canoe. That was more than enough to tip Donald, the canoe, and all of its contents into the water.

Wearing a life vest, Donald quickly bobbed to the surface. The rules for river rescue ran quickly through his head: first attend to the people, then to the boat and finally to the gear.

“Hold onto the canoe,” he shouted.

“I would rather hold onto you,” she replied with a laugh.

Donald turned to her in surprise, then joined her laughter. His need to gather equipment and find a place to land was lost upon this woman, content as she was to swim naked in the river. His need to connect with an attractive woman made laughter the easiest response. Fortunately, there was not much to do. He gathered the paddles and water bottles himself and began pushing the canoe toward some rocks.

All progress ended when the woman wrapped her arms around his neck. Her weight on the life vest pushed it and his head well below the surface. A playful struggle ensued as the two swimmers took turns dunking each other and pushing the canoe in opposite directions.

When they appeared to be at a stalemate, Donald grasped the woman by the waist and twisted her around so that he was facing her back. Placing his hand beneath her chin, he used a reverse scissors kick to move the two of them closer to the canoe.

It was a technique he had learned in high school lifesaving.

Twenty years later, neither his skill nor his endurance would have been sufficient to overcome a struggling woman. Fortunately, this woman relented and allowed herself to be pulled through the water on her back. Within a few minutes, Donald, the woman, and the canoe reached a small island of rocks.

Donald's feet were the first to touch the rocks. He released the woman but held onto the rope tied to the bow of his canoe. The flooded boat held half a ton of water and he would need the woman's help to empty it. It also held his paddles and water bottles. These he put on the rocks while stealing frequent glances at the woman emerging from the river.

Water streamed from strong limbs that carried the swimmer's slender frame. Donald noted her athletic grace, but his eyes kept returning to her round breasts, narrow waist, and broad hips. The woman acknowledged his gaze with a mischievous smile and sat down on one of the larger rocks to watch.

Responding to the current, the canoe tugged at the rope wrapped around his hand. That pulled Donald's attention back to the task at hand.

"You can ride in the canoe if you help me empty it. Otherwise, you're on your own."

The woman rose gracefully to her feet and walked into the water. Bending slightly at the waist, she took hold of the nearly submerged gunnel and looked back over her shoulder.

"I'll help, but you have to do the paddling."

Donald fought the pull of her perfect limbs. The first defense that came to mind was a witty retort. "The first paddling will be done on your backside."

The woman straightened and turned with her hands on her hips. "You wouldn't dare."

He would not have dared, but for the taunt in her voice. Smiling sheepishly, he told her how they would empty the canoe: turning it over and lifting the ends, one at a time. She smiled as

well, triumphant in his apparent retreat. When the water had been poured out and the paddles were back inside, she slowly stretched her hands above her head, proudly displaying her firm breasts. She held the position, almost daring him to touch the body capturing his attention.

Donald sprang upon her, placing one hand beneath her shoulders and the other behind her knees. Her five-foot frame lifted easily from the ground. Carrying her twisting body to a place where he could sit, he lowered her onto his knees and turned her hips so that he could spank them. The woman twisted and squirmed with token resistance as six loud slaps fell upon her buttocks.

The slaps landed harder than he intended. Concern knotted his stomach until her open-mouth surprise melted into a smile. She rose and quickly turned to straddle his legs, wrapping her arms around his neck. The kiss that followed was long and passionate, allowing tongues to probe and allowing Donald

ample time to massage the buttocks that had reddened from his slaps.

The woman broke off the kiss long enough to suggest more intimacy. An impish smile spread across her face. "You can taste all of me if you take off that life vest."

Donald rose, letting the woman slide off his lap. "As long as I am on this river and you are within 100 yards of me, I'll be wearing this life vest."

The woman landed on her feet and rose slowly with her hands above her head, imitating the motions of a snake. "Then take me to a place where you feel safe enough to take it off."

The logistics of reaching his house along the river raced into his mind, pushing away lingering doubts about connecting with this woman.

"I'll take you to my house, but you'll have to wear something until we get there."

"Take off your shirt. That will be enough to cover me."

Donald undid his life vest long enough to remove his shirt and toss it to the woman. She caught it easily and tied it around her shoulders. While Donald held the canoe, she slowly and effortlessly bent down and placed a hand on each gunnel, giving him more than ample time to observe her bent torso and pendant breasts. Just as slowly, she placed both feet in the center of the canoe and sat in the bow seat, glancing back repeatedly to confirm that two eyes devoured the contours of her back and hips.

She did not stay in that position long. As soon as they were under way, the woman turned in her seat and rested her head back against the bow plate, using Donald's shirt as a pillow. From that position, she watched him watching her and smiled when she saw that he could not look away for more than a few seconds.

Donald had barely enough composure to guide the canoe through the approaching islands.

"Do you have a name?" he ventured, trying to break the spell.

“Danu,” she replied, rising on her elbows to look at her interrogator.

“Where do you live?”

“The river is my home. Those are two questions. You only get three.”

Donald fell silent, choosing to save his final question. He had dived too long in folklore to lightly toss it away. Gifts from the faerie world vanished after the third wish or question. Never had he encountered the faerie world, but this might be the first time. He looked away as Danu returned to her reclining position, breathing easily in the warm rays of the sun.

The lunch stop was an island in the middle of the river. Tall trees provided shade as Donald shared his lunch with his well-rested passenger. After lunch, she resumed her horizontal position, but turned onto her stomach so that she could see the islands through which Donald steered the boat.

“It is almost a wilderness out here,” Donald commented “No sound of cars or trains; just the songs of birds playing in the trees and flying over the water.”

A trace of sadness colored her response. “The entire river was like this once. Humans have changed it. This place is too far from their reach to give it much attention.”

Danu pushed herself onto her knees and turned around to face Donald.

“I have joined you because you respect the birds, the trees, and the water. If you abandon them, you abandon me as well.”

“I need to know who you are before I join with you.”

“You know me already. I am the spirit of the river. You have sought me in your poems and have spent hours stroking my surface. When I move, your soul moves with me.”

Danu’s impish smile had disappeared, replaced by an intense stare. Donald gazed deeply into her dark eyes and allowed them to carry him into the pathways of his longings.

Somehow the woman knew him; knew about his poems and the hours he spent paddling upon the river. He found his soul in his poems and in his time upon the water. Did she know that as well? Not yet willing to use his final question, he broke eye contact and let the question die upon his lips.

The woman put on his shirt when they came within sight of the first bridge. Then she began to paddle with strong, practiced strokes. The canoe leapt in response, moving quickly along the shore. The takeout point appeared in a fraction of the time it would have taken Donald had he been paddling alone. When they reached the riverbank, Danu gracefully alighted from the canoe and held it so that Donald could disembark. With equal grace and surprising strength, she helped him lift the canoe and carry it along the short walk to Donald's home, a townhouse facing the river.

Donald led the way into the carport on the ground level.

Danu had little difficulty lifting her end of the canoe onto a short

sling hanging from the carport's ceiling. Donald lifted his end onto a second sling, each sling spaced to hold the canoe inches above the roof rack on his minivan. With the canoe secure, he led her into the stairwell leading to his living room, dining room and kitchen.

At the top of the stairs he paused, giving Danu time to admire the fine view of the river from his front windows. She clearly enjoyed the familiar waters viewed from an unfamiliar elevation. Her enjoyment brought a smile to his face. "The view from the front bedroom is also nice. I'll get towels so that you can shower or bathe if you like."

Danu's impish smile returned. "Will you join me?"

The logistics of retrieving his minivan, swept away Donald's smile. "It's a forty-five-minute bike ride to the boat ramp where I left my minivan. Unless you like long baths, you should be done before I get back."

The woman's impish smile remained. She lifted his shirt over her head and handed it back to him. "I live in the water, Donald. The bath can go on for hours. Hurry back so you can join me."

He did hurry, but it took an hour. Forgotten was the time it always took to get the bike mount attached to his rack and the bike secured to the mount. Given the events of the afternoon, he was lucky to remember the way. The first part of the bike trip followed a path along the river. Every time he looked out onto the water, he imagined Danu floating on her back. Each time he looked at the path he remembered her stretched out in his canoe.

Those images quickly recalled her words. She said she lived in the river and she talked of humans as if they were a separate species. Could she be a river nymph? According to the legends, river nymphs seduced young men into the water and drowned them. That was the Christian version of the story, he reminded himself, intended to frighten peasants away from the spirit world

that surrounded them. Danu made no attempt to drown him and let him choose the place of their coupling.

Coupling with Danu consumed most of his thoughts. He remembered the long kiss after he had spanked her. He had enjoyed stroking her hips and looked forward to stroking all of her.

As the end of the bike path approached, he wondered how she knew about his poems. Knowing about his paddling was no surprise for someone living in the river. His poems, on the other hand, were known only to himself and his computer. How did she learn about them?

That question remained unanswered. The road at the end of the bike path demanded his attention. There would be no coupling with Danu if he collided with an oncoming car.

He reached his minivan without incident and focused on mounting his bike quickly. His movements stumbled over a growing fear that Danu would be gone by the time he got back.

That fear was baseless, he reminded himself without conviction.

Fortunately, the drive back took only a few minutes, but the sight of his house left his fears undisturbed - there was no sign of anyone moving about. In a panic, he unloaded the bike, stored it in his entranceway, and mounted the stairs to the bathroom.

The door remained closed; no sound came from within. His stomach knotted before he had time to knock on the door. Relief and excitement washed over him when Danu's voice invited him in.

"Is it too late to join you?"

"Not at all," she replied. "Come in and take off your clothes."

The next few hours were a swirl of eager hands encountering bare flesh: Danu scrubbing Donald with a wash cloth, gently in the tender areas and vigorously elsewhere; Donald drying Danu with a towel, after hugging her wet body; Danu and Donald in bed, exploring, teasing and caressing. Only the setting sun brought their explorations to an end.

Donald found some river shorts and a loose Hawaiian shirt that Danu could wear to the local Indian restaurant. They sat at a window overlooking the river. As the view of the water disappeared with the fading light, Donald told his guest about his special times upon the river, the times when he felt one with the water and the birds of the air.

“Winding through the islands brings many special moments, but the best is watching a blue heron take flight. She spreads her wide wings and gracefully lifts out of the water, moving along the stream with gentle sweeps.”

“I live in those moments.” Danu’s voice was fervent, and her eyes looked directly into Donald’s. “I draw my life from the water and the birds and the trees. When a mortal is drawn to them, I join with him, or her, as the case may be. Together we connect with the life force of the planet.”

“Do you have children by those partners?”

“When I do, I keep them to myself. They grow in the world of the river, and not in the world of humans. And that, dear Donald, is your third question. I must return to the river now. You can find me there when you go looking for your soul.”

He followed her as she left the restaurant and made her way down to the river. At the water’s edge, she gave him back his clothes and dove beneath the surface. Donald stood watching for half an hour but failed to catch another glimpse of her. In the darkness, he made his way back home.

If you enjoyed this first chapter, the entire book is available on Kindle at: [Song of the River Nymph](#)

