

A sharp wind ripped through my thin windbreaker as I stared out at the glittering blue of Elkhorn Slough. I stood shivering with cold on the dock, watching the bright orange kayaks float across the rippling water. My family and I had decided to go kayaking on a large body of water called Elkhorn Slough. I was excited, but felt a tingle of nervousness because I had never operated a kayak before. Since there were four people in my family and kayaks could seat two people, my father and my brother would be going in one kayak and my mother and I would be going in another.

Another icy breeze billowed through my windbreaker as a man on the dock helped my dad and my younger brother into a kayak. As they pushed away from the shore and paddled away, the man pulled up another orange kayak and instructed us to sit inside. My mother was in the back, in charge of controlling the rudder that would steer us, and I sat in the front. I settled cautiously inside the uncomfortable, plastic seat and felt a twinge of anxiousness when I felt the waves rock the kayak. The man gave us some brief instructions about how to steer the boat, and then he pushed us off from the dock.

I dipped my paddle below the surface and dragged it through the water. Slowly at first, stroke after rhythmic stroke, we began gliding away from the dock towards the open water. A fresh breeze blew the sharp, salty scent of the water onto my face, and the current helpfully pushed us along down the slough. Peering across the sparkling, dark body of water, I spotted the sleek head of a sea otter pop above the surface not far away. I gasped, “Mom, look! See that sea otter?” I had never had such a creature so close to me.

“Wow!” We both admired the animal as it rolled around on the surface of the water, then disappeared beneath the gently lapping waves.

A dark shadow passed over us and we realized that our kayak was sailing underneath a bridge overhead. As we glided underneath the bridge and out the other side, I stared out at the sparkling water of the Elkhorn Slough, the deep blue color broken by the bright orange of the kayaks. There were some areas of the slough where the water was very shallow and you could see the brown rocks just below the surface. As we paddled forward, we slowed down to admire the several sea otters we saw along the way, their sleek black heads popping up here and there and their plump bodies splashing around.

After about an hour, my arm muscles were burning from the repeated strokes of the paddle through the water. I could tell my mother was exhausted, too. “Let’s

take a break,” I suggested, slumping back against the plastic seat and flexing my tired arms.

I placed my paddle on my lap and stretched my cramped legs. A salty spray flicked water droplets against my face and the sun warmed my cold face. We sat there lazily for a while, unaware of how our kayak was drifting steadily towards a shallow area of the slough. I closed my eyes and felt the warm golden rays soothe my freezing skin.

Bump!

Our kayak collided with a rock and my eyes flew open. “How could we have hit a rock? The slough is at least five feet deep!” I wondered.

The kayak scraped across another rock and that’s when I realized the current had caused us to float towards a shallow area of the slough where the water was only a foot deep. I glanced down into the water and noticed that there were rocks about half a foot away from the surface.

“Oh, great,” I muttered sarcastically. “How are we going to get out of this?”

“Try moving left toward the deep water,” my mother suggested, splashing water as she attempted to move the kayak away from the rocks. Snatching up my paddle, I jammed the end into the ground and shoved hard.

“Whoa!” The kayak rocked dangerously and glided a few feet closer to the deep waters before crashing into another rock. The whole kayak nearly tipped over and I grabbed onto the edge of the kayak with a yelp. “We can’t go left toward the deep water; let’s try moving backwards out of this.”

Using the paddle, I stuck it into the rocks in front of me and gave a huge push. The kayak sailed backwards for a few feet, and then slammed into a tangle of water plants. That didn’t help, either.

With a frustrated growl, I slumped back in the seat. “How did we even get in this position in the first place?” I wondered. A cold, frothing spray of salt water stung my exposed face as a bitter wind ripped at my windbreaker. My fingers were frozen and sore from gripping the paddle.

A freezing spray of water splashed against my face as a man skillfully approached us in his kayak. “Looks like you’re stuck,” he observed unhelpfully. “Need help?”

“Yes,” I panted breathlessly, grateful that he would help us get out of this situation.

“Turn right,” he instructed. My mother controlled the rudder to go right while I paddled furiously at the water. The kayak floated around in hopeless circles, pushed by the biting wind and bumping into rocks.

I felt like screaming out my frustration and rising panic. Even with the man’s help, we still couldn’t get out of this hopeless position. “No, no, not like that,” the man snapped. “You’ve got to push the water away from you; don’t just tap at it with your paddle.”

“I was!” I protested, using my wet hands to brush my hair out of my face as the wind stirred it. “Let’s try again.” This time, I splashed wildly at the water with my paddle, pushing it away from me like the man had told me to do. Again, we were unsuccessful and we ended up swirling around, colliding with rocks and water plants.

“I can’t do it!” I complained, my stomach curdling as panic rose up inside me. Desperately I jammed my paddle into the rocks and shoved with all my might. The kayak scraped across the rocks and traveled further into the shallow area. “Ugh!” I growled, on the verge of giving up but knowing I couldn’t. “Why is it not working?” Tears of panic and frustration welled up inside my eyes.

The man heaved a hopeless sigh. “I’m sorry, I can’t help you. You’ll just have to keep on trying.” I stared after him frantically as his neon orange kayak glided away and our only chance to get out faded.

“No, no!” I shrieked. “Please don’t go, we’ll be stuck here forever!” Never had I felt as helpless as I stared after him with tears streaming down my face and mingling with the salty spray of water. We had no chance now.

“Emily, calm down,” my mother said sharply. “We’ll get out of this.”

“No, we won’t! We’ll be stuck here forever! That man already gave up on us,” I wailed desperately.

I paddled furiously with all my might at the murky water as the kayak swirled around and nearly turned upside down when it bumped into jutting rocks and plants. *Why can’t I turn this stupid thing?* I thought with despair and fury. I flung the paddle across my lap and slumped back in the uncomfortable seat breathlessly. “Mom, how are we going to get out?” I demanded.

She glanced at me as though she wanted to comfort me, but instead puffed out a sigh and said, “I honestly don’t know.”

“This just gets better and better, doesn’t it?” I growled. Our kayak rocked as the current pushed us even further into the shallow area, crashing into rocks. “Well, we have to try,” I pressed.

As I grabbed the paddle, another man approached us in his kayak, gliding effortlessly over the forceful current with practiced ease. I stared hopefully at him, wondering if he was going to help us. "Are you stuck?" he asked over the noisy splashing of the water.

"Yes," I said, feeling a spark of hope flicker in my stomach.

"First, back up slightly," the man instructed. I dipped my paddled below the surface and dragged it forward through the water so that our kayak moved backward. Inch by inch, we slowly edged the kayak backward.

"Now, press down the right rudder and paddle only on your left side." I pulled my paddle through the water in furious, rhythmic strokes on the left side of kayak. My mother did the same while controlling the right rudder. To my surprise, our kayak slowly turned right.

"Now slowly come forward," the man told us. I could see a clear, narrow passage through the surrounding plants and jutting rocks where the water was slightly deeper. I painstakingly dragged the paddle through the water and the kayak slowly edged forward, moving toward the opening in the plants. Suddenly, a sharp wind pushed our kayak off course and sent it scraping across the rocks and crashing into rocks along the way.

"Ugh!" I complained. My clothes felt like they were weighing me down because they were soaking wet from the water that had spilled into the kayak. I was sitting in a puddle of filthy water from the slough that had collected on the seat. The blue covering had come off, allowing water to slosh over the sides and splash all over me. "We'll never get out of this," I grumbled, feeling discouraged and wishing I could give up.

"Yes, you will," the man encouraged. "Turn left until you're facing that passage again. Left rudder, right paddle."

Powered by frustration, I splashed my paddle through the water with a tremendous effort and the kayak whirled around to face the passage again. Using cautious, controlled strokes, my mother and I moved the kayak forward. A large ripple in the water stirred by the current sloshed over the side of the kayak and onto my shorts, but I ignored it. The kayak drifted forward slowly and scraped through the narrow passage. Suddenly, I couldn't hear the scraping sound anymore and I realized we had made it out of the shallow area!

“Thank you so much!” I gasped. My whole body felt like one massive bruise. My arm muscles screeched in pain, and my fingers burned from gripping the handle of the paddle so firmly. But I felt satisfied and grateful and relieved.

“You’re welcome,” the man said. He started to move away, but slowed his kayak and reminded us sharply, “Don’t get stuck again.”

As his bright orange kayak glided away, I slumped against the seat and puffed out my cheeks as I breathed out a sigh. I was exhausted. “I can’t believe we made it out,” I said to my mother.

“It was difficult, especially when that first man gave up on us,” my mother agreed. “But we got out,” she added.

“Why don’t we continue kayaking?” I suggested.

“That sounds like a great idea!” my mom exclaimed. The rest of the day we spent kayaking through the glittering blue water, watching the seals splash around and letting the breeze splatter our faces with drops of water. By the time we arrived at the dock again, my legs were cramped and my fingers were numb with cold. It had been a very frightening and exciting, yet memorable day for us.