

# *The Power of Water*

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This work is one of a series of readers from NASA-sponsored Project 3D-VIEW (Virtual Interactive Environmental Worlds), an interdisciplinary, curriculum-based program for middle schools.

Glen Schuster, Project Director

[www.3dview.org](http://www.3dview.org)

U.S. Satellite Laboratory, Inc.  
32 Elm Place  
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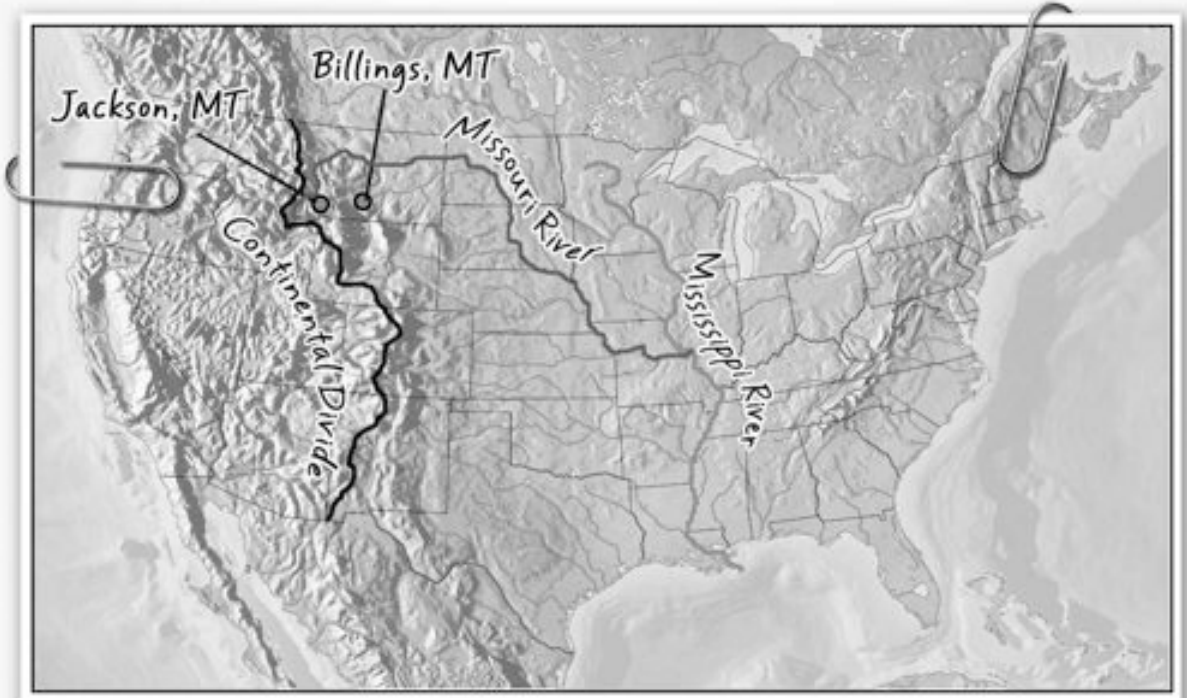
Cover photos and photos on pages 35, 38, 45, 46, 48, 50  
Courtesy of [www.BigSkyFishing.com](http://www.BigSkyFishing.com)  
Layout by Ricardo Forero  
Illustrations by Rawn Gandy

Volume 2 – "The Power of Water" A Journal by Rob Ramsey  
ISBN 978-0-9791677-1-3

Project 3D-VIEW Readers 5 Volume Set  
ISBN 978-0-9791677-5-1

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This is the last thing I have to do. Then, it will be time to leave. They said just write it down exactly the way it happened — in my own words. So, here it goes.

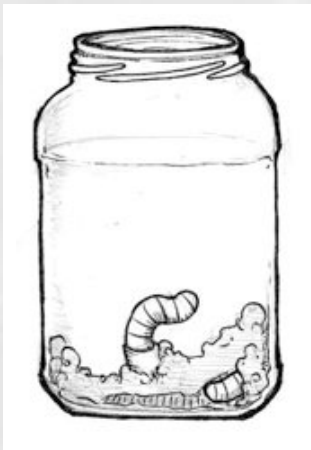
## How I Ended Up in the Boonies

I am supposed to tell the story from the beginning to the end. So, this is how it all started. This is what I did that landed me at a camp for kids who need a little attitude adjustment.

I only meant it as a prank. You know, make the other kids laugh—lighten the day a bit, break up the boredom of ninth grade science class. My teacher, Mr. Frang, was telling us his favorite “life is hard” story. He does that whenever anyone complains about homework, or tests, or cutting up frogs. He says things like, “You guys think you have it tough doing a little homework, taking a little pop quiz? You have no idea what tough is. Try surviving in the wilderness.” Then he goes on to tell us this gross story about eating grasshoppers and grubs.

He loves that story. He says, “When I was a kid, my cousin and I got lost in the woods without any food or water. We had to survive for two days on our own. Do you think we were eating hamburgers, fries, and a Coke for lunch each day? You bet not. We ate grasshoppers and grubs and berries and leaves off trees, for the moisture, since there wasn’t any water nearby. People all over the world have survived eating bugs and berries. So, until you have to eat bugs, berries, and leaves to survive, I don’t want to hear about anyone not wanting to do their homework.”

It was the third time he had told the story that month. So I got to thinking, if he likes bugs so much, why not give him some? I wasn't very fond of Mr. Frang. I was always in trouble with him for not doing the homework right. So, I spent the evening collecting a jar full of grasshoppers and another jar full of worms in our backyard. That part was pretty easy because it was raining, so all the worms were out.



The next morning, it was still raining. I went into school early, and snuck into the classroom. I dumped my little collection in Mr. Frang's top desk drawer, the one he keeps his lesson plans in. I figured he'd be sure to open it first period during our Earth science class. I knew I left a little trail of mud and water in the room from my raincoat and boots, but figured it didn't matter.

When the bell rang, I rolled into class along with everyone else. For once I was on time. I really wanted to see Mr. Frang's face when he opened the drawer. Only, Mr. Frang wasn't there. It was some substitute teacher—some old lady sub, really old. Old like they had brought her out of retirement or something. This was going to be bad.

I slid into my seat, trying to think of what to do, and hoping the old lady wouldn't open the drawer. Then, she asked, "Does anyone know where Mr. Frang keeps his lessons plans?" And Sukie piped right up, "In the top drawer." Right then I knew I was cooked—as my mom always says, cooked like a goose.









The sub opened the drawer and screamed. A zillion grasshoppers jumped out at her from the drawer full of worms and dirt. She stumbled back and slipped on some of the mud and water I had tracked in earlier. Everyone in the class just stared like they couldn't believe what they were seeing!

Sukie ran over to her and called out, "Someone get help, I think she's hurt." The old lady was just sort of moaning and holding her arm. I felt bad, but what was done was done. I figured there wasn't anything I could do about it then.

The rest is kind of a blur. An ambulance came. The medics said the sub had probably broken her arm, maybe her shoulder. Then the security guard and principal came in. They went through everyone's backpacks. They found jars in mine. Unfortunately, there were still a few worms sticking to the bottom of one of the jars. I tried to tell them that I had no idea how the jars got in my backpack. Like I said, the damage was already done, so what was the point of me getting in trouble? But it didn't really matter what I said.

I had already been in some trouble at school. I had been known to provide some distractions to a few terminally boring classes but nothing on this scale before. So, between my reputation







and those stupid wormy jars, no one was very interested in what I had to say that morning.

That's how I ended up in the boonies. I guess the principal and my mom thought it would be good for me to spend time in a wilderness camp just like Mr. Frang would have liked. Mom said that I would have to face myself out here and learn how to survive a little on my own. She said that a program like Windpipe teaches kids to have some respect for themselves and for others. I told her that I already had plenty of respect for myself. She half smiled, and half rolled her eyes at me. She wasn't changing her mind though.

I decided not to fight it. I mean, hey, a couple of weeks at camp didn't sound too bad, especially since I would get to miss the last two weeks of school. I really like swimming and canoeing and sleeping outside. I thought maybe we would play baseball, horseback ride, or there might be a good game room. But, boy was I wrong about most of it. There has been more than enough time in the water, lots of canoeing and sleeping outside but no baseball, no swimming for fun, and definitely no game room. I guess that physical I had to take before I came should have been a clue; There is a reason they call it a wilderness camp.



All this writing is giving me finger cramps. I'm going to take a break.

# The Day Begins

Okay, I'm back. I saw Mike in the hall. He said, "You just keep writing until you write yourself out of here and back home" —which is what I am planning on doing. (I didn't think I would ever say this, but I really would like to see my mom, ASAP).

I arrived in Jackson, Montana after a million hours on a bus. It was late. That was the first time I met Mike. He showed me to a dorm where the three other guys from our group were already asleep. There was a lot of snoring going on, but I guess I finally fell asleep myself. I know I must have slept at least a little, because I woke up to some horrible bugle call at what must have been 5am or something. It was still dark outside. Mike came running through barking, "The day begins now!" He pulled the blankets off anyone who wasn't up yet—like me.

That morning at breakfast I met the guys from the bunk—Tomo, Seth, and a guy named Pinky. Tomo and Seth seemed okay. They appreciated my grasshopper story. I wasn't sure about Pinky yet. I mean, what guy has a name like Pinky? His skin *was* kind of pink, and it turned out he sunburned really easily, but still. You'd think he'd have more pride than that. Or at least, that's how I was thinking then. Then, we met the four girls and the other counselor, Nina, who would be part of our group, too.

After breakfast, Mike and Nina spelled out what we would be doing over the next ten to fifteen days. They explained how the program works and what we needed to do to be "successful." They said that our program had a theme: "*The Power of Water, The Power of Me.*" I groaned when I heard that. It sounded really dorky to me. Nina and Mike were totally into it, which made it that much cornier.

“You think that you are more powerful than water,” said Nina. “You turn on the tap and water flows out. You put your dishes in a dishwasher and the water cleans them for you. You think you have the power over water. If you are so powerful then how is it that water can exist without you, but you cannot exist without water?”

No one said anything. She kind of had a point, but no one was going to admit that right off the bat. Mike chimed in, “As you learn about the water over the next 10 days, you will learn about yourself.”







“There are three parts to this program. We call them: Mountain Water, Running Water, and Solo on the Missouri. Each of you has to show mastery of each part of the program. Each of you has to be promoted to the next level before you can move on, and before you can go home. The key is that you all have to graduate together. So, if one of you doesn’t make it, none of you make it.”

We all looked at each other. Everybody was sizing everybody else up, trying to decide who might be a real screw up. I hate it when people look at you that way, like you might be a loser. They don’t even know you, and you’re the loser in their mind. I do the same thing to other people, or at least I used to. I know I did the same thing that day, but that doesn’t mean I don’t hate it when other people do it to me.

So, that part was pretty much a bummer.

I didn't think I was going to be the screw up who kept the group from moving on, but, still, just the idea of it made me uncomfortable. Then, as if she knew what was going through my mind, Nina added, "Don't worry about what the others are thinking, learning or doing. Just worry about doing your part."

Mike jumped in with glee, remembering he still had to talk about all the ways we could get in trouble. "Anyone who doesn't pull his or her weight, or makes trouble of any kind, gets demerits—extra kitchen detail, cleanup, heavy labor, basically whatever we want."

"The part of the program that we call Mountain Water starts tomorrow. We will hike up to a high altitude lake called Darkhorse Lake. We will snow camp for two days and then hike down. Got it?"

Nina took over, "To get through the next couple of days you will need map reading skills. So that's what we are doing this afternoon. Then, after dinner you pack and get to bed early, no funny stuff."

In the map class that afternoon, Nina showed us how to read elevations, and various markings for mountains, lakes and rivers, and other stuff. That's when I first noticed Layla.

It was hard not to notice her. She was wearing a tie-dye shirt that didn't completely fit her and she had obviously dyed her hair super jet black. Layla was not the type I usually pay much attention to, but there was something about her. She seemed to know exactly what she was doing. She definitely didn't care what anyone else thought. In the map class, it was like she was a genius. She could figure out how far any one place was from any other place. She knew what all the symbols meant, and she seemed to really enjoy it.

I hate to admit it now, but she was so obviously smart that I cheated off of her when they gave us a little map reading test. By the end of the first day, I already owed her one.

# The Ghost of Skinner Meadow

The next morning Mike came through the bunk, same as the day before, “The day begins now!” he shouted, as he hurried us into breakfast. After scarfing down eggs and oatmeal, and juice and toast, we all piled into a van packed with a scary amount of gear. Snow gear. And it was June!

It took more than half an hour for Nina to drive us from Jackson to the edge of Beaverhead National Forest. Mike used the time to lay down the law. “Listen up,” Mike said. “We’re going up to Darkhorse Lake today. We’re giving you a little break by driving you up the first 1,000 feet of elevation gain. But we’ll be hiking the rest of the way.”

It hardly seemed like we were going up hill in the van at all, so all this talk about elevation gain didn’t seem like such a big deal. But Mike

kept talking. “First we’re going to hike a piece of the road leading to Skinner Meadows so you can have a little warm up. Then we’ll cross the meadow and make our way up the mountain to Darkhorse Lake. The dirt road that leads to the lake is high enough that there may still be snow on it. So, for that part of the hike you might need to be wearing these snow shoes,” he said,



holding up a pair. “You can grab a pair as you get out of the van. Tie them on to your packs.



“And let me remind you, everyone needs to carry their own pack. No exceptions. Some of you might find it hard going, but we’re here to toughen you up. Every one of you passed the physical to come to this camp, and every one of you can make it up to the top. No sissy whining or complaining. Any complaining and you get a demerit.

“And stick with the group. None of you know squat about the terrain here, so pay attention to everything you see, where you are going, and the rest. I can guarantee you will need to know it later.”

Mike seemed like a drill sergeant dropout or something. At that hour of the morning, he was particularly annoying. Nina gave him a great big smile. Yuck.

Soon enough we were out of the van. After just one hour of lugging my pack uphill I was ready to call it quits—and that was just the “warm up.” We got to this big flat open field with mountaintops all around us. I told Mike that I thought we were plenty high up already—at 7,346 feet above sea level—and that we should camp right there. Mike laughed and told me to get going because we still had to get across this huge meadow, called Skinner Meadows, and go up another 1,300 feet before sundown.

Some of the guys and I kept griping a bit longer, but we really didn’t have much choice but to keep going. Meanwhile, the girls had already started walking.



Right then, I thought it was time to get smart. I saw that Layla was walking along the edge of the meadow. I thought she probably knew something I didn't. So, I walked behind her. At least I knew I wouldn't get lost. But every step she took, she hit me with gritty slush she was kicking up. There were patches of snow on the meadow that were melting really fast. Even though the valley looked flat when we started, it was actually tilted a bit. So, there was slushy ice water running towards us as we walked. I started walking faster so I could walk next to her and get out of the line of fire.

As I came up next to her, Layla just gave me a sideways glance. I couldn't think of anything to say so I said, "Nina says this area can get five to ten feet of snow in the winter—more up there." I continued, pointing up to the mountains above us. Layla didn't say anything. I kept talking. "I guess it's all starting to melt," I said, noticing that the water on the meadow was actually flowing down in small streams coming down from the mountains above. I knew it was kind of boring to talk about, but I still thought it was pretty amazing to be in a place that still had snow in June.

Layla smiled and changed the subject. I guess she took pity on my lame conversation skills. "You heard about DarMO, right?" she asked me.

"Darn what?" I answered.

"Not darn, DarMO," said Layla. "How about the gold, you heard about the gold?" I had no idea what she was talking about.

I said, "Layla, I don't know about it. Whatever. Just tell me your story."

"It's not my story, Robby. It's the legend of Windpipe Camp. Didn't you find out anything about this place before you came?"

I was beginning to feel like an idiot. I wondered if I should fake like I knew what she meant, but I did want to hear the story. So, I just shrugged.

“Well, you do know this is gold country, right?”

“Uh, uh.” I grunted.

“Well, it is. People used to come here to pan for gold. You still can now, too. Anyway, the story goes that Darmo was this counselor here, twenty years back. They say he was really intense—the kind of guy that would make Mike look like a wimp. Darmo heard that someone had found gold in one of the streams up here. So, he told these two kids that he was going to take them on a hike. But instead he made them walk a mile away from everyone else back down by the streams running off the meadow.

“He made the boys pan for gold for three days. And he only let them stop to sleep and eat once in a while. Peanut butter sandwiches and water out of the stream were the only things they had to eat. Darmo said that if they tried to leave he would follow them and tell their parents they had run away from the program.





“Aaarrrrrrgh!” Layla barked suddenly, interrupting her own story. I jumped and she laughed really hard.

“Ha, ha.” I said embarrassed and annoyed. “Without the sound effects please.”

“But seriously,” she continued with a little apologetic smile. “The boys found some gold but still Darmo wouldn’t let them stop panning. Darmo got paranoid and began to think the boys were stealing some gold and putting it in their pockets. He snuck up behind one of the boys while the boy was dipping his pan in the stream to see what he was doing. Darmo had to lean over so far to see the boy’s hands that he lost his balance. He slipped and fell face first into the stream and drowned.”

Now I had her. That didn’t make any sense to me. None of the streams we passed was deep enough to drown in. None of them would even come up over my knees. So, I said, “No one drowns in a stream, Layla. They’re too shallow.”

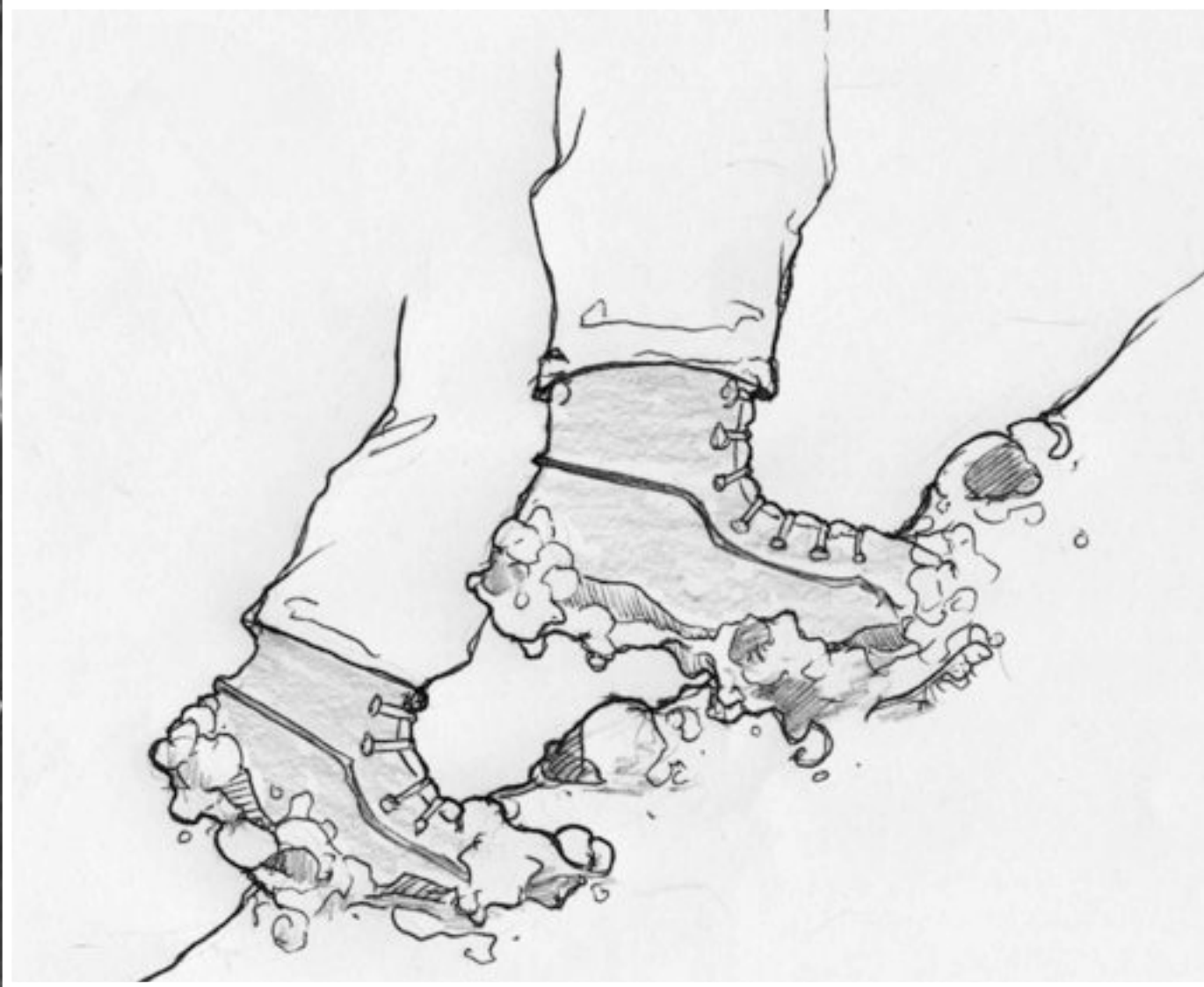
She looked at me impatiently. “You can drown in almost any amount of water, Robby. People drown in bathtubs all the time. Darmo hit his head on a rock in the stream. By the time he came to, he was dead.”

“Okay, oh-smart-one. If he was dead, how did he come to?”

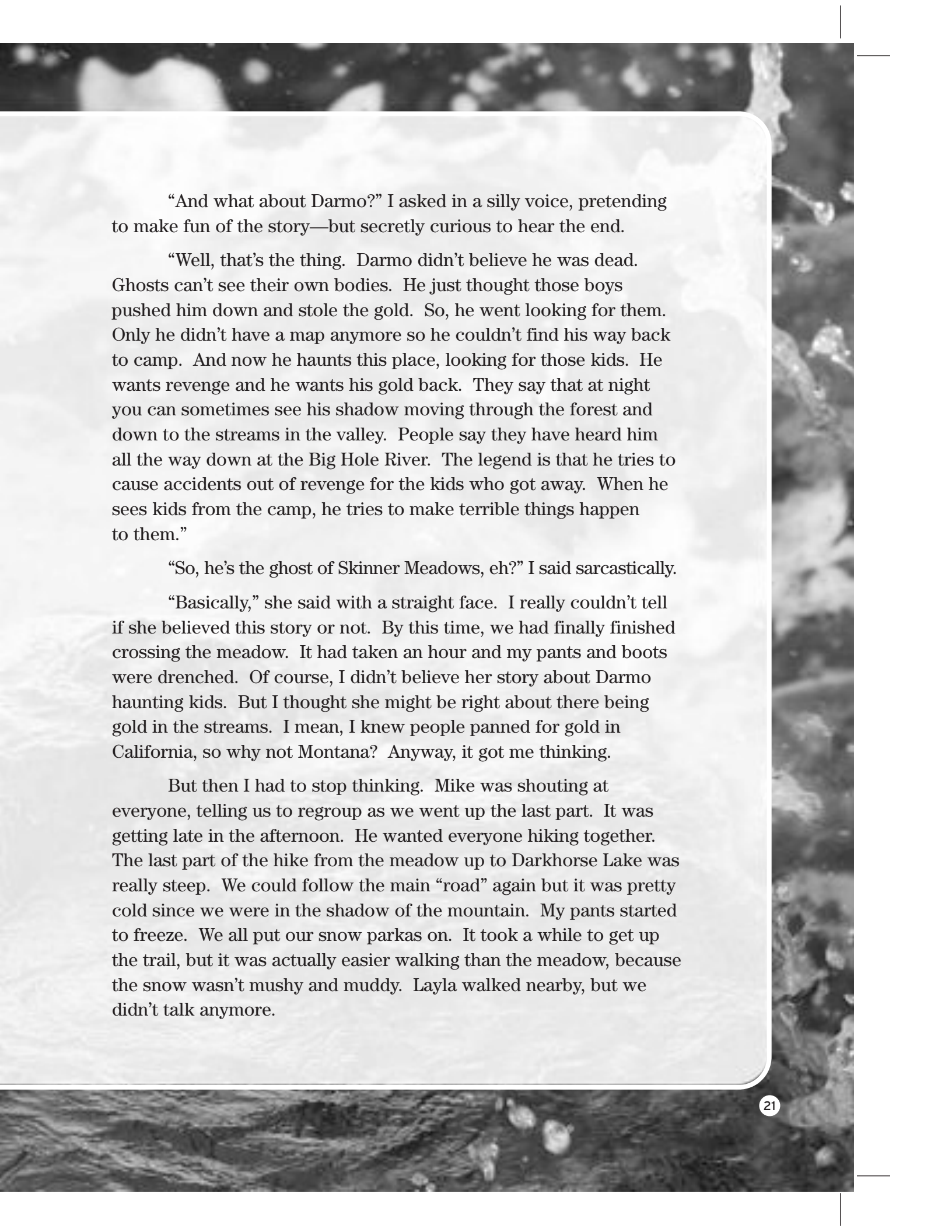
“He didn’t know he was dead. He thought he was alive, but the boys knew he was dead. They bolted out of there as fast as they could. Luckily, one of the boys was really good at map reading, like me.” She grinned a cheesy grin at me. “He took Darmo’s map from his pocket while he lay there dead in the stream. And they used the map to find their way back to camp.”



“They never told the counselors what really happened. They knew no one would believe them. They just said that Darmo had an accident. But they told the other kids, and they showed them the gold that Darmo made them find. Those two boys ended up with some serious money.”







“And what about Darmo?” I asked in a silly voice, pretending to make fun of the story—but secretly curious to hear the end.

“Well, that’s the thing. Darmo didn’t believe he was dead. Ghosts can’t see their own bodies. He just thought those boys pushed him down and stole the gold. So, he went looking for them. Only he didn’t have a map anymore so he couldn’t find his way back to camp. And now he haunts this place, looking for those kids. He wants revenge and he wants his gold back. They say that at night you can sometimes see his shadow moving through the forest and down to the streams in the valley. People say they have heard him all the way down at the Big Hole River. The legend is that he tries to cause accidents out of revenge for the kids who got away. When he sees kids from the camp, he tries to make terrible things happen to them.”

“So, he’s the ghost of Skinner Meadows, eh?” I said sarcastically.

“Basically,” she said with a straight face. I really couldn’t tell if she believed this story or not. By this time, we had finally finished crossing the meadow. It had taken an hour and my pants and boots were drenched. Of course, I didn’t believe her story about Darmo haunting kids. But I thought she might be right about there being gold in the streams. I mean, I knew people panned for gold in California, so why not Montana? Anyway, it got me thinking.

But then I had to stop thinking. Mike was shouting at everyone, telling us to regroup as we went up the last part. It was getting late in the afternoon. He wanted everyone hiking together. The last part of the hike from the meadow up to Darkhorse Lake was really steep. We could follow the main “road” again but it was pretty cold since we were in the shadow of the mountain. My pants started to freeze. We all put our snow parkas on. It took a while to get up the trail, but it was actually easier walking than the meadow, because the snow wasn’t mushy and muddy. Layla walked nearby, but we didn’t talk anymore.

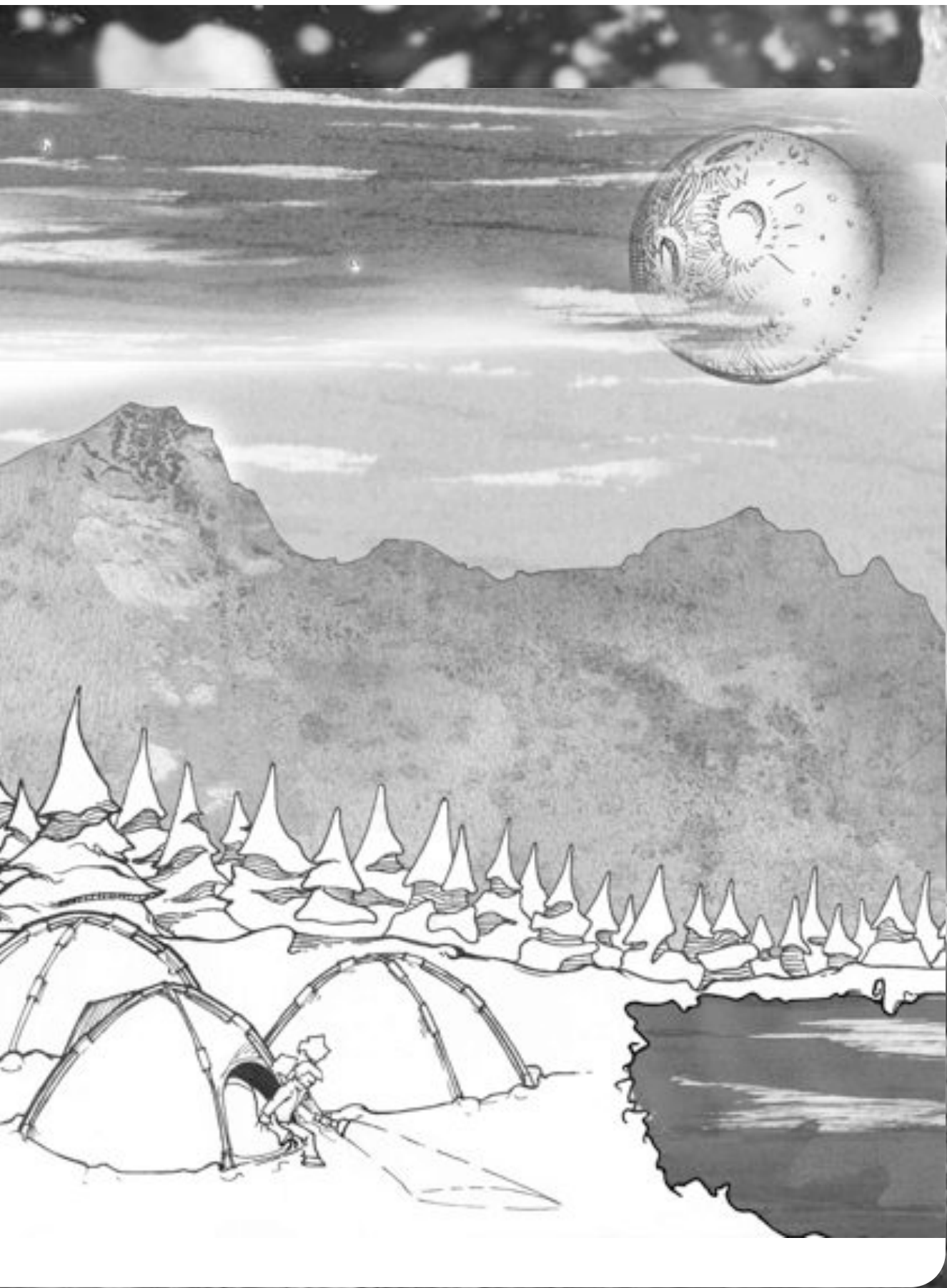
# Gold in Them There Hills

At around 5pm, we finally made it to Darkhorse Lake. Later that night—after we all did our jobs building the fire for cooking dinner, helping with dinner, setting up tents—I went up to Layla to say hi again. “Do you know we are 8,686 feet above sea level here?” was my opening line. Geeeeezzz. Super geek again. I don’t know what was wrong with me. Anyway, I just went on about how cool it would be to see the Continental Divide—that we were so close to seeing it, etc. When I finally stopped babbling for a moment, Layla said, “Yeah it would be cool to see the Divide. Let’s go see it at sunrise tomorrow. Wanna?”

“Sure,” I said, surprising even myself. “I am not going to get any sleep in this freezing weather anyway.” The entire snow camping thing brought the concept of roughing it to a whole new level. We had all kinds of gear, but it was still really cold. Layla and I agreed that we would pretend to go to sleep. Then, we would meet a little after midnight to start our hike to the Divide.

A few hours later, I felt someone poking me. Layla had come into the boys’ tent to wake me up because my pretend sleep had turned into serious deep sleep. When I got outside the tent, I pulled out a mess tin that I had taken from dinner. “New idea: I think we can pan for gold with this.”

Layla laughed. “So, you’d rather do that than see the Continental Divide?”

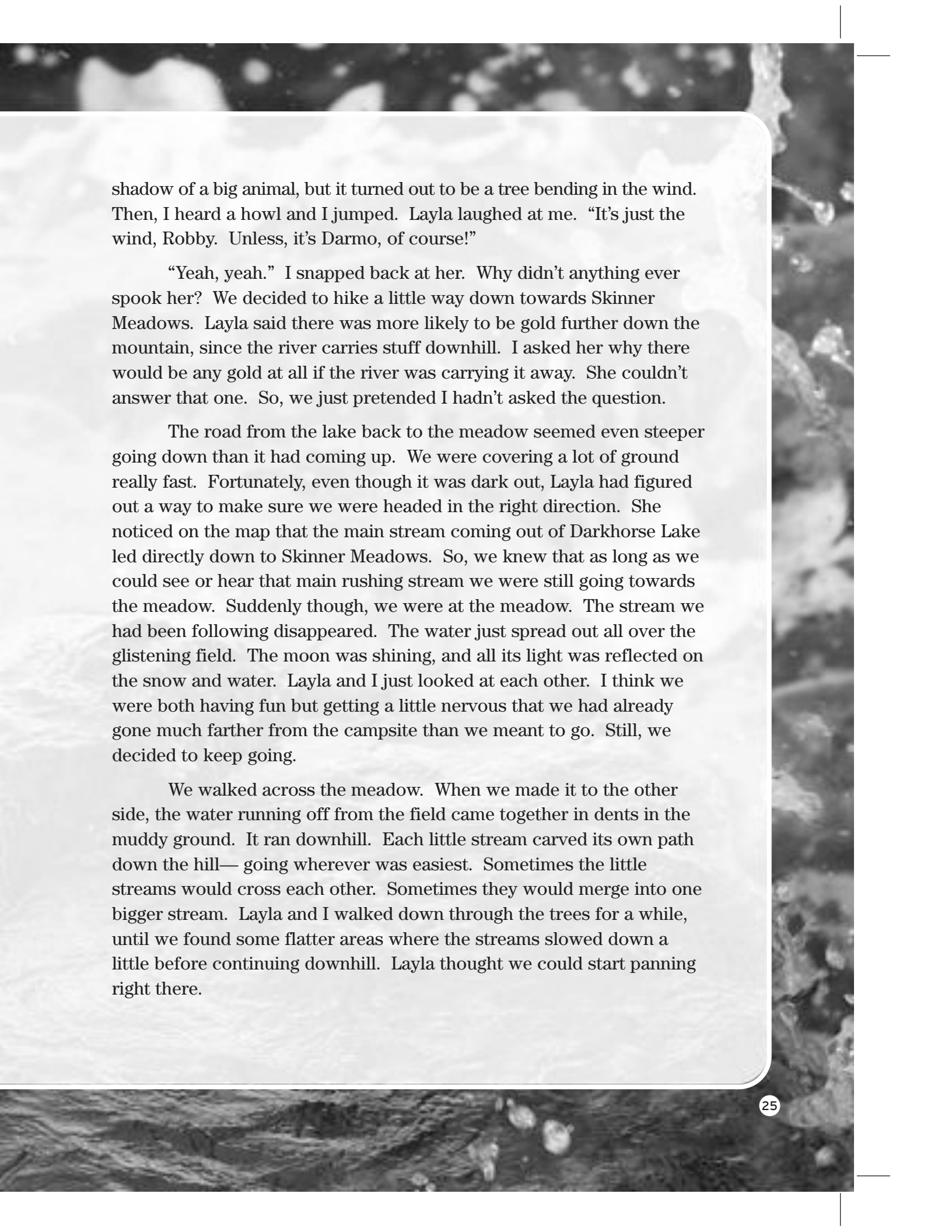






“We can see the Divide later with everyone else,” I said. “Let’s hike back down and find a stream somewhere.” I knew I would probably get lost without her help. She knew it, too. I guess that’s why she agreed to come with me, even though she probably would have much rather seen the sunrise over the Continental Divide.

It was dark but the moon was up. It was kind of beautiful and super creepy at the same time. For a moment, I thought I saw a



shadow of a big animal, but it turned out to be a tree bending in the wind. Then, I heard a howl and I jumped. Layla laughed at me. “It’s just the wind, Robby. Unless, it’s Darmo, of course!”

“Yeah, yeah.” I snapped back at her. Why didn’t anything ever spook her? We decided to hike a little way down towards Skinner Meadows. Layla said there was more likely to be gold further down the mountain, since the river carries stuff downhill. I asked her why there would be any gold at all if the river was carrying it away. She couldn’t answer that one. So, we just pretended I hadn’t asked the question.

The road from the lake back to the meadow seemed even steeper going down than it had coming up. We were covering a lot of ground really fast. Fortunately, even though it was dark out, Layla had figured out a way to make sure we were headed in the right direction. She noticed on the map that the main stream coming out of Darkhorse Lake led directly down to Skinner Meadows. So, we knew that as long as we could see or hear that main rushing stream we were still going towards the meadow. Suddenly though, we were at the meadow. The stream we had been following disappeared. The water just spread out all over the glistening field. The moon was shining, and all its light was reflected on the snow and water. Layla and I just looked at each other. I think we were both having fun but getting a little nervous that we had already gone much farther from the campsite than we meant to go. Still, we decided to keep going.

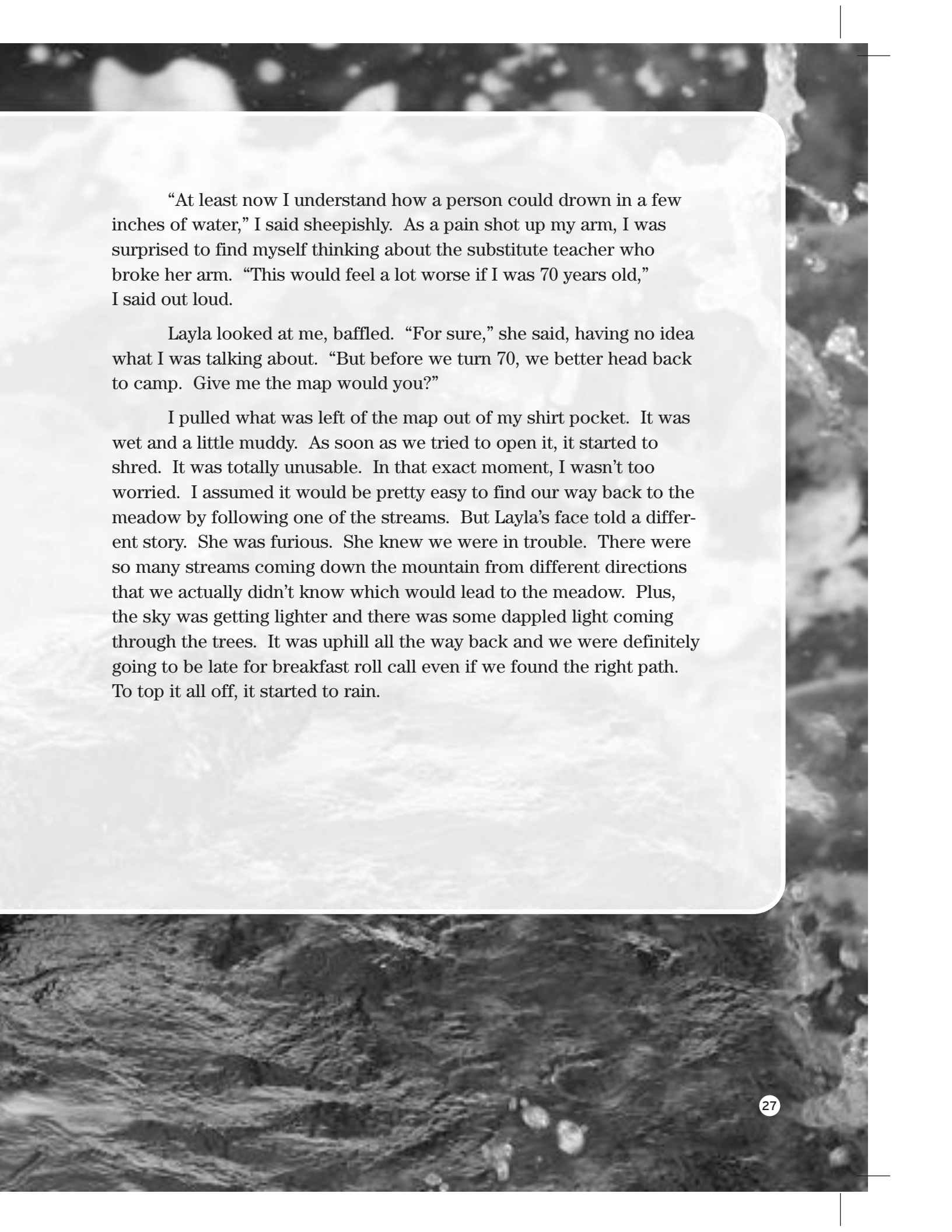
We walked across the meadow. When we made it to the other side, the water running off from the field came together in dents in the muddy ground. It ran downhill. Each little stream carved its own path down the hill— going wherever was easiest. Sometimes the little streams would cross each other. Sometimes they would merge into one bigger stream. Layla and I walked down through the trees for a while, until we found some flatter areas where the streams slowed down a little before continuing downhill. Layla thought we could start panning right there.

I stood in that spot looking around for a few minutes. I was noticing that overall there was very little snow in this area, and a lot more mud. Plus, there were little piles of stones and sticks and things that the streams carried and dropped at certain points. I think it was just about then that Layla guessed that I must not know how to pan for gold after all. Since I obviously had no idea where to begin, she grabbed the mess tin out of my hand and walked into the slow part of the stream. Then she started sifting pebbles and dirt out of the water.

“What, do I have to do everything around here?” she said, half annoyed and half kidding. I walked up close to her to watch what she was doing. Then she let me have a turn. She showed me how to sift the sediment out of the water in the pan. We even found a fleck of gold or two. It was kind of a kick. A moment after that I was focusing pretty hard on the pan, when I heard some branches snap and what sounded like footsteps. I was startled, so I jumped and then immediately slipped. Somehow I managed to land face down in the riverbed with my hand caught under a rock. Layla just looked at me in disbelief. A badger came scampering through with some small victim in its mouth—kind of gross but definitely not a ghost. “Well, that was scary,” Layla said sarcastically and smiled at me.



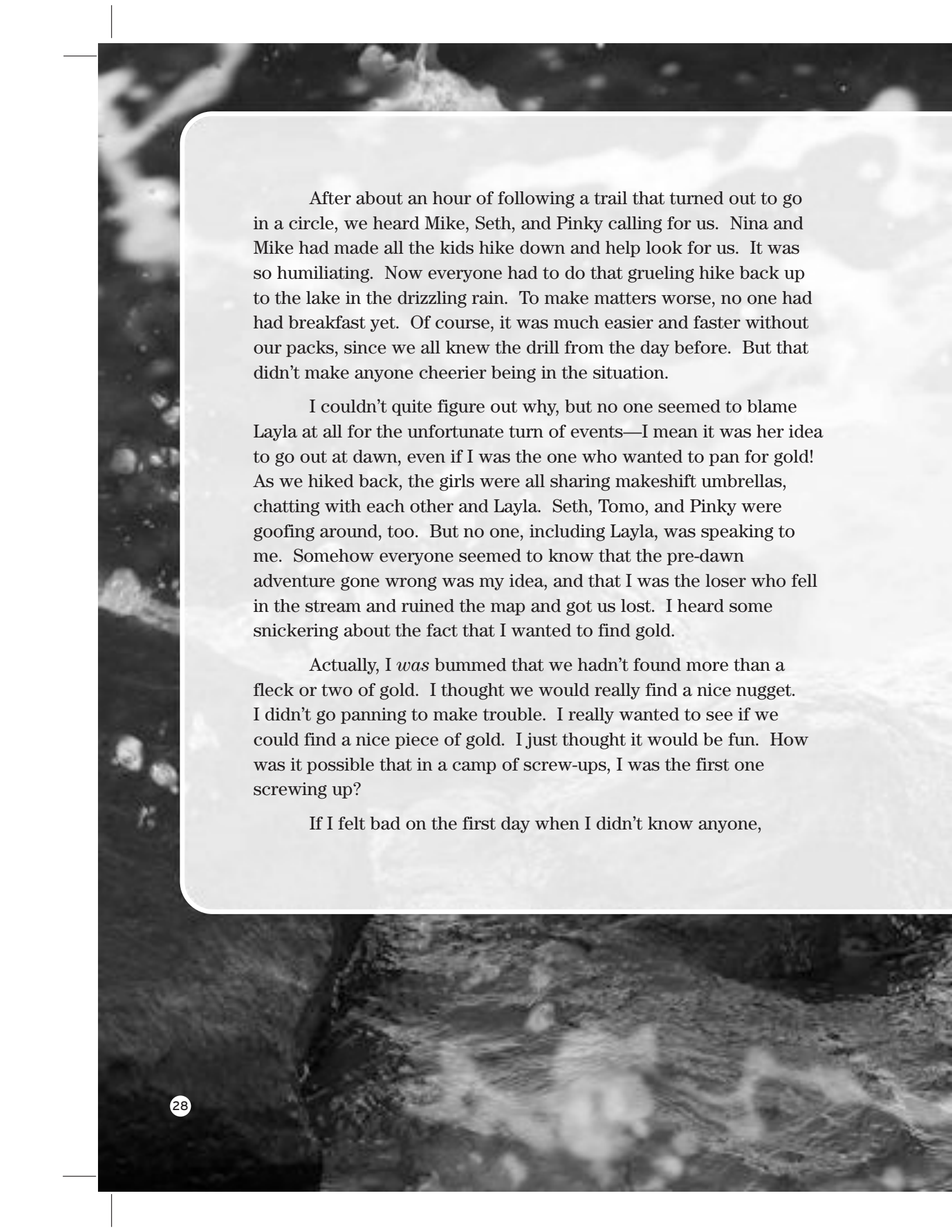




“At least now I understand how a person could drown in a few inches of water,” I said sheepishly. As a pain shot up my arm, I was surprised to find myself thinking about the substitute teacher who broke her arm. “This would feel a lot worse if I was 70 years old,” I said out loud.

Layla looked at me, baffled. “For sure,” she said, having no idea what I was talking about. “But before we turn 70, we better head back to camp. Give me the map would you?”

I pulled what was left of the map out of my shirt pocket. It was wet and a little muddy. As soon as we tried to open it, it started to shred. It was totally unusable. In that exact moment, I wasn’t too worried. I assumed it would be pretty easy to find our way back to the meadow by following one of the streams. But Layla’s face told a different story. She was furious. She knew we were in trouble. There were so many streams coming down the mountain from different directions that we actually didn’t know which would lead to the meadow. Plus, the sky was getting lighter and there was some dappled light coming through the trees. It was uphill all the way back and we were definitely going to be late for breakfast roll call even if we found the right path. To top it all off, it started to rain.




After about an hour of following a trail that turned out to go in a circle, we heard Mike, Seth, and Pinky calling for us. Nina and Mike had made all the kids hike down and help look for us. It was so humiliating. Now everyone had to do that grueling hike back up to the lake in the drizzling rain. To make matters worse, no one had had breakfast yet. Of course, it was much easier and faster without our packs, since we all knew the drill from the day before. But that didn't make anyone cheerier being in the situation.

I couldn't quite figure out why, but no one seemed to blame Layla at all for the unfortunate turn of events—I mean it was her idea to go out at dawn, even if I was the one who wanted to pan for gold! As we hiked back, the girls were all sharing makeshift umbrellas, chatting with each other and Layla. Seth, Tomo, and Pinky were goofing around, too. But no one, including Layla, was speaking to me. Somehow everyone seemed to know that the pre-dawn adventure gone wrong was my idea, and that I was the loser who fell in the stream and ruined the map and got us lost. I heard some snickering about the fact that I wanted to find gold.

Actually, I *was* bummed that we hadn't found more than a fleck or two of gold. I thought we would really find a nice nugget. I didn't go panning to make trouble. I really wanted to see if we could find a nice piece of gold. I just thought it would be fun. How was it possible that in a camp of screw-ups, I was the first one screwing up?

If I felt bad on the first day when I didn't know anyone,



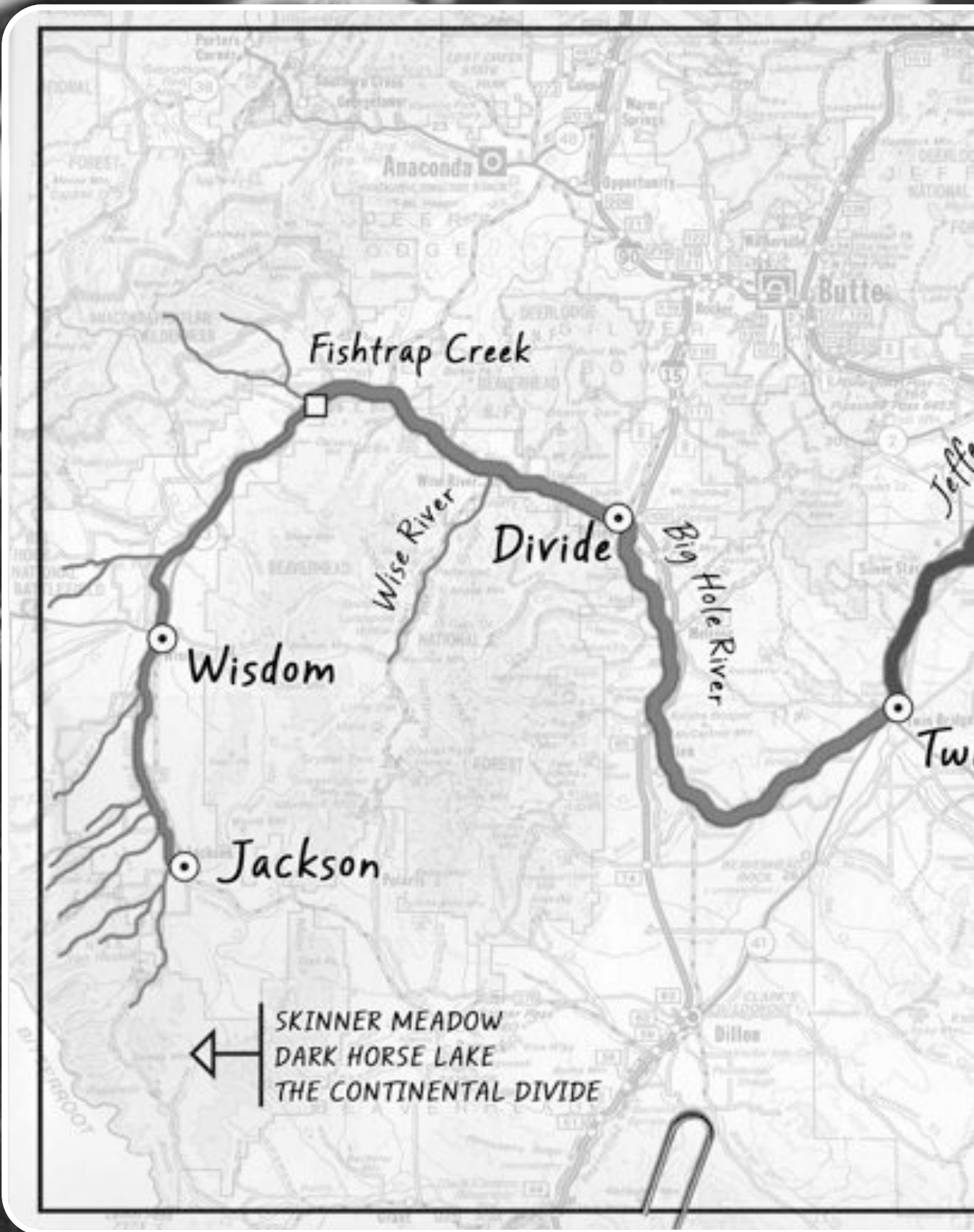
I felt worse on that third day, because now the one person who maybe was going to be my friend was really mad at me. Layla totally blamed me for leading us so far down the mountain, and for ruining the map. But you know I didn't twist her arm and make her go with me or anything! The entire group had me pegged as the big joke, loser guy.

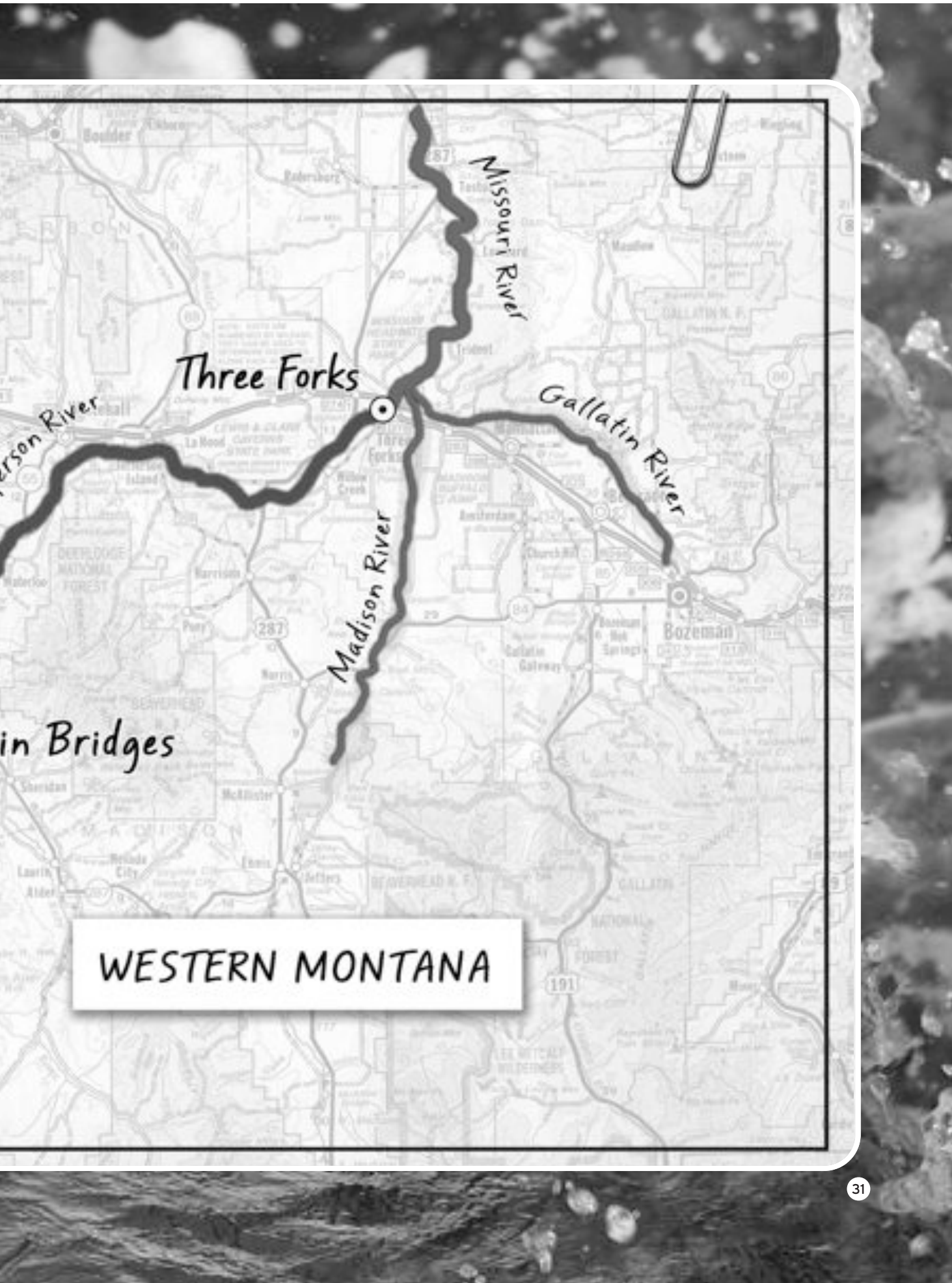
My penance for our little outing was doing all kinds of work at the campsite with Nina, while everyone else got to go to the Continental Divide. I overheard Tomo and Pinky later on saying that the rain was actually snow up at the Divide. They said everything had a fresh layer of white on it. They also said that the snow that melted on the East side of the divide went into oceans to the East. And, all the snow that melted on the West side of the Divide went to the oceans in the West. The water would never cross back to the other side of the continent. (I guess that's why it is called the Divide). It sounded pretty cool. But, I didn't let on that I was sorry I missed it.

The next morning Mike had me hike down the mountain early with him, so I could help set up lunch for the rest of the group. That was the last of my additional assignments. From then on, I just went back to the normal drill. Layla had some demerits and had to do some stuff, too, but not much. The worst part was still just how mad she was at me.

If I had known that the situation was going to get worse before it got better, I would have found a way to leave Camp Windpipe right then. But ignorance has certain benefits, it turns out.







Three Forks

Missouri River

Gallatin River

Madison River

Western Bridges

WESTERN MONTANA



# Running Water

The next day was a Wednesday—I remember because the local ice cream store in Jackson had cones for \$1 on Wednesdays. We were back in Jackson and getting ready for a five-day river float and camping trip down the Big Hole River. It was the part of the program they call “Running Water.”

Mike and Nina said that Layla and I had not been promoted to the next level, so the entire team wasn’t technically promoted. But they would let us all participate in the next level and then decide if we would get credit later.

I tried not to think of what it would mean if after all this we didn’t get credit for the program. I decided to focus, instead, on how nice it was to be in normal June weather again. It was almost 70° and really sunny that day. It was so nice, in fact, that it was hard to understand why Nina and Mike were making such a big deal about having the right gear for the river trip.

I started getting the drift when they told us we would have to learn how to fly fish for this trip. That would involve standing in the river for hours at a time. “The river that started at the Continental Divide?” asked Layla.

“Right, Layla” said Mike. “A lot of the water in the Big Hole River comes from streams like the big one you saw coming down from Darkhorse Lake. Darkhorse and some other lakes up there are considered the headwaters for the Big Hole River.”

I had a flashback to that freezing cold water on my hands while I was panning for gold. We were going to be standing in water like that for hours?!



“Cool,” said Pinky. He and Layla were jazzed about this connection between the mountain water and the river. When did they get to be such good friends? I wondered to myself, but decided not to think about it. Pinky gave me this look like he was superior or something. What if I got stuck with him for five days going down the river? What about getting paired with anyone from this group for five days? Mike and Nina made this big deal about how we would be depending on each other for survival, and believe me, ever since the panning for gold fiasco, nobody wanted to depend on me.

Thursday morning we pulled straws to see who would go in what canoe. Guess who was with me? That’s right. Layla. Everyone thought that was hilarious, except for Layla and me. Nina just said, “Ah, you never can tell what the fickle finger of fate will bring you.”



Then, she and Mike smiled at each other like that was the funniest thing in the world. It became obvious later that they had planned for Layla and me to be together. They thought we'd both learn a lesson by having to work together again. But, they hadn't planned on what would happen to us. Of course, at the time, I didn't know what was about to happen to us either, so I thought, "Fine, this whole trip is about survival. Watch me survive."

We loaded our canoes onto the racks that are pulled by the van. Then we all got in the minivan. Each of us had our own paddle, life jacket, fishing gear and small pack.





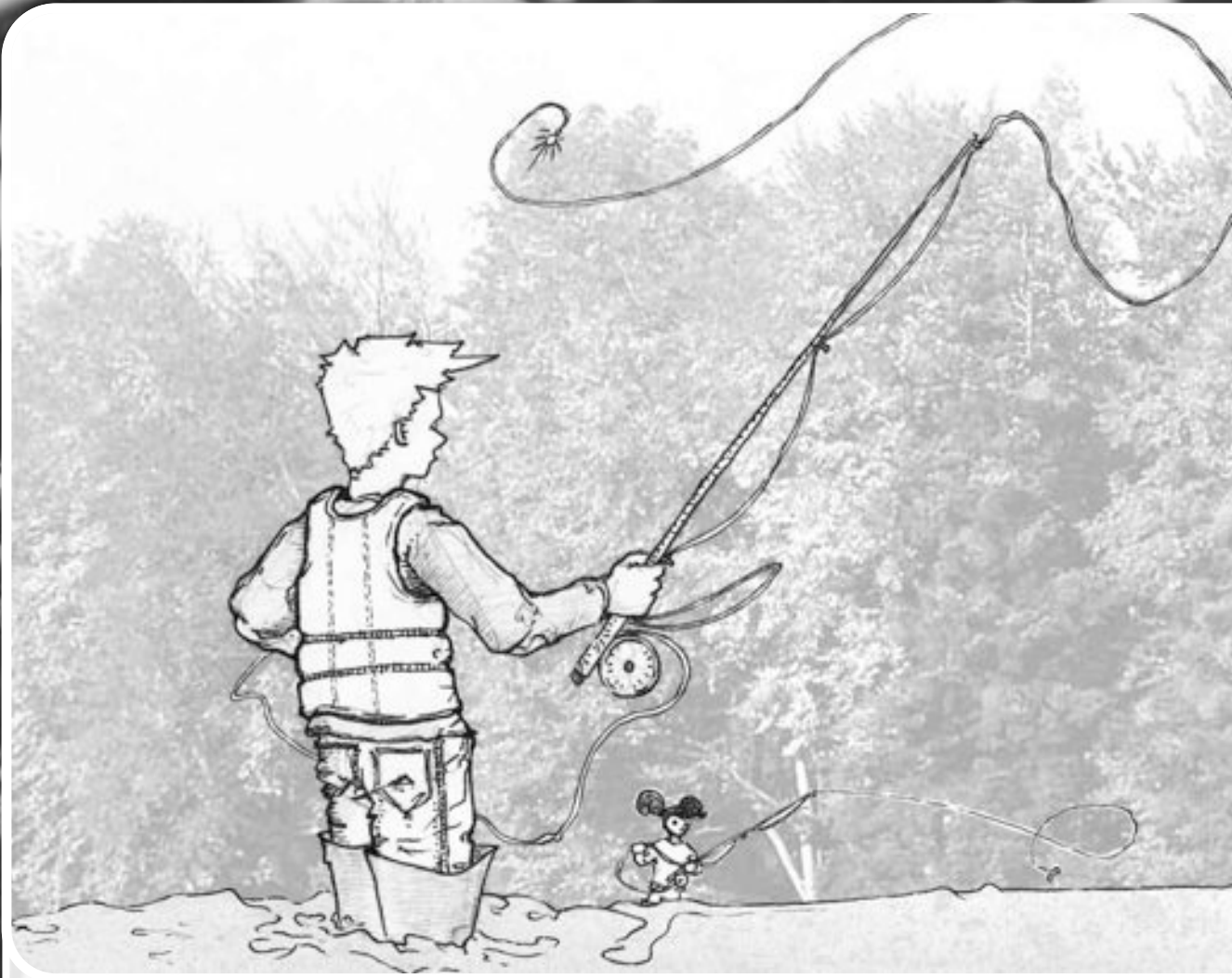
For a couple of hours we drove north along a road that basically followed the Big Hole River. Almost everyone was asleep but Tomo and me. Tomo was reading a book. I was looking out the window. The river was pretty shallow but getting bigger all the time. Little streams kept feeding into it, mile after mile. The river gurgled its way through the valley. Sometimes you could see the river divide and come back together. Mostly it just went here and there, always taking the easiest path—just like the streams we saw in the mountains. The mountains were still there, too, on either side of us but kind of far away. Once we passed through a town called Wisdom, though the mountains felt closer again. Finally, we got to the put in. It was where Fishtrap Creek fed into the river. The river was a lot bigger here. I guess the other rivers and streams really filled it up. If you looked carefully you could see that there was a lot of water moving along.



Layla and I put on our life jackets, loaded our canoe into the water, and loaded our gear into the canoe. She wasn't much for chatting with me, but we had to talk about who would steer. We both wanted to, no surprise. So, we flipped a coin. I won. She got in the front and I pushed off. Almost right away we started to squabble. For almost half an hour she kept turning around to complain that I needed to keep in time with her paddling. Since she was in front I could see her and she couldn't see me. "Don't you understand that?" she kept asking.


Then, suddenly, I noticed that the mountains had moved in on us. We were now floating in the bottom of a canyon. I looked at my compass. "Layla, wasn't the river going north? Why does my compass say east now?"





"I guess it couldn't go north anymore" she said quietly. "I mean how could it get through these walls or even over them?" Layla sounded so grave. She identified with the smallness of the river below these big canyon walls. Could it be that Layla was finally nervous about something?

After a few hours of floating, we stopped all together for our first fishing session. The river widened up a little, and we could stand along the side of the river. Mike reminded us to cast out, and slowly reel back. Then, we spread out with our partners. Most partners talked and messed about with each other. Layla and I didn't even look at each other, much less talk.



But, you know, I didn't really feel like talking anyway. I stood there in the water—knee deep with my waders on—casting, teasing the fly over the water, and then slowly reeling back. The other kids had gone around a bend down river, so the only person I could see was Layla. After a while, she just sort of blended in with everything, like she was part of nature.

The way Layla fished, it was like she belonged there, even with her weird hair and strange clothes. She was really graceful when she cast, and really calm while she waited for a fish to bite. But, I was calm there, too. There was something about water—the way it sounded against the banks and over the rocks. It was like we were a million miles away from every bad thing.

I must have been spacing out a little because I didn't feel the tug until Layla said, "I think you got something." I reeled my line back in and grabbed this good looking fish they call a "Big German Brown trout." I took it off the fly, and threw the trout in our bucket. After just a while, Layla and I had caught three brown trout. We went back to find Nina, so she could show us how to kill them and prepare them to be cooked.

As we walked along the river, Layla and I still weren't talking. But it was as if some of her anger had been left back where we had been fishing. I left some of my anger there too—my anger about having to be at this camp in the first place.

We floated a little more that evening and then set up camp where the Wise River pays tribute to the Big Hole River. Just kidding. That's just an expression I learned here. When one river feeds into a bigger river, it usually becomes part of that new river. The first river is then called a tributary to the second.

We all ate our freshly caught fish for dinner together. Then we camped, there at the end of Wise River. My muscles ached, but a good kind of ache. I slept pretty well.



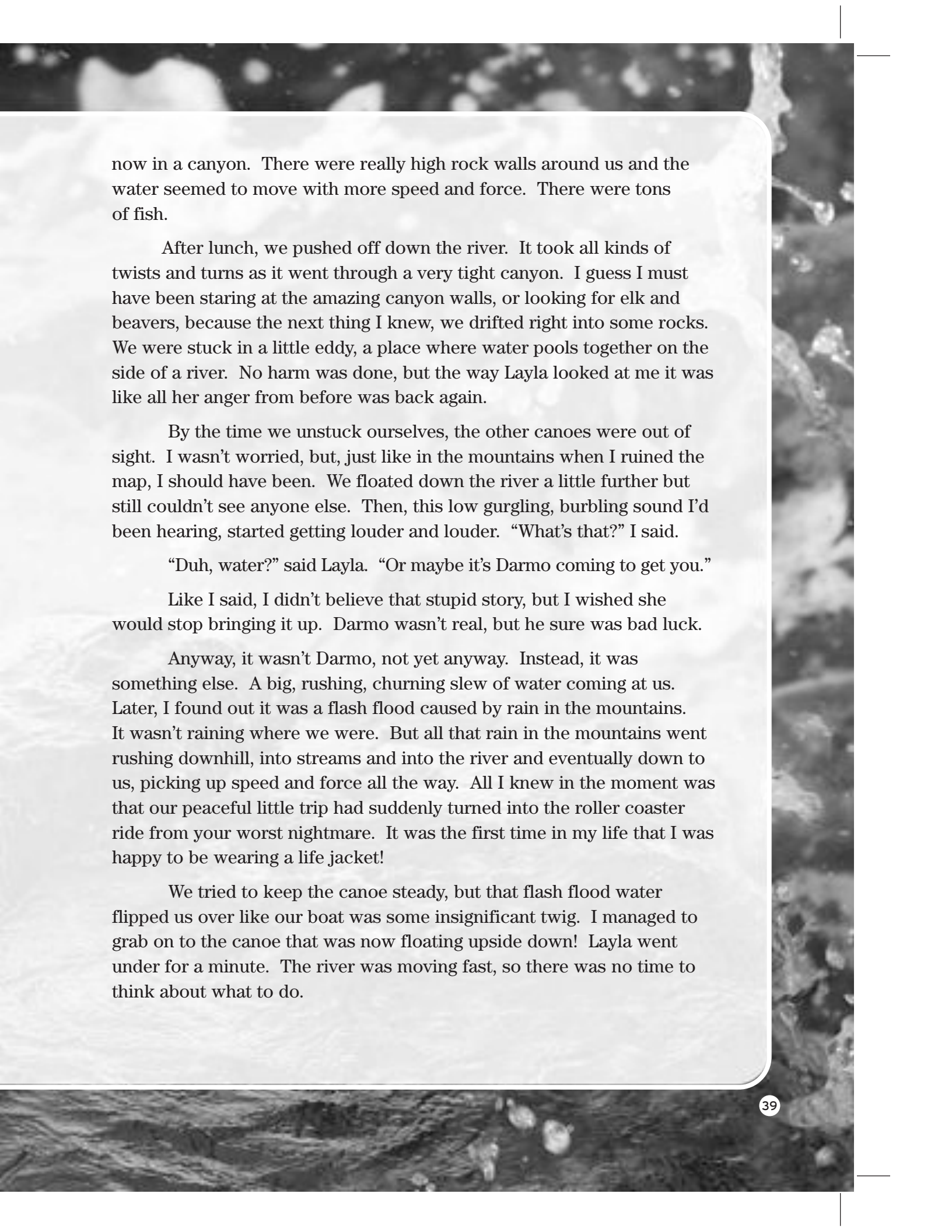
# Freaky Flash Flood

The next day was pretty much like the first. We were floating from where the Wise River feeds into the Big Hole River to a place called Divide. You've got to love these names. (I wish someone could tell me all the stories of where the names come from.) It was just our second day on the Big Hole River, but I had to admit it was beautiful. I even had to admit that I was becoming used to the fact that no one was talking to me. It was like everyone had just gotten in the habit of not speaking to me. It wasn't a big deal anymore. I had become an outcast, and that was just the way it was going to be. Of course, I would have expected that maybe Pinky would have been the outcast, and not me. What can you do? Maybe it sounds wimpy to say but I think I understand a little better how all those losers in school feel. They probably feel like they didn't do anything to be labeled losers. And they can't do anything to be unlabelled.



We stopped for lunch that day halfway between Wise River and Divide. The river had changed its look and feel that morning. We were





now in a canyon. There were really high rock walls around us and the water seemed to move with more speed and force. There were tons of fish.

After lunch, we pushed off down the river. It took all kinds of twists and turns as it went through a very tight canyon. I guess I must have been staring at the amazing canyon walls, or looking for elk and beavers, because the next thing I knew, we drifted right into some rocks. We were stuck in a little eddy, a place where water pools together on the side of a river. No harm was done, but the way Layla looked at me it was like all her anger from before was back again.

By the time we unstuck ourselves, the other canoes were out of sight. I wasn't worried, but, just like in the mountains when I ruined the map, I should have been. We floated down the river a little further but still couldn't see anyone else. Then, this low gurgling, burbling sound I'd been hearing, started getting louder and louder. "What's that?" I said.

"Duh, water?" said Layla. "Or maybe it's Darmo coming to get you."

Like I said, I didn't believe that stupid story, but I wished she would stop bringing it up. Darmo wasn't real, but he sure was bad luck.

Anyway, it wasn't Darmo, not yet anyway. Instead, it was something else. A big, rushing, churning slew of water coming at us. Later, I found out it was a flash flood caused by rain in the mountains. It wasn't raining where we were. But all that rain in the mountains went rushing downhill, into streams and into the river and eventually down to us, picking up speed and force all the way. All I knew in the moment was that our peaceful little trip had suddenly turned into the roller coaster ride from your worst nightmare. It was the first time in my life that I was happy to be wearing a life jacket!

We tried to keep the canoe steady, but that flash flood water flipped us over like our boat was some insignificant twig. I managed to grab on to the canoe that was now floating upside down! Layla went under for a minute. The river was moving fast, so there was no time to think about what to do.

I let go of the boat and threw myself towards her. I managed to grab her life jacket and pull her around so I could make sure her head stayed out of the water. I knew to lie on my back with my feet up and to point them downstream—to avoid going head first into a rock! I held Layla on her back, too. Eventually, I got us into an area where we could get out of the water.

Layla was sputtering and coughing a little but totally fine. She gave me a huge smile and a hug when she realized that basically, I had saved her life.

Layla was just so tired and relieved to be okay that she didn't seem to notice it was getting dark and that we were sopping wet. This time, finally, I was the first one to get worried. We had no food, no one was around and we had no tent. But we did have a waterproof map which we decided would be best used in daylight, since last time we went adventuring in the dark it didn't go so well.

By mutual decision, we stayed where we were and worked on making a fire. In theory, we knew how to do it, but, in practice it took forever. Eventually though, we actually lit a little fire. We didn't have tons of dry stuff to burn but had enough to get a little warm and to dry off a bit. Then we lay down to sleep curled up between some rocks. Mother Nature cut us a break that night. The moon and the stars were out, but there was some cloud cover to keep us warm. And the wind died down, so that helped a lot.

I was counting the stars in the sky when Layla said, "Maybe Darma wasn't really a person's name. Maybe it stands for Dang Apple Rind Mold."

"Or maybe it's an abbreviation for DARN MOSQUITOES." I offered.

"Or possibly Dastardly, Absurd, Ridiculous Monster," she giggled.

"Did you make up that story Layla?! I swear if you did..."

"Noooo," she said giggling more. "I swear I didn't." Then, she said kind of peacefully, "But maybe someone else did." We were tired



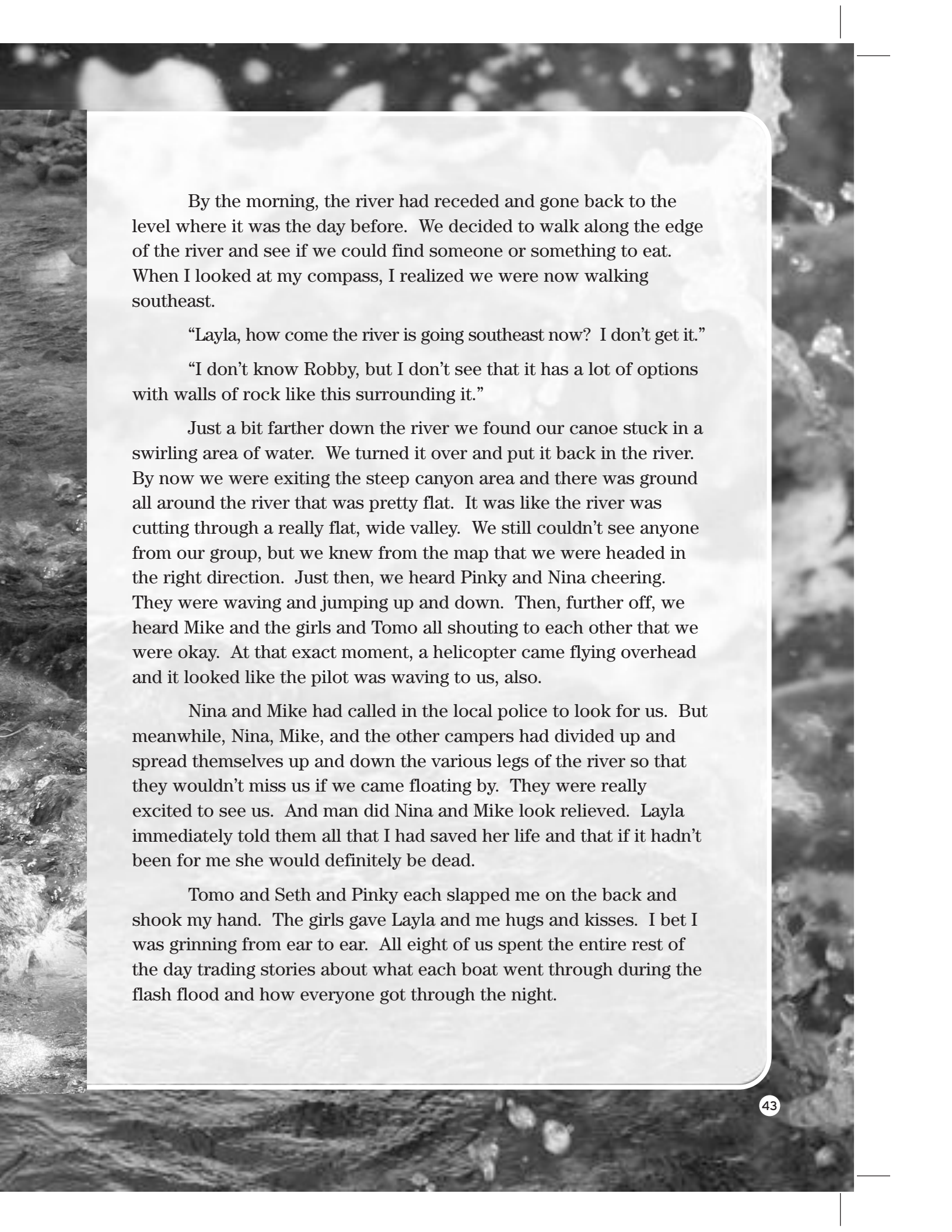
and hungry so we thought this was all very funny. Finally, when I was almost asleep, Layla said, “Maybe it stands for DAngerous River and Mountain.”

“Yeah. Well I think we’ve had enough danger for today,” I muttered. “Let’s go to sleep.” She put her head on my shoulder and we both drifted off. And that’s the last thing I remember about that conversation.









By the morning, the river had receded and gone back to the level where it was the day before. We decided to walk along the edge of the river and see if we could find someone or something to eat. When I looked at my compass, I realized we were now walking southeast.

“Layla, how come the river is going southeast now? I don’t get it.”

“I don’t know Robby, but I don’t see that it has a lot of options with walls of rock like this surrounding it.”

Just a bit farther down the river we found our canoe stuck in a swirling area of water. We turned it over and put it back in the river. By now we were exiting the steep canyon area and there was ground all around the river that was pretty flat. It was like the river was cutting through a really flat, wide valley. We still couldn’t see anyone from our group, but we knew from the map that we were headed in the right direction. Just then, we heard Pinky and Nina cheering. They were waving and jumping up and down. Then, further off, we heard Mike and the girls and Tomo all shouting to each other that we were okay. At that exact moment, a helicopter came flying overhead and it looked like the pilot was waving to us, also.

Nina and Mike had called in the local police to look for us. But meanwhile, Nina, Mike, and the other campers had divided up and spread themselves up and down the various legs of the river so that they wouldn’t miss us if we came floating by. They were really excited to see us. And man did Nina and Mike look relieved. Layla immediately told them all that I had saved her life and that if it hadn’t been for me she would definitely be dead.

Tomo and Seth and Pinky each slapped me on the back and shook my hand. The girls gave Layla and me hugs and kisses. I bet I was grinning from ear to ear. All eight of us spent the entire rest of the day trading stories about what each boat went through during the flash flood and how everyone got through the night.



# Finding My Way Solo



It's hard to imagine that after all that, Layla and I would voluntarily get back in a boat. But we did finish our float trip and ended up at Twin Bridges, just like we planned. We covered 81 miles in those five days going from Fishtrap Creek to what is basically the end of the Big Hole River. In Twin Bridges, the Big Hole River pays tribute to the Jefferson River. It just ends there, as suddenly as it started in the mountains around Darkhorse Lake.

All of this area, I learned later, is the route that those famous explorers Lewis and Clark took in the early 1800's. The only thing is, that they were going the other direction—Upriver. Not sure how, or why

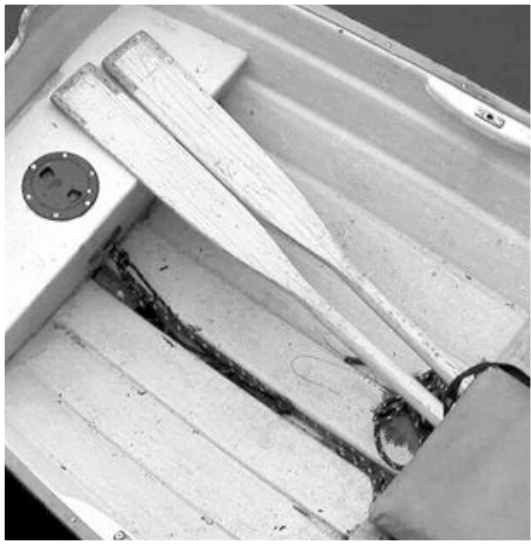


they did that. But I can see that if you didn't have a car, floating down one river to the next could be a great way to travel.



So, the last thing I had to do on this trip, before writing these notes, was to take a trip on my own. The counselors decide when you're ready to do your solo. And everyone has to do a solo before the team can leave. Saving Layla's life, and the two of us making it through the night without any supplies, made Nina and Mike pretty sure we were both ready to solo. The other kids had been approved to do their solos also.

Mike and Nina told us that we had all been promoted through levels one and two now, and that we would all be getting credit for the program if we finished our solos. But somehow getting credit didn't seem so important anymore. I was just glad everyone was talking to me again, and thinking about my solo.



The only problem was that I wasn't actually looking forward to the solo. It's one thing to sleep out in the wild with just one other person, but to do it totally alone is an entirely different thing. I wasn't the only person who felt this way. Seth, Tomo, and Pinky all admitted that they were not sure they were looking forward to their solos. Still, we all knew we would do it.

Maybe Mike sensed that we needed some time to get mentally prepared. He had arranged for all us guys to spend the day together on the way to the solo drop-off point. So, we packed up our gear in Twin Bridges and drove north, basically along the Jefferson River.

We stopped in a town called Three Forks for lunch. And Mike showed us how, just outside of town, a river called the Madison and a river called the Gallatin merge with the Jefferson to form the huge and famous Missouri River. That's how the town got its name—Three Forks.





There is also the world's largest Beaver Dam here. It's over 2000 feet long and 14 feet high! Pinky and Tomo did an imitation of two beavers building a dam. One was doing all the work and the other was telling him what to do. It was so funny I almost went to the bathroom in my pants.



That day we also got to see waterfalls and the shortest river in the Country. Outside a town called Great Falls, there are big waterfalls. There are also these springs, where almost 200 MILLION gallons of water spill out of the Earth every day. All that water runs 200 feet to the Missouri River—and makes a little river called the Roe. Weird stuff like that is cool.

All this sightseeing and hanging out was such a change. I have to admit it was decent not feeling like the outsider anymore. But all that chumming around didn't last long. We each had to do our solo that night, so Mike kept us moving along. We were each going to be dropped off inside the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, somewhere along the Upper Missouri River.

Mike dropped me off first. I knew that somewhere, not so far away, Tomo and Pinky and Seth would each be doing their solos, too. And I knew that the counselors had to know exactly where I was. But, the idea was that you had to spend the night by yourself, and you really didn't know exactly where anyone else was. Now it would just be me, my camping gear, a bunch of dried food and my fishing pole. In the morning I was supposed to hike along the river to a designated spot where they would pick me up again in the middle of the day. Mike gave me a radio to call him in case of emergency only. He stressed the word emergency.



At first it all seemed good. I set up my tent and ate a protein bar. I liked the nice chill in the air and watching the sunset. But things change at night, especially when you are by yourself. And the change is not always good kind of change, either. I could hear the water in the river just running along normally, but then, especially when the wind blew, it almost sounded like someone crying or moaning. And I kept thinking about that stupid Darmo story. Even if Darmo wasn't real, maybe there were other ghosts, ghosts of people who came to this place and never made it out again. What if all the voices of people drowned in the river somehow spoke or cried out? What if that was what I was hearing? What if Darmo wasn't true, but was sort of true?

The trees made these long-limbed shadows everywhere. Limbs and fingers reached out, grabbing in the night. I was pretty spooked out.

Then I thought I saw a light, a glowing greenish-yellow light. The wind picked up and the whistling of the wind through the canyons got louder and louder. I'd like to say I was brave, but I wasn't. I don't know where I thought I was going, but I started running fast. Suddenly, something reached out and grabbed my ankle, and I went down screaming, waiting for whatever it was that had come for me. And then I waited some more. And then I sat up. There was nothing there. My foot was caught in old tree root. That weird light was gone... totally gone.

My face was covered in dirt, but I sort of liked it. I found the smell of it comforting. It was dirt, but it smelled clean—a lot cleaner than the way the bunkhouse smelled, or sharing a tent with someone else.

I sat outside my tent, radio in my hand, ready to call for help at the first sign of that weird light. But it never came back. Eventually, I crawled into my tent and zipped it shut. I tried to just concentrate on the earthy scent, and how it reminded me of being a kid. At some point, just breathing in and out, I fell asleep.

In the really early morning, the birds woke me up. I ate a couple of cereal bars, packed up, and started walking down the river. The sun was just coming up and it spread over the water. The light glimmered against the white cliffs that ran alongside the river. There were some strange sandstone formations. But in the morning light they looked like friendly animals coming to say hello, or something.

As I walked and looked at the view around me, I realized that something was missing. That jumpy feeling that had been inside me for so long was gone. I had lost that feeling that nothing was quite right and that I was going to fail, in the end, at whatever I did—because I had done all this stuff and not failed. I did hike up the mountain to Darkhorse Lake and back down again. I canoed the Big Hole River. I caught my own trout. I saved Layla's life.




In my own way, I had been as powerful as that raging river when I needed to be. Little things seemed important too, like: I had made it through the night on my own; I could carry a heavy pack; and I could do what I needed to do. It didn't matter what other people thought. Deep down inside, I finally knew that I was not a loser.

I kept walking and watching the Missouri River flow. I thought about how the snow way up in the mountains melted into little rivulets that became streams. I thought about how all those streams joined together to become a river, and different rivers came together to



become this huge river. This river didn't come out of nowhere. It was made from something. And so much depended on the river—the fish, the animals, us. In a strange way, all of us depend on those little patches of melting snow we saw back at the beginning of our trip.





And maybe, somehow, small things we do could make for something big and important too. A river doesn't choose how it is going to be, but I can choose how I am going to be.

I liked how I was feeling that morning: strong, in control, and at the same time like I was part of something bigger than me, something I couldn't control. Having those two different feelings was okay, because the truth is that I can control some things but not everything. I CAN control what I do and how I react when things happen to me.

Then, I started thinking about the old lady. I hadn't thought about her since I slipped in the river while I was panning for gold. She was really the reason I was here in the first place. So, there by the river, with no one else around, I started to really think about her. I wanted to be able to be proud of myself. I wanted my family to be proud of me. I thought about how that lady had broken her arm, and how hard it must be to do things with a broken arm. I decided that when I got back, I would stop by to see her. I could maybe help her some, take out the garbage, run some errands, that kind of stuff. I know those are small things. But, like the little streams that turn into a big river, maybe my little good deeds could turn into something bigger.

And then, as I stopped to fish for my lunch, I stopped thinking about anything. It's hard to explain unless that's happened to you. It's like I just was. I just was like the river, like the trees and cliffs. I was just a part of the world. And it felt right.

I kept that feeling all the way as I hiked to where Mike came out to meet me. He had brought Layla with him. It was good to see her and I was happy to hear that she felt as good about her solo as I did about mine. We caught up with Nina, Seth, and the rest of the group and all piled back into the van.

Later that night, Layla and I talked a lot about all the stuff that happened to us, about the gold we never found and the ghosts that never got us. We talked about a lot more stuff, some of it too personal to put down here. But, I think we will stay friends for a long time.

Now this is the last thing we are supposed to do here—write down everything that happened, how we got here and how we feel. I hope I did a good job. I'm not just writing this so people will think I've learned my lesson and let me go home. I really have learned my lesson. And even though I want to go home, I know I'll miss fishing, going to sleep under the Big Sky, and Layla. But, mostly I will miss the flow of the river. I'll miss that feeling that it may go faster or slower, or get colder or muddier or fishier, but it just keeps flowing, without end.







