

Sometimes you never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory. ~ Dr. Seuss

One Pea in a Fog



“It’s not an adventure until things start going wrong,” Yvon Chouinard once said. *OK, Yvon, I get it, but REALLY? Does it nearly have to kill me?* I was nearing the end of Grenville Channel, a 45-mile trough of water contained within steep walls rising more than 2,000 feet, its north end roughly 35 miles south of Prince Rupert, British Columbia. Pretty much in the middle of nowhere.

Places to land were scarce and my hopes to stop and camp were dashed on two occasions that day when grizzly bears--cubs in tow--stood defiantly along the shoreline. By the time I did find a marginal place to set up camp, I was a soggy, string-of-bad-luck, hypothermic bundle of exasperation. Had my adventure truly just begun? I didn’t know, but what I did know was that any residual arrogance I may have had was now whopped out of me. I was paddling solo on the Inside Passage, and I was being handed a pivotal lesson--almost along with my ass.

“Give me a fucking break!” I screamed at the top of my lungs--at the wind, at the stinging rain, at everything and at nothing, thrusting my chest forward, my arms hyper-extended behind me, all ten fingers spread wide in outrage. I was 38 days into my expedition and had come to accept, even expect, being cold and wet. But this was different--and much more dire.

My primal screams filled the forest, only to be reabsorbed by the howling wind, sullen seas, and the sucking mud of this godforsaken bay I was stuck in. I was attempting to set up camp a hair's-width above the briny dung of what appeared to be a saltwater chicken coop, a goopy, flat area where the funky smell of seabird guano met my nostrils. Debris from last night's high tide hung like Christmas garlands from the fringes of the impenetrable forest behind me. My campsite would certainly be under water in the middle of that night and the reality of having to deal with that made me sick to my stomach. Remembering that my sleeping bag was damp and my tent waterlogged, frantically crammed in the back hatch earlier that morning, made my heart sink even further.

A vigorous rain pelted the right side of my face, which was swollen and disfigured from the previous day's blood-sucking black fly attack. Moments before, I'd shivered violently in sopping wet clothes, and struggled with a nylon tarp as the wind belligerently whipped it out of my hands. My fingers, barely able to tie the knots to secure the corners, became less and less dextrous. Gale force winds had descended upon Grenville Channel and were only slightly diffused by the landmass I was hiding behind.

Earlier that day I'd briefly fallen asleep in my drifting kayak, then succumbed to the initial stages of hypothermia, as crushing fatigue took hold; I hadn't cared enough to

extract myself from the gallons of cold water I was sitting in inside my cockpit. Warm urine pooled in the crotch of my wetsuit, momentarily warming me as I peed in the boat. I'd landed here out of default, and ludicrously bad luck, after paddling nearly forty arduous miles, forced to move on at the twenty- and then thirty-mile mark when mama grizzly bears had trumped my intended campsites. My muscles cramped, my head throbbed, and in spite of a tailwind, my lightweight carbon-fiber paddle felt like a two-by-four and the seas felt like grape jelly. I was completely, utterly spent, and there were simply no other options. I knew that night would be no different from the three previous ones: when I was finally tucked into the thin veneer of my nylon tent, my serial date with the high tide would come knocking at my door. When saltwater began licking at my rainfly under the dark cloak of night I would curse the moon and I would curse gravity for conspiring on a 23-foot tidal exchange. Around 3 a.m. I would be forced to change back into my cold, wet rain gear and extract myself from my womblike shelter. Then, like a bride snatching up her gown, I'd lift my tent just as the water poured in around my bug-bitten ankles and stand tippy-toed on a piece of driftwood or slippery boulder. Each of those three past nights I stood in a brine-soaked kiddie pool, in the dark, in the pouring rain, and pleaded with the ocean, politely asking her, "Are ya done yet?"

I learned early on in my trip that Mother Nature can be unforgiving. Or she can be neutral, soothing you, enveloping you in her sweet velvety senses. But on that day in Grenville Channel--as I desperately tried to set up camp--she was schizophrenic. She didn't care that I was on the verge of tears, or scared out of my wits. I'd put myself in this position, and it was up to me to put on my big girl panties and figure a way out.

It was then, when I was chilled to the bone, fumbling with the tarp, that an inner pathos hurtled out of me, along with an alarming variety of expletives. My explosive rage made my blood flow hot, pressed my mental reset button, and refocused my intent. Perhaps it saved my life. Miraculously, I was able to tend to all my needs: shelter, food, warmth, and rest--at least for a few hours. Praying for sleep to come, shivering inside my slightly damp sleeping bag, eyes wide open, I felt an unease in the pit of my stomach. Would I have the strength and courage to take care of myself throughout the entire journey?