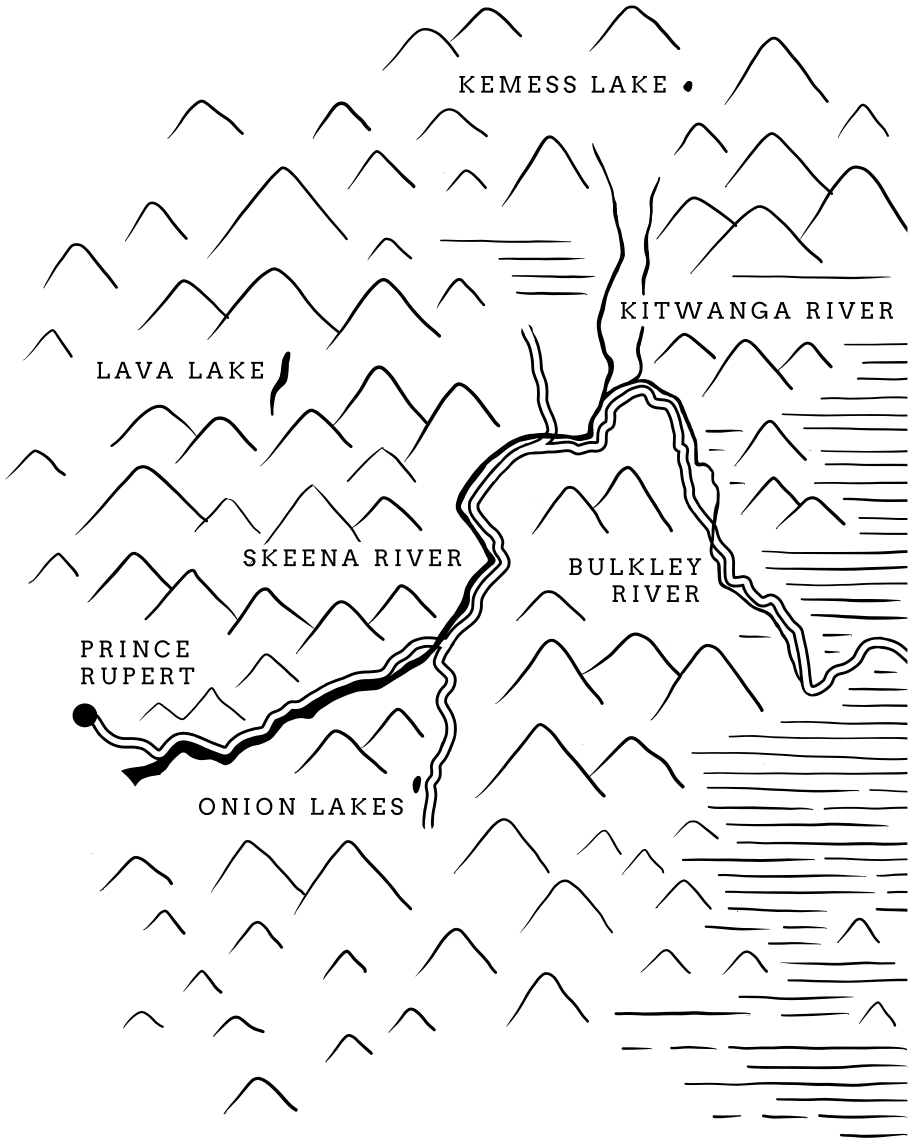


# INSTRUCTIONS FOR A FLOOD

Reflections on Story, Geography and Connection

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KEMESS LAKE •

LAVA LAKE

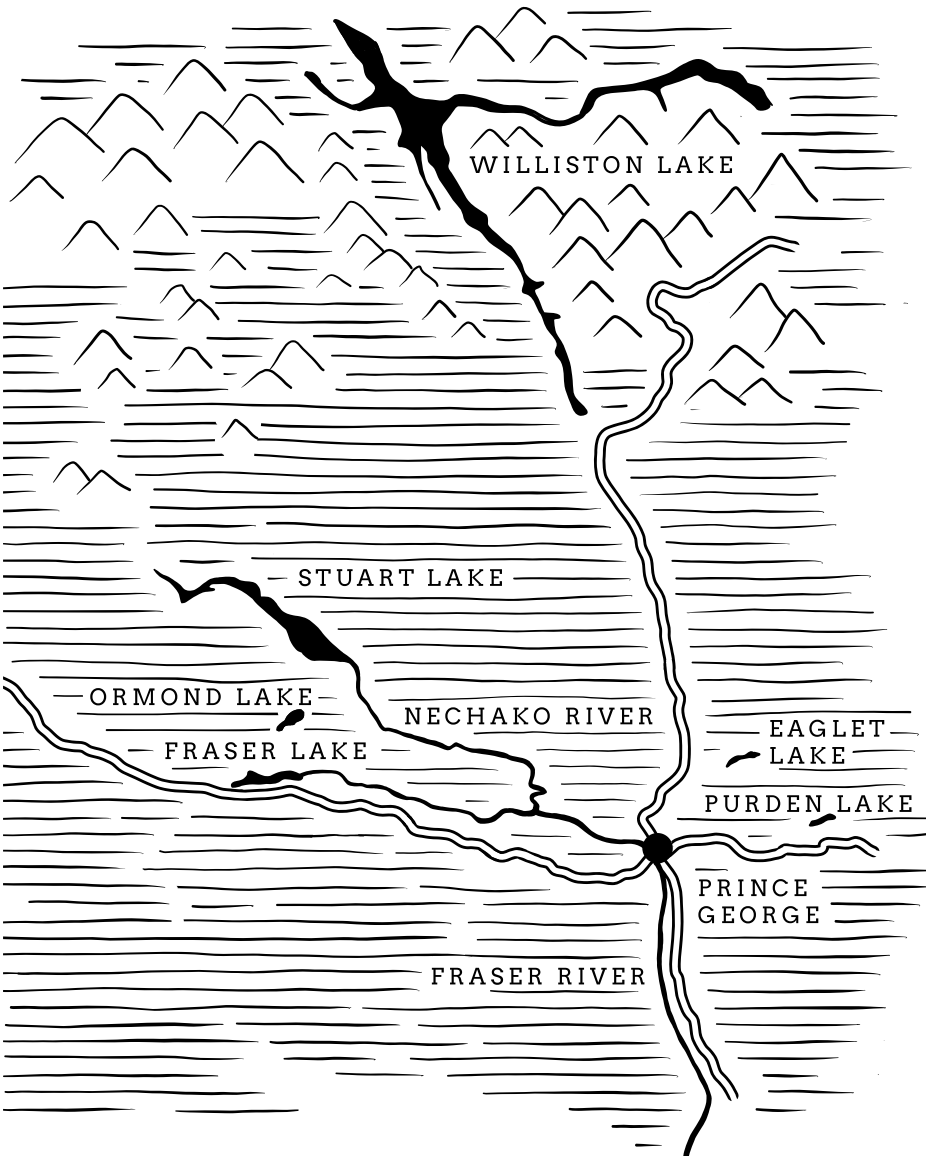
KITWANGA RIVER

SKEENA RIVER

BULKLEY RIVER

PRINCE RUPERT

ONION LAKES



WILLISTON LAKE

STUART LAKE

ORMOND LAKE

FRASER LAKE

NECHAKO RIVER

EAGLET LAKE

PURDEN LAKE

PRINCE  
GEORGE

FRASER RIVER



## Purden Lake

It is Taylor's birthday, hot beginning of July. We eat a skillet breakfast at Denny's, my treat, and a young burly man beside us has a booth to himself, bent over his sketch pad. Taylor steals a quick glance. He's drawing a dragon but not the Disney kind, she says. More Japanese. Majestic neck and intricate scales. I think I saw some fire coming out of its nose. Maybe he'll give it to you as a present if you ask nice, I say. His forearms are thick, fair skin mottled with tattoos. Nah, I already have a dragon, she answers as we push out the front doors, heat rifling through the space between us.

Taylor has never been to Purden Lake, so we pack up some water, snacks and coolers in my SUV and head east. The day is ours, I declare as I crank music, AC. Lake is on the road to Jasper; rugged and lonely, even in the summer it seems unused, as if we are encountering the outer edges of an abandoned land. Open road unfolds over steep hills; from the top glimpses of the Rockies jut blue and pink in the light.

My mom used to drop us off at the lake near our house and let our older brothers look after my sister and me, Taylor says. They took off with their friends and we sat under a tree, waiting and watching kids play, she adds, twirling her hair with a red polished nail.

Parking lot is mostly full. We nab the last bit of nubby grass, next to some lounging teenagers. They are pale and sullen, even in the brightness, wearing shorts past their knees as if to ward off the heat. Little round bellies flare out when they reach for a beer. Lake like a bucket, round and deep at the base of a ski hill. You can see the switchbacks of trails, carved criss-crosses. Lake ringed with peaks, small cabins perched on the other side.

I love beaches, they are like the starting line to the deliciousness of lakes, I say, especially beaches up north. This isn't up north, Taylor says, swats me with her hat. This is the middle, the centre, where people pass through on their way up to somewhere else.

I lie out flat, sprayed and slopped with sunscreen. Lolling my head to the side, anticipating the moment when the sun pokes and kneads through the knots in my neck, my back, when I start to melt and feel a primal connection to the earth. When the heat is too much, a dip in the clear cold water is bracing, knocks the sleepy heat out of my body. Wade up to my neck, let the shock of it penetrate even further through. Then I repeat, as much and as often as I can stand it. I swear you are an iguana, Taylor says, throws back her thick hair, her clunky earrings glinting. Beaches where I grew up were packed with tourists, felt like they weren't even ours. We had to get there early and fight for space like everyone else. Taylor and I found each other, an instant recognition, like picking someone out of a lineup. A face, a look you recognize but you don't know where from. Her intensity unnerved me but then I grew accustomed to the energy that could go anywhere. We would get into a car together to get some lunch and end up buying crystal balls at a shop with a blind resident dog.

Kids were stalking minnows with nets and buckets, the youngest ones squealing when the tiny fish got so close to their feet, then swerved. Delighted at how they moved in an instant, seemed to have one mind, an electric connection. People aren't like minnows, Taylor says with a wry smile. They go all over the place, don't pay attention to signs, don't trust a leader. We laugh and drink deeply from our coolers, trying not to splash our faces.

Taylor gets up to test the water, wade in knee deep and watch the black tadpoles that hatch by the thousands at places like Purden Lake. Sun washing the lake, her face white and sweaty, a thinly painted sheen, and then it goes slack with shock. There are so many tadpoles, little slivers of life, and the kids with their buckets eagerly capture them and haul them up to shore. Taylor

comes over to me, concerned: if the tadpoles can't swim, they'll die. I look over at the lounging moms, chatting, juggling food and phones, the buckets forgotten in favour of lunch. Taylor strides over and explains the tadpole predicament to the mothers. The little kids walk down to the beach and empty the buckets, eyes cast down, and quickly run back to their moms.

Here's to the tadpoles. May they live long and happy lives. We cheer each other when Taylor returns. Beach is bursting now, all the picnic tables are claimed, rickety chairs unfolded, sunglasses, hats, books. There is chatter, faint music, bodies turning over and over so the sun can reach everywhere. I walk in up to my neck, feel the sharp stones on the bottom that throw me. Water clear, mountain cold; I relish the shiver that creeps up my skull, the full immersion, spreading out all my limbs and letting the sky hold me in place.

## Mud River


If you want to go tubing, Mud River's the place, Franca calls out from the back seat, over the radio, while Taylor looks for a bottle opener in her purse. Franca came here as a teenager herself, so she knows all about it. I catch her in the rear-view mirror, blond hair grazing her shoulders, sun hat pulled low. You'll be our tour guide, I say to her, and she says, There's not much to see. Mud, beaches, beer cans and white bellies. I've never been there but I've passed traffic turning off down the dusty road, spotted bare arms and legs bobbing just past the bridge. Major teenager hangout, reeks of pot; thankfully they go off in the bush for their make-out sessions, Franca says as we follow a white F-150 down to the tiny parking lot. All dust and huge holes you have to swerve around quick, squeeze in beside some bushes, out of the afternoon sun.

Patches of young moms are spread out close to the bridge, their toddlers squealing along the bumpy shore, little fists clenched with dirt. River's a tight S shape, sloping over exposed gravel beds that feel cool and soothing on my feet.

We walk past the moms and out on the gravel bed and the river sweeps to the right. Think there is a nice beach around the corner, Taylor says, just not sure how we get there. We start climbing exposed tree roots on the shore that turn to crumbling cliffs, so we backtrack. We can walk across the river at a narrow point, Franca points out. There are other people crossing, bags and coolers balanced on their heads, water swirling around their shoulders, so we follow them. Mud River is skinny but I have to focus on keeping my feet on the rippled bottom. It doesn't look like much, but it can knock out your knees like a sucker punch.

People don't come here to swim, just hang out, Taylor says. Glamorous scarf wraps her long dark hair, Jackie O glasses and





cut-off jeans. We stretch out on a hump of the S, facing hollowed-out overhangs. A purple-haired girl and her boyfriend walk past; he is clad in jeans with chains draped around his slim hips. They saunter around the corner, off to their secret lair. Sound of rap music, angry voice cutting through the heat, rush of water. Small stones on the beach push through taut muscles in my back, little pockets like liquid heat. I inch down to the river and slide in crablike, easing in my legs, sweaty middle and up to my neck, my arms anchored on the shore. Letting the muddy water braid through me, power of the current lifting my legs up; lean my head back, let my hair drift through.

Water draws me in, just so far, pressure of current forcing my body to resist. Bottom on the verge of slipping, you have to hold on. The pull a kind of testing or teasing, luring me up to the line where the river takes over, underneath pulling like a magnet. You can sense it like a storm coming, a drop in temperature, a cold spread of knowing at the back of your neck. I repeat my slow foray into the river and out. I can see why they call this Mud River, I call out to Taylor and Franca, but they are chatting, lithe and feline on their blankets, and don't hear me as a teenage boy does a screaming cannonball off a crumbling cliff, landing flat on his butt as his friends howl and applaud.

When I flop down on my blanket, Franca is talking about a friend of hers who flew a helicopter over this area, following the squiggly river like bent wire past farms, swamps, ramshackle trailers and elegant homes tucked behind a copse of trees like mushrooms in a field. Hodgepodge of the north, all mixed up and in together, connected by the extreme weather. It matters who your neighbours are—they may dig you out of the ditch, tow you to the shop.

I swear it's like bodysurfing out there, I tell Taylor and Franca, but they don't join me. They find pretty rocks, explore around the S corner and come back giggling. They caught the sultry teen couple nude, tattoos all over them, Taylor says. All you

could see were their sweet faces.

I don't want to go but Franca has had enough heat, her face pink and puffy. We walk across the river at the same spot but it feels deeper, water colder than when we arrived. Clothes piled on our heads, unbalanced, unglamorous, current tripping us up. In some countries they do this with grace; rivers and creeks are highways, I say as we reach the shore. No staggering around with sunscreen tubes and empty beer bottles in their bags.

We are spent, filled up with sun and the rancorous river. Minivans are filling up with small children, whimpering in their buckled seats. Moms impatiently slam the doors shut. Go fuck yourself, yells a young woman at her boyfriend across the front seat of a truck. Arms crossed, her brown hair piled in a sloppy bun. Go fuck yourself, he yells back. We sidle past and into my car. Good time to leave, I think, Franca says. Nice day at the beach, Taylor says, and we ease out, trucks and cars with booming music passing us on the way in, honking for more space.