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Relaxation Story

Roger and I went to visit the wilderness in the northern rocky interior ranges where there are no roads. We had a map, a good deal of gear, and we were fit. But there was no trail, markers, or GPS. We knew the name of the creeks, and we had a good eye for the territory.

There were logging roads, as there are logging roads in so many forests, and we had read the reports of others who'd gone in before. Few did, but some, and that made for a small band of strangers who left stories for each other in alpine journals, summit books, and trekking reports. Swan Creek, it was called, and we thumbed and walked our way into whatever valley it was, tracing our maps and riding on logging trucks.

And after a while we found ourselves on the racked and dusty, beat-up logging

track, crested a hill and dropped our packs above to a briar-choked creek bed. We repacked, ate some food, and wondered how many twists, turns, hills, buttresses, oxbows, waterfalls, deadfalls, cold fords, meters of shingle creek beds, tangles of alder brush, thorn patches, and Devil's Club lay between us and the open alpine meadows, somewhere high above the tree line.

As it turned out, the answer was "a lot." I should mention that this trip of ours, in the mountains where there is no trail, is called bushwhacking. And where we'd chosen to go bushwhacking is famous because it's the worst place you'd ever want to do it. But ignorance is bliss and, all the more excited, we shouldered our heavy packs and headed down into the dense overhanging vegetation of Swan Creek.

There was a trail of sorts, where the dense brush did not grow, and we stepped into it, as it was the creek itself, knee deep in its cold and rushing water. We only had 6 miles to go to get above the tree line, and it would take three long days to get there.



As you can image, the trip was rather surreal. You had only to fight your way a few feet through the tangle of horizontal tree branches that choked the river, before you found yourself in front of the next tangle of horizontal tree branches that choked the river. So after a while, you can't remember how far you've gone or how long you've been going. Your feet are wet, the water roars, you sense no progress, and it all starts to remind you of being lost in some chapter of Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*.

What you remember, then, are the different places where the river opens up to an uncrossably wide and deep pocket, overhung by cliffs on either side, and you crane your neck to see a way up the steep, never-touched deep-moss chasm, and how you'll wrench your way from one tree branch to the next in order to navigate a hundred feet of elevation to move another 50 yards upstream.

And then there were the tantalizing alternatives: a massive fallen hemlock bridging a small waterfall and 100 feet of river with an angled, slime encrusted trunk of sharp and broken punji sticks, that gave us a chance to choose our misery, in which case all that one remembers is that last ecstatic footstep to victory and safety. Needless to say we didn't kill ourselves, though we had many chances.

And I don't remember the nights, probably because we were too exhausted to do anything more than collapse after sunset. I guess we took our boots off, but I really can't remember anything but looking ahead, and yearning to round the next bend, rise the next shoulder, pass a brief vista of distant peaks above, where we would be eventually, and where all would be gentle, open, and easy.

One normally remembers the pack's weight, the shoulder's tension, or the sore feet, but I don't remember any of that. There was no point, it would not have made things better. One just settles into the work, and the little blessings one finds: the water was refreshing, there were lovely flowers, club mosses, irises, and orchid-like things -- we didn't know our botany -- and the sun was out. Just to think of how miserable it could have been in bad weather cheers one up immediately!

I have a photo of myself near the top of that creek, and I look like the survivor of some drunken brawl, punch-drunk and swollen-faced, having stepped on and been hit by one too many garden rakes.

Have you ever recalled good memories from uncomfortable times? It seems possible there are two sets of memories, one set pleasant, and the other not, as if they happened at different times, or to separate people. Maybe you had a wonderful trip but got sick, or had a great visit to an injured relative. A single event with two points of view, and you can choose to remember one, and forget the other.

If you recall such a time, imagine it here: beautiful nature slapping, stinging, swatting, and splashing you in the face. Sometimes the prize comes at the end of a sharp stick. We're good at seeing opposites, so consider what miseries are still attached to the things you're really grateful for.

On our third day, we finally saw above us the fuzzy boundary where river's greenway transitioned to grasses and alpine brush. We could count the twists and turns and feel, in time and distance, the changing world ahead.

The bush doesn't relent immediately, but tapers off. The flagellating Devil's Club recedes, and the Alder thins to sporadic. Trees cluster to the creek, letting us see high up the hill's broad shoulders. When the way is clear, we scramble straight up

the boulder-encrusted slopes somewhere near the headwaters of Swan Creek, which becomes a receding ribbon glinting through a valley tucked below glacier peaks.

As the terrain clears, our view reaches far, and we quickly rise above the tangle. Our pace becomes regular across boulder fields and rocky moraines. The brush reaches knee-high, and mostly sedges, grasses, and lichenized boulders.

The impenetrable creek shrinks to one of many nondescript, dark valley tablecloths rumpling helter-skelter down in every direction. Above those shadows we've risen into a black and white hall of mountain kings. Rock and snow peaks chiseled like vain portraits of drama, with names like Citadel, Sentinel, Turret, Austerity, and The Blackfriars.

We ascend ancient valleys, following ridges of loose moraine, under a warm sun and indigo sky. Ascending the boulder slope is like climbing a 6,000-foot broken escalator: the steps are too high, and many missing. You try to keep in cadence with your breath, but each step offers puzzle choices. Progress is steep, slow, and steady. Every 10 minutes we check to find ourselves a little higher amidst the crown of black peaks in snow whites.

At a high pass above peaks I no longer remember, creeks hidden in velvet green snaking below our feet, we scramble into a gentle swale, with spring-fed pond and sand beach, ruffed by a garden of Paint Brush, Fireweed, and White Asters. We roll the small boulders, filling their holes with sand to make a perfect site, dropping off to valleys on three sides, and the reddening Western sun.

Dropping our packs we lose half our weight to walk barefoot. At the world's top a few clouds slumber past and, with nothing to do, we soak our feet. If we could have been satisfied with perfection, there would be no further to go. Images of that spot are etched into my mind, a place so perfect that I couldn't appreciate it.

This small, cupped garden offered no protection from the elements, no nut trees or fertile soils, yet we were not the first to be amazed. "Fairy Meadow" it's named, for its drama, magic, and inaccessibility.

Few come here, so there is no trace, just rocks and flowers, light, air, and space. Lots of space, probably as much space as you'll ever find. Miles in all directions, including down. And the light is special because, with so much sky, everything is lit up all day, a solarium from dawn to twilight, While the dark valleys, eroding ever deeper, wetter, and more fertile, soak up light as they soak up water, giving the feeling that to look down is to look inside yourself.

Above a tangle of life, in the center of this chiseled, lunar landscape that changes only with the light, you sit comfortably among flowers in the biggest IMAX auditorium on earth, to watch the solar hour hand's singular melodrama sweep across the sky.

You don't need to fight 3 days and a vertical mile to know what it feels like to be here, at this perfect spot, at the end of the world. A warm sun, a few bees, a shallow pond, perfect meadow surrounded by perfect air and perfect light.

It was as close as I can remember to a virtual reality, except that it wasn't virtual though, by its nature, it could not be permanent either. I guess it was us who were virtual, and so is that state of mind I call you back to, that state of finally having risen above it all, yet being unable to remain there for long. And that's just what perfect relaxation is: to have moved above all struggle, but to be in a place where you just can't seem to stay for long.

And there ended "the approach," and began our climbing trip to summit these various peaks. And it has happened before, as it happened here, that what I remember most was just getting there, birthing the reality that took so much effort to conceive.

And here you are, holding your newborn mind in the palms of your hands thinking, "What do I do now?" And you don't really know, and it doesn't really matter because the event is over, you've reborn yourself, and now it's just another struggle to the next level of disembodiment, to the next rebirth to more light and more air.

There is no goal, it's only process. I remember next to nothing of the peaks, just more up and down leading to summits with virtually no comfort, and hardly a minute's respite before inhaling the undeniable conclusion that we reached nothing, and there is no more "up" to go.

The whole affair being somewhat akin to a fish jumping out of its bowl. Somewhat pathetic, really, the fishbowl analogy. It's not the leap that's liberating so much as realizing the bowl is an illusion, in a huge and boundless ocean. Fish are fish, and so are you, and it's not about getting higher but getting bigger.

Get above your fishbowl and look around. You can do that now. There is so much air and light, every lungful of this hologram is an ocean you've never explored if you can only sense its presence. As you can only do by relaxing to receive what you have nowhere to put, and you can't stay there for long because fish breathe water, and you must have your air, and air will take you back down into the forest.

For that moment, as long as you can give yourself, you can feel what you are now and might or can be. A membrane between states of consciousness, and when you're ready you'll push again until, at some point, your struggles to relax will birth another form in your adamant ascent from fishhood to whatever we are to become.



The Adamants, Selkirk Mountains, southeastern British Columbia, Canada

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