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## Four Personalities in a Canoe

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## Four Personalities in a Canoe

### **Author Bio**

JULIA CHIN is a sophomore English major with a Writing Concentration and a Music minor. She writes for *The Gettysburgian*, sings soprano for College Choir, and swing dances for herself—everyone should have the chance to laugh at the delightfully silly messes they become now and again. She is in love with words.

# Four Personalities in a Canoe

JULIA CHIN

*“I’m going to die here on this highway, and when the police come and find our bodies together under this canoe, they’re going to think, What happened?”*

I may never have a completely accurate answer for those state troopers who never came: everyone remembers it in their own way. However, I will never forget that day, the lake, each of you. Here’s to my most unexpected friends—Fire, Earth, and Air. I love you more than I’ll ever know why. Our story is for you.

## I. FIRE

The wooden tower caught Fire first. It captured his eyes, climbing to the sky and challenging the surrounding evergreens. As if that weren’t enough, the edifice stood on a hill, outranking everyone else for miles. Damn. Talk about machismo.

A tug on an aux cord killed the mariachi trumpets just as the car’s engine cut out, the silence marking Fire’s official arrival at camp. Fire knew that was the end of mariachi for the next week: the only thing Mexican in this whole place was himself, and he had come reluctantly.

He could have been gone by now: his last exam was five days ago, and the trek back to Texas was far, but it wasn’t that far. The way he saw it though, there wasn’t anything waiting for him there that he couldn’t come home to later. He had gotten up early for this and was here now, so he might as well make it interesting. Just some trees, friends, and God—oh God.

An enormous mansion looked down at him as he slung his black duffel over one shoulder. Four stories tall with a wrap-around porch and rocking chairs, it was the whitest thing—literally, the paint was a Jesus’s holy teeth shade of blinding—Fire had seen since he saw his friend Air earlier that morning.

For the first of many times to come, Fire thought *What the hell?* in a Christian camp.

Speaking of Air, a head of blond curls materialized out of the foggy mist beside Fire, a pale hand clasping his tan one jovially with a fraternal closeness.

“Bro!” Air attempted in Fire’s characteristic accent, and Fire laughed. White people, bro.

As the two boys carried their bags across the lot, Fire glanced at the

hill again. This time he noticed them: a bunch of canoes latched onto a trailer at the base of the tower, sitting like bright bananas at the woods' dull green edge. Fire knew fun when he saw it, and fun was on top of that hill.

What anyone else thought was irrelevant.

“Taco Tuesday” was a disgrace. Pale lettuce, shredded cheese, and diced tomatoes did not a taco make. As with all of his meals, Fire had saturated the culinary failure in Old Bay—a taste he'd acquired from befriending Maryland students—just to give it a flavor.

One of the zealous, thirty-something-year-old camp counselors had sat at their lunch table and just introduced himself when Fire decided to get real, real fast.

“What the hell?” he said with a deadpan expression, gesturing at the taco-trocity on his plate. “They say in the Bible not to offend your brother, but then they put this in front of me.”

And the man *laughed. Politely.* Nothing fazed these people. Everyone was so calm, so unaffected, so . . . so lame. Yeah, that was the word he was looking for. No one knew how to have fun.

Luckily for them, Fire did.

On Thursday afternoon, Fire rolled out of bed, having skipped another mandatory Bible study in exchange for a nap. He spotted Air again in the dining room, sitting around a table with two girls also in their year, Earth and Water. They were hard to miss, as Earth was a ginger and Water was a minority.

The three teenagers were starting to clean up their lame food after another lame lunch, and all Fire could think about was just how lame they were. All these college kids sitting around, doing nothing, when there were so many things they could do. Even better, so many things they couldn't do but should anyway. Blue, green, and brown eyes flicked upward as Fire approached the table, his next words lighting the first match.

“Hey! I'm going to the canoes. Who is going to come with me?”

## II. EARTH

She hadn't eaten much but lettuce since Sunday, and it was now Thursday. Earth was a vegetarian, and the grass flattened by her pacing sandals was beginning to look tempting in comparison with her empty stomach. Yet, she could handle starvation, alongside chronic panic attacks. But Grand Theft Canoe with this crew?

Earth glanced at her trio of accomplices and inwardly sighed an expletive involving lofty vocabulary and a condemnation of the male species. This was mostly Fire's fault by virtue of who he was, but Air wasn't helping, as he

only continued to fan the flames.

Fire stood in stark contrast to the undisturbed greenery around him. Stripes along his gym shorts matched his stop-sign red shirt, and his yellow sneakers were the color of caution tape. Truthfully, Earth had only followed him up the hilltop because she didn't trust him to not get everyone hurt. Not that she necessarily trusted herself, but at least she did a lot more than she trusted anyone else.

Air, on the other hand, was a child. He wasn't quite as bad as Fire, but he would go wherever the wind took him, laughing all the way, even if it was to their watery graves or juvenile detention after this stunt. Except they weren't even young enough for juvie anymore. Excellent.

The sleeping Snoopy on Air's grey shirt mocked Earth, outlined by the caption #RELAX, a word Earth was generally unfamiliar with. Her sandals kept treading infinity loops into the ground before stopping at small, blue shoes pointed towards her. Placid as a frozen lake, Water held her gaze, the soft silt in her brown eyes meeting the growing green worry in Earth's. She smiled knowingly, taking Earth back to the previous night on that same hill.

Dinner had been too loud. Too many people. Not the right people, of course. The seniors whom Earth had come to depend on were having seniors-only night because graduation was days away and that was fine and good and all but wasn't fine was that Earth couldn't control the fact that all her closest friends were leaving her. She couldn't control much anything anymore.

Exhausted from a week's growing hunger and anxiety, at least Earth had been promised vegetarian lasagna for dinner. Of course, it had bacon in it.

Among a table of laughing and chattering youth she barely spoke to, Earth couldn't even scream or whisper to anyone *I'm not okay*. Except Water asked.

"Do you want to get out of here?"

No sooner had she followed her up the hill, far from the crowded, white mansion, than the sky opened. Raindrops echoed hard around the perimeter of their sheltered pavilion, the downpour invisible through the black night.

Water sat on a picnic table, perfectly still as Earth paced excitedly in front of her, walking five feet only to turn and retrace her steps in the opposite direction. Earth talked for hours because it was fine and she knew it was fine but she didn't *feel fine, you know?* Water would nod and hm occasionally. No words could truly fix it.

Unlike then, Water now wouldn't stop singing in smiley, soprano

tones to distract Earth from the present reality of the canoe crisis. A chorus of laughs from Water and Air followed, and it almost worked. But there was Fire untying the top canoe from its holding rack, and Earth was taken back to chapter one of her unending autobiography titled *Anxiety*.

“Whoa, whoa, wait. Hang on a second.” Air pulled one of his classic, split-second mood swings, his joking grin replaced by a furrowing brow. “Aren’t we supposed to wait for the truck to come up here and drive the canoes down?”

Finally, someone other than Earth with a scrap of logic!

“Yeah, but I want the canoe now,” Fire replied, his burly hands still removing cables and constraints. “We can carry it to the lake.”

“Um ...” Earth and Air speculated in high-pitched unison.

“Or we could just sit in the canoe and slide down the hill,” Water mused.

Goodbye, logic.

“Oh SHIT! I love that!” Fire exclaimed, and Earth realized he was actually going to do it.

“Wait, but what if we hit a car?” Air wondered.

“Or, you know, trip and break our arms?” Earth interjected, not joking in the slightest.

But the boat was already halfway free. Fire grabbed the front just as the rest began to slide.

“Air,” he commanded, a general going into impossible battle, “get behind me.”

### III. AIR

The canoe was heavier than he thought. Obviously, Air understood, it was meant to hold the four of them—Fire, Earth, Water, and himself. Any boat that could hold that many personality clashes in one vessel had to be sizeable to say the least.

A tried and true Boy Scout—with the campfire stories and chatterbox sociability to show for it—Air had surprisingly only ever been in two-person canoes. With his “the more, the merrier” attitude and Fire’s ride-or-die motto of “more,” period, the boys were just naturally four-person-canoe kind of guys. At least Air’s lean height and Fire’s stocky brawn enabled them to actually carry the thing above their heads, progressing down the steep hill at a semi-cautious pace.

Their female companions, however, were definitely two-person-canoe people.

Willowy Earth somehow managed with the boat’s stern, and Air was impressed that she had stuck with them up to this point. She dealt out lots of spontaneous sarcasm to match her blazing hair, but from what little he knew

about her, she was extremely rooted. Most times he'd seen her, she always had places to be and people to meet with a neat styrofoam cup of tea in one hand and a pristine Bible in the other. He knew Earth liked schedules, but he really doubted that she'd booked "boat-stealing" into her planner under the noon-time Thursday slot. She was a Type A anomaly.

In front of Air and a head shorter, Water's black hair bobbed against her shoulders, shaking with the physical strain on her smaller frame. Maybe Air didn't really get her either. Maybe he just didn't get women.

He'd passed Water on his way back to the dorms on Monday around midnight. She hadn't made a sound as he'd almost walked right on past her spot in the common room, but her face said she'd been crying. She hadn't offered him an explanation.

Of course, Water hadn't been the only person there. Because also sitting on that couch had been her, Air's crush and Water's proclaimed BFF, holding the miserable girl in a tender embrace.

She had started off like a mother to them both, Air and Water, taking them under her wing soon after they started college. Air adored her for her three-years-older wisdom, warm heart, and faithful direction. Adoration turned to affection which turned to something more. A reciprocated yet mutually denied something more. It didn't change the fact that she was graduating at the end of the week.

Having just finished his first year that May, Air couldn't deny that he had the reputation expected of a social butterfly who did his job well. He rarely walked any distance at all without recognizing someone and offering up a friendly fist bump and beaming smile. Extroverted to the extreme, he filled his days with people and their energizing company.

But the camp gave him too much free time. Sure, he ate meals in the dining room and played cards on the couches and hit volleyballs around the court a bit. But when he wasn't with anyone else, he was thinking about her—where she was, what she was doing, how much he wanted to be with her.

In already too full moments like this, carrying this ridiculous canoe, Air didn't think of her at all. His goofy self was here in the now with these three oddballs, having one hell of a hilarious adventure. He would add it to his growing collection of "Stupid But Memorable Mistakes" to tell his kids someday.

In the moment, this was all he needed.

#### IV. WATER

For the first time in nearly a week, she laughed. It's important that

she laughed, not smiled, because she smiled all the time anyway. Most people smile in happiness, but Water smiled through everything: sadness, awkwardness, madness. And so it was important that she laughed because it was the one indicator of joy she had never quite learned to fake.

Child-sized hands struggled to hold up her fraction of the canoe's weight, but Water simply could not stop quivering with amusement. Giggles bubbled from her mouth, filling the otherwise quiet outdoors, save for the sound of a familiar laugh behind her.

She suddenly remembered that she liked him, Air. That they were, in fact, friends. Their identically crinkled eyes met, and they only laughed the harder for it. Water realized that she herself was laughable, victim to a constant hydrologic cycle: freezing, then thawing, and melting her heart in turn.

In some ways, it was her fault.

Water constantly built up sand castles of expectations that almost always got washed away when high tide reality came in. She knew it was foolish to have such high hopes, but she indulged in them anyway, splashing through waves that would ultimately drown her. For Water, this week was supposed to be about faith and friendship but also about buying time before goodbyes she'd dreaded for months.

Unfortunately, she had overestimated herself. She had forgotten that people had lives and other friends and no one needed her half as much as she needed them. Lost in a sea of hundreds of faces from day one of camp, she'd never been so overwhelmed nor felt so alone.

Stress and sleep deprivation fed one another in a vicious cycle, culminating in the first midnight meltdown less than 24 hours after Water's arrival. Curled up in her friend's arms, she'd felt thirteen again: weak, dependent, and wanting to be loved. As per usual, Air had to be there.

Uncharacteristic anger had poured into her sorrow, but she'd bottled both emotions within. She had dammed up frustration at Air, whom she felt monopolized those final days with her best friend, leaving Water in straits of physical and emotional isolation. Resentment made her small and pathetic, but heartbreak and abandonment were foes she had no chance of conquering.

When Earth had verbalized her sadness over similar goodbyes and the absence of bonding among their own year, Water couldn't give her a perfect solution. It would have been like a doctor prescribing antidepressants that she herself was still adjusting to.

Yet, though they weren't close, it didn't mean that she didn't care. Water never thought much of fellowship within their class, but she saw how much it meant to Earth. When Fire proposed the canoes, she'd looked at Earth and said yes for her.



Her laugh reverberating with Air's inside the upturned canoe, Water replaced loss with love, filling the hole in her heart she'd let grow void. She was cracking up so hard that she might burst with uncontainable joy. Of course, it didn't assist in her struggle to harness any upper body strength, so Fire made her switch places with Earth at the back.

"I'm going to die here on this highway," Water lamented as they crossed a mercifully empty road, and the foursome erupted with laughter again at the morbid plausibility of their untimely ends, "and when the police come and find our bodies together under this canoe, they're going to think, *What happened?*"

## EPILOGUE

None of the sophomoric youth died that day, in fact. Only a small death of pride ensued when they finally reached the lakefront after carrying the canoe a third of a mile downhill and an unexpected truck pulled up at the exact same time with the remaining canoes attached via trailer hitch. No one could argue that God didn't have a sense of humor.

At their journey's end, the four teenagers piled into the canoe single file: Earth, Air, Water, and Fire. Gliding away from the dock was peaceful. That is, till the canoe started spinning in circles before its occupants grasped the concept of balanced paddling. It was a lot like the four of them: uneven, completely incongruous matches for one another, yet somehow better together. Their differences evened out on the lake, making way for friendships deeper than surface-level personas.

Fire provided the impetus for their course, catalyzing the majority of their movement from the back, and Earth refrained from commenting when he discarded his legally mandated lifejacket within the first minute. Even Air was quiet, allowing the magic of the moment to live just a bit longer. Water smiled out of genuine happiness this time, finally at peace in her element.

Nature was silent, quiet bliss broken only by a quartet of paddles dipping in and out of the lake until Earth had a thought, a rare compliment for her free-spirited foil.

"Wow, you're good at this," she hesitantly remarked. "Do you do this a lot?"

"No," Fire replied nonchalantly. "This is my first time in a canoe."