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Last July, I was the matron of honor in my cousin's wedding. My job was clear – plan the shower, write the speech, bustle the dress, and generally do anything she asked. Which was fine, until she asked me to join the rest of the wedding party .for a day of whitewater rafting on the Deschutes River in Oregon

This makes total sense: my cousin's fiancé, now a Portland environmental lobbyist, was a whitewater rafting guide on the North, Middle and South Fork American Rivers for over a decade. And my cousin, who routinely does things like run triathlons and eat twig salads for fun, is very outdoorsy.

I, however, am not.

I am the very picture of a city-dweller. I can tell you the likelihood of bad traffic on any of the Los Angeles freeways at any given time, along with several alternate routes. The most wildlife I deal with is the squirrels and pigeons my dog chases out of my cement-filled back yard. In short, this was not going to be my scene.

Given that, I was much less nervous about my trip than one might expect. Or at least I was until my cousin's fiancé sent out an email to all the rafters with vital information like what to wear, when to meet, and the fact that we might potentially die. Generally, when you see such sentences in a waiver at some random adventure outfit, you sign it and don't give it a second thought because obviously this language is a boilerplate business precaution. When you receive that in a personal email—even if you know it was probably cut and paste from that person's former adventure outfitter business—let's just say that it gives you pause.

In that one paragraph, I went from 'Yay! Rafting trip!' to 'How much Valium can I take before I get on the boat?' My husband, who had been whitewater rafting before and who is accustomed to my periodic, often nature-induced panic attacks, went into reassurance mode. 'We'll be fine,' he said. 'I went with my parents when I was eight. If you fall out of the boat, all you have to do is sit, put your legs straight out ahead of you, and hold onto your life jacket.'

'Oh God,' I thought.

In my defense, I was far from the only one panicked by this email. In fact, the bride's brother immediately called her to express his concerns for all of us and potentially back out of the trip. This is a guy who has gone sky diving before—of his own volition.

The Deschutes River is a cold, north-flowing tributary of the Columbia River. Named the "Riviere des Chutes" (river of falls) by French fur traders who used it in the 1800s, the headwaters of the Deschutes are at Little Lava Lake in the Cascades.

These days, the main action is rafting and fishing. The downstream section between Warm Springs and Sherars Falls is especially popular for whitewater rafting, with many outfitters leading trips out of Maupin, OR.

When the time came to start rafting, of course it went smoothly. I lucked out and got in a slightly less adventurous boat helmed by a groomsman who had run the Deschutes many times. I busied myself with swearing vociferously at the other boats when they started a splashing war on the quieter stretches (that water is cold!). Of course, this doesn't count the part where I very nearly fell out into the very first rapid. Note to self: take bracing yourself seriously. But in general it was lovely, bouncy, safe-adrenaline fun all the way.

That is, until we decided to get out and voluntarily ride through the Upper Elevator Rapids sans boat. I thought this sounded like a magnificent idea—a chance to practice going through the rapids without the anxiety of actually falling in? Perfect!

Or not. The thing about rapids is that it's hard to figure out when to breathe. You see a gap before the next wave is going to splash on your face and you want to inhale and get in a big gulp of air. However, if you time it wrong you get a big gulp of water instead. Fearing said big gulp of water, I started hyperventilating and couldn't get my chest to expand for a deep breath—a situation not aided by the cold water.

Struggling for air, my instinct was to push my legs down to tread water and get my head up higher above the water. This is not what one would call a good idea. This is, in fact, how you can catch your foot on something under the water and really do drown, which I thankfully managed not to do. Then I would catch myself and thrust my legs out in front of me and panic and hyperventilate some more. Delightful.

At the first chance, I dove out of the rapids and swam like hell to get back on land, where I promptly informed anyone who would listen that I would not be repeating the experience. We got back in our boats—which I was far less enthused to do now—and I white-knuckled it the rest of the blissfully short way.

In retrospect, I realize the hyperventilating was probably much more about me than the rapids. Perhaps the next time I want to 'practice,' I should do it in a baby Class I rapid in the world's warmest river. Or better yet, in a wave pool at a water park. Or maybe the next time my cousin and her new husband suggest a whitewater rafting trip, I might invite them over .for a movie on my big-screen TV instead. Inside. While my dog chases away the pigeons