



Finding Heartstone

A TASTE OF WILDERNESS

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Alex (8), Michael (6) and Tanya (4), on their fourth trip to Hemming Bay.

FINDING LIMPETS

When my husband told me we could buy into a wilderness co-op and have a piece of beachfront on an island to ourselves, I said, “Oh, let’s do it!” I said it without even seeing East Thurlow Island, somewhere up the BC coast. Woldy had visited it with his brother, Vic, our soon-to-be partner, and they had come back with photos showing a tree-filled, highway-free island with five large lakes and not a building in sight. Overgrown logging roads hinted at a busier history, but at that time, in 1979, it seemed to be a pristine, inviting wilderness.

A group of Seattle environmentalists took the initiative to buy the 232 acres of private land. They came from a range of backgrounds. For example, three of the planners worked for Boeing, the large company that dominated Seattle industry. Two in the group were marine biologists, one was a goat farmer, another an anthropologist, and still another an apple grower. What this mixed bag of twenty shareholders had in common was that they had all read Thoreau and believed in the redemptive power of nature. The youngest of the investors, bearded and in overalls, had visited East Thurlow Island as a Sea Scout. Now in a different uniform (the hippie attire of the 1970s), he wanted to fulfill his boyhood dream of retreating to the forest. His girlfriend, Sue, was already a commune dweller, a lover of goats and granola. Woldy and Vic contributed strong Ukrainian bodies that actually loved

labouring. Also, they were the Canadian partners needed to make this purchase legal.

Another thing the founding members shared in the 1970s was a fear of the nuclear arms race. The Seattle area, with its Boeing factory and adjacent military bases, would be a likely target for Soviet planes carrying atomic or hydrogen bombs. Maps for the fallout area from such an attack clearly showed that East Thurlow Island was far enough north to escape any fallout radiation. So, the call of the wild and the fear of nuclear holocaust were prime motivations for the founding of the Hemming Bay Community.

My motivation was much simpler. I loved to swim. I loved watching wildlife programs on TV and wanted to see for myself the living animals in their natural habitats. As a preteen, my favourite book had been *The Call of the Wild*. I imagined that a West Coast island would have wolves, deer, cougars, bears and sea otters. One could dig for clams, go fishing for salmon and cod, or throw down a crab trap. I was familiar with the bounty of the sea from the summers Woldy and I had spent aboard our twenty-six-foot sailboat, a boat that had yet to venture as far north as East Thurlow Island.

After my husband and his brother bought their share of the property, Woldy and I sailed up from Vancouver. Well, mostly we motored, as even at six knots per hour (our max), it took us two days to reach our destination, two hundred miles from our moorage at West Vancouver's Eagle Harbour Yacht Club. Alex, our only child at the time, was three years old. He couldn't swim yet, but I was sure I could teach him at "our" beach. What I didn't know yet was that the northern waters above the Seymour Narrows rapids in the Gulf of Georgia are always ice-cold, even in the summer months. I soon found this out on my first dive off our boat after anchoring in Hemming Bay.

"Eek! Help me out of here!" I screeched, splashing my way

back to the boat's rope ladder.

Woldy was laughing, but Alex looked with alarm at his screaming mother. To assure the boy, I attempted to laugh too.

"Ouch! My forehead hurts!" I complained, as I climbed on board and quickly wrapped myself in a beach towel. No, this was not swimmable water! My first disappointment in my dream of a wilderness paradise.

Back in a warm hoodie and jeans, I asked Woldy to row Alex and me ashore. Two days confined to a twenty-six-foot boat is tough for a three-year-old—and for his mother. We would roam the shore together, collect shells and pretty stones, I thought.

But no! The shores of Hemming Bay consisted only of jagged rocks! No stretches of sand for our youngster to run on, or to build castles. In fact, I mostly had to carry Alex, which intensified the challenge the rugged terrain posed to my own shaky legs. Just when I was about to cry, "This is not what I imagined, not what I dreamed of!" a kingfisher shrieked and dove down about twelve feet in front of us.

"Look, Alex, look! A blue bird!" I cried.

And Alex, who at the age of four would declare that he wanted to be an ornithologist, clapped his hands in excitement.

After more exploring, we hollered for Woldy to come and row us back to the boat, along with a bucket of definitely-not-pretty stones, which were to occupy young Alex for at least half an hour.

"*Boom!*" he shouted, as each rock he threw overboard made a satisfying splash, sending off rings and bubbles.

I clapped and shouted, "Bravo!"

"Mommy go *Boom!*" Alex demanded, his rock pail now empty.

"Not here, hon, not here," I said.

Mommy would go *Boom* further south, in the waters of Desolation Sound, anchored among many visiting sailboats, but not here, dammit, not here.

We had the bay to ourselves for one day and night. Unbelievable, compared to the crowded anchorages where we had stayed on our journey north. As we sipped our nightly brandy in the boat's cockpit, Alex now asleep in the front berth, I forgot about the icy swim and the rocky beach. Multitudes of stars, never seen near city lights, winked down upon us. The boat rocked gently as moonlight played on the water.

The next morning, our new partners in this wilderness co-operative started arriving: by water taxi from Campbell River, by seaplane from Seattle (one of our members actually owned and piloted one), and even by kayak from Rock Bay, the closest launching point for crossing Johnstone Strait. While Alex and Woldy were excited by this commotion (especially the landing of the seaplane not far from our anchorage), I was regretting the loss of the quiet of stargazing and kingfisher watching. With the arrival of representatives of the twenty shareholders, we were no longer Mr. and Mrs. Robinson Crusoe and son, sole possessors of the bay.

Despite my occupation as a teacher of college English, I am basically a shy person. When Alex was about eight, he said to me, "You're not like other mothers. You don't talk on the phone or go have coffee with friends." I guess he got this image of a "typical mom" from TV. It was true. I prepared lessons and marked papers, I played and read with my son, but I didn't keep up with a social circle of friends. Woldy, the garrulous one, got very excited about the arrival of our Hemming Bay partners and their friends. Alex and I stayed on our boat while he rowed ashore to the grassy outcropping where the newcomers were unloading their tents.

Hours passed. I could make out all the busyness on shore and knew that Woldy, who had led many camping trips in his role as principal of an alternative school, would be helping to set up tents and to start cooking fires. Perhaps he had gone into the woods for

firewood and it was him swinging the axe that was echoing across the once-silent bay.

My parents had never taken my sister and me camping. They had worked so hard to provide for us that the idea of buying tenting equipment and leaving the city when Vancouver's beaches were our free playgrounds never occurred to them. I did go to Girl Guides for a year, but I never opted to go to camp. I didn't like the idea of sleeping outside with strangers.

Well, ashore were strangers I was going to have to get to know. I couldn't hide out with my child on our boat refuge for the three days allotted for exploring our new, mutually held wilderness.

Woldy had left us at around two in the afternoon and didn't return until six. "Come on!" he said. "We're going to have our first community dinner!"

I would have preferred to cook for the three of us in our little ship's galley, using our two pots and three bright plastic plates and looking out the galley window at the changing colours of the sea. I was also feeling irritable from my four-hour wait, but I didn't want to argue in front of Alex.

"What should I bring?"

"Don't worry. They have lots of food. We'll contribute to tomorrow night's dinner. Come on! Get on!"

"Get on" meant climbing down the rope ladder to our rubber dinghy, first handing Alex down to Woldy's arms. He stood in the dinghy, with his arms outstretched as he precariously balanced his large body to receive our boy. *Gasp!* I didn't know much about seamanship, but I knew you weren't supposed to stand in a little tippy rubber rowboat while holding on to a three-year-old.

We thankfully made it safely to shore and were greeted by the tent colony with gusty hellos. Alex, like his father, was very social, and he was soon running from tent to tent, making himself known and loved. He also attempted to join some older children

who were rolling down a grassy bank, yelling, “Downdee, down, down!” I held back, trying to memorize names—I was good at that in the classroom, where students sat in rows and occupied the same seats every time. Oddly, there were three couples named Bob and Sue—how was I ever going to tell them apart? At least I was wearing jeans, like the rest of them, but I felt that my short haircut and horn-rimmed glasses gave me away. I was not a hippie or an outdoorswoman, and although I had a social conscience and had even marched in nuclear protests, I was basically conservative and shy.

The shared food was vegetable stew with cornmeal bread. No store-bought hot dogs here. I was already worrying about what I could bring for tomorrow night’s feast. I couldn’t go to the store for tofu.

Alone, back on our boat, with Alex tucked in bed in the forward berth, Woldy asked me why I was so silent.

“I don’t like it here,” I answered.

“What? What don’t you like?”

“Shh, don’t shout at me; you’ll wake Alex, and voices carry over water.”

“Okay,” he said, now in a lowered tone, “What don’t you like?”

“Everything: the cold water, the ugly beach, the too many people, you going off for hours.”

“It wasn’t hours. And I thought you liked being alone on the boat.”



This was the first of many arguments we would have about Hemming Bay. The boat was gently rocking, the multitude of stars were shining, but our different temperaments were pushing us apart: Woldy, the extrovert who loved challenges; me, the introvert who loved comfort and her own space.