

One Moment in Time

Randolph's Leap is a grade 5e waterfall in Scotland.

It sits in the lower part of the River Findhorn and is a stretch of water that my friends and I paddled earlier this year. To those uninitiated to the terrors of white-water kayaking "5e" means you'd better be shit hot if you expect to pull yourself out of the river alive. However, on the day we paddled it, the river was running significantly low, otherwise I wouldn't have even been there.

But despite this, it must be said that the waterfall was still very, very dangerous. Now I'm not explaining this simply to boost my ego, although that's probably why I did it in the first place, but to outline the picture to those of you who read this now. I was very scared, and very humbled by the river.

What follows is an account of my thoughts and feelings as we shot the Leap. We were forced to wait for about half an hour on the bank before attempting the river, during which time the fear and coldness set in. The close proximity of such a potentially fatal stretch of water produced one of those genuinely rare male bonding moments that we all like to laugh about.

But as I sit here now and think about it, as I remember standing grouped together on that frozen land talking shit to each other, I know I wouldn't have wanted to have been anywhere else. We were all scared, and in that precious moment, from all our different backgrounds we opened ourselves to each other.

We may have been talking about fleece-lined wetsuits, but we were all thinking about life and death, and as such every one of us made damn sure we had something to say...

The river gurgles next to me, every second it sings and whistles its presence. *You cannot ignore me, she says. I am here all the time, whatever you do I will be here, running my way, you cannot forget me.* She sings happily at my torment, teasing me, as I try to convince myself of the folly of my actions.

She is life, eternally there, seemingly unconcerned about my tragedies, waving aside all my precious problems as she sings her incessant song. *Here I am, here I am, you can't hide from me Ziad...* I close my eyes, blocking the sight of the river. But it is no good.

Directly ahead lies a small calm patch of water apparently harmless, but all the more terrifying for its playful innocence. For around that rock just there, behind that mossy tree, Randolph's Leap awaits me. I can see Glenda's helmeted head just peeking above the rock, I am the last to go. The others have all done it and sit freezing in their boats waiting for me below.

I cannot allow myself the luxury of just sitting here and willing the moment of truth to go away, as I can no more simply will the waterfall to go away. Life crashes down upon me with cruel decisions, go or stay? But whatever you choose, no more flathering! Just choose now!

I'm going. Fuck, I can't believe I'm doing this. Quickly slide into your boat before your brain catches up with you. With fumbling hands I strap myself in, nice and tight. I try to forget the description of my boat as a plastic coffin and look for my paddle. It lies nearby on the ground next to me.

The heart pounds, remember lean left, one stroke, two stroke, brace on the right, brace on the right, no problem, bullshit. Do it now, go, go, go. I dip my canoe nose into the water, my body leaning forwards to throw my weight in fully and thereby committing me to this course of action...

But I stop.

No.

Not yet.

Leaning back, I look at this land that I am in. I search the trees for life, I examine the colour of the sky. Smells invade my nostrils as if for the first time. The warmth of the bark, the crispness of the morning. I can almost feel the presence of my friends around that rock waiting for me. I can see the colour of their friendship. I breathe deep, the air smells good, river water drips silently down my face bathing me in its infinite coolness.

Then my thoughts begin to drift. I think of home, I see my mother, she is holding me and laughing. I see the playful swing of brown permed hair, a Welsh face breaking into a smile, blue eyes glittering. I remember the tears, how far away they seem now. The world holds me to her breast and kisses me gently, washing away the pain.

This is it, in my heart I hold the nugget that is life, that is love. This is not adrenaline, I have not yet survived. This is fear, and the beautiful realisations that it brings with it.

I shake my head in understanding, and once more breathe in the deep smell of my wetsuit, feel the cold splash of the river and open my ears to the roar of the fall. Fuck, I can't believe I'm doing this.

Leaning forwards I slide into the river and feel the water begin its irresistible pull towards Randolph's Leap.

My hands shake now as I write this, but it was not like that as I paddled. I'm no river god, but once committed there was no fear only clear thinking. Get to the right, avoid that line, set up in the eddy and go for it.

All my carefully rehearsed plans left me then, I was not prepared for the sheer sudden force of the river. Too long I had lulled myself with the calmness of the water, not appreciating its full strength, until now as I hurtled towards the crack. Left brace. No, damn, wrong way. Too late I'm in.

The boat crunches against the rock, my paddle fly loose from my hands and then all I know is cold water and hard rock. It takes me a moment to realise that I am upside down, paddle completely pinned against me. Jammed in Randolph's Leap.

Suddenly I feel a cold hand against mine and then water rushes around my head, Glenda is there by the rock pulling me out of the mess I am in. A quick bang on the helmet. Ready? I nod. Teeth grit I bodily bang my way through the crack, sod the paddle, my body is far more effective at steering. Suddenly I am through, and I float with quiet wonderment into the pool beyond.

I see two boats waiting for me, Matt Elwin and Zeb, gods in their canoes as far as I am concerned. Zeb examines me swiftly and refrains from commenting, only when in the pub once more will he allow the responsibilities to fall away and begin his jokes, but out here he is thoroughly professional. I recall how Zeb is the only one of us to make it through the Leap upright. Matt E checks me quickly, and pushes me on.

The final deadly trick awaits, leaving the pool. Fuck up here, fall out of my boat and I am dead without a doubt. The fall is the energy of the rush, but this pool is the trap. Below me vicious undercurrents from the fall gouge out a deep underwater cave. Were I not in my boat now I would be sucked under and trapped in that cave. Survival was not a possibility, it would be difficult enough to recover my body. Gingerly, trying not to think about the depth below me, I grit my teeth and force my way out of the pool.

Below I join the others and pull to a stop beside two of my closest friends, Wolf and Mikey, their faces are tight with jubilation and exhilaration. But I can still see signs of worry there. Randolph's Leap, although the hardest, is only the first. Wolf looks at me, and tells me to wait for the adrenaline rush to kick in.

But strangely enough it never did, not how I expected. Or rather maybe it has, but it wasn't the instantaneous rush I thought it would be, a fulfilling and uplifting experience that quickly diminished. I paddled that stretch of water nearly five months ago now and I still can't fully believe that I did it.

But as I prepare to finish this piece and begin the laborious spellcheck I can still feel in my heart a rush of adrenaline from merely recalling what had happened. It's there, the wait, the fear, the river, it is all there in my heart forever. I guess that's what it was really all about...

By Ziad Al-Hasso, Written Sep 1996, Published Sep 2026. 8 minute read.

Randolph's Leap is a grade 5e waterfall on the Lower Findhorn River in Scotland. I paddled it in low water with some of the best people I have been fortunate enough to call my friends, the U.C.S. White Water Kayak Squad.