

Singing with the Trees

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ROB FILLO

Singing with the Trees

**A pandemic adventure of growth and
enlightenment down the backroads of
Vancouver Island**

by Rob Fillo

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This book recounts a pivotal time in my life, narrated from my perspective. While my opinions and views may have evolved since its writing, the story remains an honest reflection of that period, as captured in my personal journal.

This is a work of non-fiction. Names, places, and events are depicted based on the author's personal journal and foggy memories. Some details may have been altered from reality. Any resemblance to individuals not directly identified by their full name, whether living or deceased, is purely coincidental and unintentional unless explicitly acknowledged.

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This book is dedicated to the kind, hardworking, courageous, and optimistic risk-takers—the dreamers who dare to pursue their purpose in life.

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Preface

This is the story of my leap of faith. A mad dash into the woods to escape the degradation of societal norms and find peace in a time of turmoil. Or maybe, it's simply the tale of a self-indulgent man-boy in search of something more. In all accounts, I found what I was looking for.

I'm older now. Sober now. Wiser...maybe? My world has changed and found a fantastic direction. I have a new wonderful woman in my life and my music career is on a fantastic and exciting trajectory. This story is from a pivotal moment in my existence, and I am so happy I took the time to capture it in writing. Life happens so fast and truly speeds up as it goes along. I invite you to read this snapshot in time with hopes that it amuses, entertains, and maybe even enlightens you—in some small way—to the perspective of a not so young man's search for meaning in a tumultuous world.

There was a time when I was afraid of the dark, afraid of the beasts that lurk in the wilds, and afraid of nature itself. That time has passed. The days recounted in this memoir changed me. I am very grateful for the positive changes that came out of my own personal crises during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am different now and so very happy with the man that I have become. It took a lot of work and no small effort. My life's journey continues. But there was a time, not so long ago, when I thought the world just might end...

Sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride. I know I did.

Thank you for coming on this journey with me.

Where Am I?

Where am I? What just happened? Everything seems to have gone horribly wrong... or at least, it did. Back in March 2020, when I was quite certain the world was going to end, I ran away. I took my closest friend, and we ventured into the forest. After about three weeks of camping off grid in the snow, it seemed quite certain that civilization would not immediately crumble. The world of man would not go out with a prophetic bang of biblical proportions, but more so a long drawn out—and rather entitled, yet ever so subservient—whimper.

After returning home to board up the windows, dissolve my business and liquidate what little I had, it was time to leave again. This time, I was going off-grid for a different reason. Not for fear of the civilized world collapsing, but for the much more imminent fear of my mental health collapsing.

I am not the smartest man in the world. I don't hold the kind of encyclopaedic knowledge which university-indoctrinated, contemporary minds deem 'smart'. Nor do I subscribe to the ever-more destructive pop-cultural values that are so prevalent in our society. However, over my many years of struggles, trials, and tribulations, I have had the good grace to learn something very rare in this world. I have acquired a very small (but solid!) spark of wisdom. This wisdom is matched with two other nearly extinct traits of humanity—principles and morals. This trinity of wisdom, principles and morals is what keeps my intellect constantly balancing between multiple perspectives and knowledge sources, always in search of a greater truth. Although sometimes, this balancing act blows up in my face and hits me like a ton of bricks.

In general, I am not a happy person—perhaps I never was. Unconditionally happy people must maintain a constant

state of wilful ignorance. This mode of living is of little use in the grand scheme of existence. Like all things, life must be cyclical and pressure mediated. There is a pain-pleasure balance that must be maintained. We need darkness to experience the light. I do experience this light from time to time. However—as I have discovered—being locked in a condo, in a soulless city, and left with no foreseeable positive future, is not conducive to any form of sober and sustained happiness. Amidst my struggles with isolation anxiety, depression, and the substance abuse that seems to go hand in hand with it, I began to lose my grip.

I have said time and again that the worldwide pandemic known as COVID-19 has done good for me. However, there is more to that statement than meets the eye. As for many, if not most of us, COVID-19—that mysterious virus from Wuhan China that no one can seem to pin down and everyone seems to be covering up—made me miserable! Or at least it did. Then something happened. I snapped...

I made a conscious decision to look at things differently. I imagined that I was already dead. We all are, right? Sixty years or sixty seconds, only Death knows. So, what did I have to fear? No one gets out of this life alive. Best to live while the living is good. So, instead of dying by slowly drinking myself to death in lockdown—in my fancy condo (my beautiful cage)—I packed up my car with all the essentials (the coveted toilet paper of course, among other things) and I hit the road—after getting a clean COVID test stamp of approval, of course.

I made it to my parents' house on Vancouver Island to start. Then I began a massive adventure that would encompass the next two months of my life—summer 2020. Instead of rotting in the city, I would risk it all in the wilderness. I felt this was my time. Finally, my time to

become a man... albeit at thirty-eight years old. I imagined I would have to fight a bear—or something—to earn my stripes. I awaited this challenge on my last night, alone in the misty darkness. By the light of the full moon, I stared into the ether from a wooded terrace overlooking the ocean. By this time, after all my adventures, I had no fear. My campfire dimmed as the moon reached its pinnacle. With my bear mace and ten-inch-long hunting knife—hand sharpened to a razor's edge—I waited. I waited for nature's wrath on man. I waited for the stalking cougar to strike. I waited for the darkness to take me into its cold grasp... But how did I get here? Let me tell you a story about a man I know, sits heavy in the saddle, 'bout six foot four. This is my story.

The Journey Begins

I was born in Richmond, BC. Canada, to a mother and a father and taken to a humble stuccoed home. Such auspicious beginnings for a young Canadian lad... okay, I'll fast forward a bit. We'll save the deep dive into my childhood for the biopic.

I made landfall on the island in early July, soon after my most depressing Canada Day on record. When I arrived at my folks' place, I took a deep breath and realized that I had packed my 2004 Nissan Sentra to the gills with nearly everything I'd owned. I think part of me never wanted to come back to my condo—the condo in which I now sit editing this story. With permission to store a few things, I took the time to do a triage of the gear I had packed. I ditched my suitcase for a backpack, ditched my entire toolkit for a light set of essential tools, and the plethora of blankets got trimmed down to one blanket and a sleeping bag. The back seats of my car needed to be removed to make room. I had put my brain into adventure mode, coming up with a new vehicular configuration, the Mini RV! The absence of back seats made for much more storage space, and now the passenger seat could lay flat for sleeping. There was also open access to the front passenger area through the trunk, making room for other essential pieces of the puzzle.

I have severe sleep apnea. Every night I need a CPAP (breathing machine) to be able to safely rest and avoid being miserable the next morning. With a little research, I rigged up a MotoMaster Eliminator PowerPack in the rear centre of the back seat area. Now I could sustainably charge the PowerPack from the rear DC port while the car was running. This, coupled with a specialized 12-volt CPAP adapter, some CPAP computer adjustments, along with my sleeping bag and single blanket, made for a very functional and reliable sleep setup on my passenger seat. Food storage on the right of the trunk, fuels and tools in the centre, and

clothes to the left. Axes, campfire grill and toilet paper... you get the picture. The smaller items filled in the trunk gaps and made for a tight-fitting pack job, suitable for those bumpy logging roads that traverse the best adventure spots Vancouver Island has to offer. Water and firewood would live right-rear shotgun to balance my weight as a driver and my weapons of mass destruction (comically large hunting knife, bear spray, bear bangers and emergency flare launcher) lived—more or less—safely in the passenger side door compartment. Of course, Covid times call for Covid measures, so hand sanitizers—both spray and gel—lived in the small centre console with masks of various colours and flavours living above the visors and nitrile gloves in the aptly named glove box. Did I miss anything? Heck no! I was set.

After a few days visiting with my family, I set out. It was a hot and sunny day... I'm assuming. Honestly, I don't remember because it all seemed to go by in the blink of an eye. I can't believe I'm already back home and writing this all down.

The first leg of my journey was rough. I was inexperienced, scared and alone. The transition from civilized Rob to bushman has always been a little awkward. I too, like so many of us, fall for the trappings of the civilized world and all the addictions and distractions that: a) go with it and b) go nowhere... generally speaking. So, I headed to... hmm... I don't remember. Luckily, I kept a journal. Let me just dig that out and place it next to me for reference. It says here it was actually a brisk day... 'brisk and sunny.' Let's get this right. Here we go...

Ukee-fino

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I set out on a brisk sunny day and travelled north, then east on Highway 4 towards Tofino/Ucluelet. I recalled previous visits to Tofino revealing the area as a rich person's playground with entitled hippies and beautiful vistas. It had not changed. Upon visiting the visitors centre—as one does—to get the lay of the land, I met a very candid Tourism BC employee who warned me of things being amiss in town. Apparently, the place was overcrowded with tourists who had nowhere to stay, and the less bashful tourists were defecating on homeowners' lawns. Personally, I considered this a rude move, as no one wants to add a 'stranger's poop' to a list of household cleanup chores... But honestly, like so many other human conflicts, this was a matter of rich versus poor; the haves and the have-nots—in this case pertaining to toilet facilities. In the not so distant future, there will be many more actual homeless people and many more lawn poops to clean up, Not-In-My-Back-Yard (NIMBYs) get ready!

It seems, while the world was in the grips of a pandemic, resort season for the wealthy was still in full swing. 'No Vacancy' signs were strewn up on almost all the (\$75 and up per night!!!) campgrounds and the plethora of high priced—though lovely I'm sure—resorts. Apparently, self-isolation is best done in large groups with affluent strangers at fancy resorts. I think I'll go that route next time...

Alas, after being aggressively accosted by an odd brand of entitled—yet seemingly more filthy than usual—hippie for wearing a surgical mask (not an environmentally friendly cotton bandana) in the grocery store, I decided to hit the road to find greener pastures.

There is a left turn we should all make when we hit the T-junction between Tofino and Ucluelet. Left goes to a wonderful peaceful place that, in many ways, is the equal yet

opposite of Tofino. Instead of the overpopulated Long Beach (\$7—or more now—to simply walk on the beach, no joke!) I headed to the land of storming seas, friendly faces, and black craggy rocks.

Ukee! Ucluelet—or ‘Ukee,’ if you’re cool—is wonderful. The locals are yet to be visibly jaded by the influx of tourists in the summer, mostly because they get way less tourism than their affluent neighbour Tofino. In another life, as the executive director of a non-profit arts advocacy group, I visited the lovely Black Rock Resort in Ucluelet for a work conference. I decided I would chase down those memories there and found the resort to be rather barren. My server, in the near empty lounge, regaled me with candid tales of staff turnover and the broken dreams of those who had moved to Ucluelet for the West Coast magic, only to find the lack of Starbucks and Walmarts too much to bear. If you know me, a lack of chain stores has quite the opposite effect. I typically become quite happy and excited in their absence. I felt comforted listening to her cheeky tales.

I feel so honoured that my demeanour repeatedly brings out a release of honesty in so many wonderful strangers that I meet. The intuitive, authentic vibe that I emanate really deters the robots and allows the last of us real humans to let go and speak from the heart. I believe the simple reason for this is that people sense my intention to listen to them free of judgement.

I meet so many angels and demi-angels on my journeys, and this lovely server was no exception. I don't know her name, but I will always remember our little chat somewhere inside me. Not to mention that she gave me a deep discount because I was, ‘nice, unlike most guests’ she had met on the dark and stormy shores of the Black Rock Resort. This comment fills my heart, even now, in contemporary

recollection. She was the first of many wonderful strangers I had the privilege to meet that summer. From Darren, the homeless, pit-bull loving alcoholic, to my angel of the campfire light Barb, and all the others you will soon meet throughout this memoir. After that lovely lunch/dinner, I sensed my time in Ukee-Fino was short, and I listened to my intuition. It spoke to me and said that the battered 'Wet' Coast was no longer in need of my soul's presence at this time. So, I hit the road.

The Secret River

Night was falling fast—too fast—as it does when the topographical gradients are so dynamic. Mountains and tree cover make it difficult to predict when the sun will slip away at night or rise in the morning. I was fading fast after that lovely meal and conversation at the Black Rock Resort, so I took a chance. Using the WikiCamps app—a bit of a community driven digital crapshoot for finding sneaky camping spots—I found a marker on the in-app map that simply said, ‘Camp Near the River.’ At this late stage, that was good enough for me. And so, on this fateful night, I pulled off the highway and onto an unmarked section of the Nahmint Forest access road. There, hidden from the highway by a beautiful creek and tree line, were a multitude of little ad hoc bush campsites all along this tributary of Sproat Lake. It was lovely and busy. I found a little branch-covered hovel to pull my car into and slept the night.

Sunday morning, there was the expected exodus of weekend campers heading home and I managed to secure a sought-after campsite directly beside the river. It was hot, very hot, so I took the opportunity to try ‘floating.’ Floating, or going for a float, is terminology—for those not in the know—for using a flotation device to leisurely travel the length of a slow-moving lazy river. I only had my super-cheap, ten dollar, almost useless, air mattress. So, I began to blow. After the better half of an hour, my headache had passed, the dizzy spells were gone, and there I was with my inflated rubber raft of sorts. I was almost ready to float...

As an experiment in Covid safety, to avoid the hair salon, I decided to use the clippers (a long-ago gift from my friend and soon to be travel partner) to shave my head. I felt a twinge of regret as my luscious locks fell, but I soon grew quite accustomed to my new hairstyle. However, my shaved—and admittedly balding—hair situation required sun protection. As it would happen, I was in luck. The loud party

of young Australian folks from the night before had left a very large—and only slightly more effeminate than I am accustomed to—sun bonnet. With slight modifications for my more than ample brain cage, I had found my knight of shady armour. With trepidation, I dipped my feet into the frigid water at the top access point of the little river.

Over the next hour and a half, I was elated to find that I had adapted to the time-honoured British Columbia tradition of going for a ‘float.’ This experience proved to be refreshing, revitalising, and relaxing. In due time, I successfully dragged myself and my drippy shorts up through a fellow camper’s end-of-the-river campsite with a wave and a smile. A visceral sense of enlightened clarity came over me for what I had accomplished. I was now an initiate in the zen art of floating. I was a floater! This newfound pastime was repeated many times and in many various water bodies along my journey. This wonderful site—directions to which I cannot share, as I have been sworn to secrecy on pain of death—was so very beautiful. This beauty was especially evident during the workweek when the muggles were back at home. It was truly paradise and a great starting place to warm up my camping skills. I decided to stay for a few days, and I am so happy that I did. For at this magical riverside campsite, I met a lovely group of people that would hereafter shape my journey in a multitude of positive ways.

Sam, Trish, Chris and my newfound angel Barb, all decided to plunk down their camping vehicles by that same fateful river. On my first evening, I’d hidden in the bushes to escape the rabble, but now—after my successful float—I was filled with a bravado that led me to suggest a group effort to produce a campfire.

Chris—a paramedic and sharp-looking thrill seeker—volunteered to be my wingman and brave the mosquito kingdom of the creekside forest that lay beside our camp. There, with hatchets in hand and an ever-increasing array of mosquito bite constellations growing on our shirtless backs, we foraged and foraged and foraged some more. We had finally gathered enough dead fallen wood to have a moderate campfire, so I set about flexing my evolutionary ape muscles and performed the magical task of piercing the ether through the traditional and ancient practice of dumping a cup of white gas on a pile of sticks and dangerously throwing matches at it from afar until... BOOM! MAN MAKE FIRE! GRUNT GRUNT! Cough, grunt, cough... Uh, don't do what your Uncle Rob does kids...

It was around this—now rather robust—fire that my newfound friends and I shared stories, rolled joints, drank dranks and got to know each other. It was also about this time when I pulled out my guitar for the first time on my trip. Little did the others know, I have had years of practise dancing my fingers around the guitar strings. With their expectations of obligatory contrived applause and painful renditions of ‘Kumbaya,’ the party waited to hear me play with bated breath. And I did. I heard their whispers of ‘Wow’ and ‘Holy shit, he’s good’ as I struck the chords, soloed around the strings, and regaled them with my music. I blew them away and it felt great. For the first time in a long time, I felt my music truly being appreciated; here, in the middle of nowhere, of all places.

I have played shows before, many shows in the city, on the mainland. Most of those shows were spent competing with big-screen sports events playing simultaneously—often with the TV sound left on—while I tried to perform my heartfelt, personal music. Needless to say, I’ve—so far—found little appreciation or respect for my music in

Vancouver and the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Around this campfire, however, I could feel the undeniable spirit of the universe—if only a little kiss of it—seeping through in perturbations from the great beyond. The feeling was special. It left an impression on my newfound friends and, even more so, an impression on myself.

People actually enjoy it when I play music..? In many instances throughout my life, due to a lack of self-esteem and other negative self-concepts, I felt I was only capable of annoying people with my hard practised, lifelong pursuit of songwriting and musicianship. But here, in a random spot, by a random river, with random new people, I felt very much appreciated. It filled my heart with contentment, my soul with delight, and my head with the ‘lonely spark.’ This lonely spark—a recurring construct in my mind—signifies an instance of magical and transformative thought; a vague realization of unmistakably moving split-second inspiration, impossible to grasp in a material sense. This guiding glimmer of light can create a blazing forest fire of creativity, if nurtured with care, wisdom, and compassion. That night, I felt the lonely spark ignite and it began churning with my soul. The fire has been growing ever since.

The next night, my new friends moved on and I was left seemingly all alone. Then, with a whisper of the divine and an air of fate, through the trees crept a beautiful young German woman. At first, I was oblivious to her presence as I serenaded the fire gods by the creek. Honestly, it was so dark that part of me thinks she was not in fact a woman at all. I don’t remember her face or her body, nor eating that handful of magic mushrooms. I simply remember a silhouette that filled me with a visceral passion for life and the well-hidden awkward nerves of a lost boy in the presence of a beautiful young woman. Perhaps she was not a German

traveller at all, but rather a goddess of the forest. I think I'll remember it that way.

There I was, under the stars, fire blazing, and this goddess of the forest decided to materialize and come sit with me. We sat together, in this magical ambience, lit up only by the firelight and the glow from a few well-endowed marijuana cigars. She listened to me play for hours. I squinted my eyes and gazed up from the flames. A remark from my persisting insecurities squeezed through my lips and I squeaked, 'I must be boring you.' Without a hint of hesitation, she spoke with soft luxury, 'I could listen to you forever.' Amidst a haze of various smokes, I continued to serenade...

We hadn't spoken much over the course of approximately three hours of music. We had revelled in the surrounding beauty and freedom of the natural world, off the beaten path, and it was glorious. The silence in between the notes was caressed by the slapback echo off the rocky highway embankment.

As the night came to an end, I played an especially entranced and passionate rendition of my song *Let Go*. We stared intently into the meek and dying embers, as the cycle of life and death played out before us in the firelight. Every beginning has an end, and every end is a new beginning. For this metaphysical metaphor of a gift, I proclaimed aloud that I would invoke the spirit of the fire to join us for this last song.

In a strange and goosebumpy moment, a last gasp of flame shot up out of the dying coals and proceeded to dance. It was a very strange and special moment. The flame was long and lean, and taller than you might imagine. It swayed and frolicked back and forth, dancing along with the beat and telepathically singing its own magical harmony. It sang

in wind-like emotions with a consistent cool refreshing current of electricity emitting from the flame directly into my brain. The forest's song, the forest's hidden lessons, the forest's soul, transmitted from the wood through the medium of fire. It felt as if the trees that fuelled the fire were sending out the wisdom from their collective histories before they relinquished their last grasp on the material world. I can feel it even now, quite vividly, the gravitas of the moment is still very moving.

When my song ended with a dramatic final chord, the flame vanished with precise rhythmic accuracy, replaced by a single serpent-like spire of smoke. The goddess of the forest and I shared a mutual glance of slight fear and grand amazement. I don't claim to be a wizard of any sort, but there was certainly magic afoot.

This seemed like a good ending point to say the least. There would be no encores. Elvis had left the building. The forest goddess and I gazed at each other with bewildered smiles and red squinty eyes. As the moment was leaving us, we felt a mystical sense of closure. She rose from her seat, we embraced, and she wandered back into the forest.

I have never seen nor heard from her again, but we shared a special moment that will stay with me for a lifetime. That moment when the veil parted, and we saw the ghost behind the machine dancing in the firelight. I can now say for certain that I'm a believer, though I'm not exactly sure what it is that I believe in. Maybe there are no proper words for it, but I know that it's out there: the god of Spinoza, the ghost in the machine, love beyond love. Whatever it is, I have faith that it exists.

ROB FILLO

The Inward Journey

Part 1

With my newfound incommensurable understanding of the universe that I could never put into words—and, frankly, still makes very little material sense to me—I felt the call of the spheres again. It was time to travel onwards. My soul wasn't required here anymore; I was being drawn away.

For just a moment, I want to ask a question. Do you know what intuition feels like? I didn't. It took me years to reconnect with it. Most children are quite intuitive right out of the oven. There is a magical radio signal out there that we human creatures are connected to. It makes us intuitive, somewhat empathic, and gives us an incomprehensible sense of oneness. Some people find the essence of this, albeit often a perverted one, through religion and new age spiritualessque materialism. However, without any labels, traditions, or monetary exchanges, if one finds a solitary, silent spot in nature and opens their deeper senses to it, this essence will be felt. Oddly enough, I swear I can smell it. That said, to those in the know, I am far less human than I look and far more human than I care to be.

Intuition, in its most basic physical sense, lives in the solar plexus—the region just below the bottom bone of your sternum. You ever get punched there? The bullies at my elementary school found humour in hitting people there, as the victim would have terrible trouble breathing due to the impact—this is where your diaphragm is, the muscle responsible for sucking air down into your lungs. This is also where my physical connection to intuition seems to come from. Picture a timey-wimey ethereal field where strands of energy emanate from each of our chests, forming a beautiful array of all that is and all that ever was—happening constantly, simultaneously, and instantaneously, beyond the illusion of time itself. Are you still with me? I tend to visualize these energy strands as life pathways—think *Donnie Darko*. When I am tuned into my solar plexus area,

and I follow my timey-wimey energy path, I get all these amazing and wonderful surprises and experiences along my life's journey. Synchronicity. It's as if these experiences have been placed before me, waiting for my arrival, but I need to follow the magical—and elusive—light of intuition to reach them: a somewhat determined path that requires courage and faith to follow. It seems to be a practice in letting go and, like so many lessons of the human condition, it is steeped in contradictions.

Almost all of us, as humans, have strayed drastically from this path. It's become invisible to us after years of unhealthy conditioning, over-reliance on materialist thinking, and using the brain as a computer, not as an antennae. We overwork our material processes yet miss out on the more subtle wonder of the overall experience. This creates short-sighted goals and decisions detrimental to the existence of future incarnations of our DNA. So, if you feel ready to make the time, try some body scan meditations. Consciously try to get in touch with your subtle unconscious senses. For a time, focus on letting go. You probably won't go crazier than you are now—most people find body scan meditation very relaxing and grounding. I did it for years and it helped me through some tough times in my past. *Side effects may include a renewed sense of spirituality and connection to universal nature.*

Existential contemplation of the universe's wonders can be a wonderful thing, but remember, enlightenment is meant to be received in sips. To chug the nectar of wisdom, is to choke on the hubris of man.

Opportunity Knocks

It was finally time to meet up with my friend and to-be travel companion, Mary, at her sister's place in Parksville. I would also be greeting the welcome rumble of a laundry machine.

Freshly washed sundries packed, Mary and I decided we would head towards Horne Lake Caves in the morning. But before we left, she saw a simple little poster on a lamp post by the BC Liquor store, 'Open mic tonight at The Music Café.' This innocuous poster led us to a fantastic night at the sweetest little music club.

In this town, you are either newlywed or nearly dead. There is not much nightlife, though I have a strange attraction to the old bowling alley with its terribly sloppy cosmic karaoke Fridays. In Parksville, you can stay at a lovely resort, play mini golf, or drink yourself into a stupor on a sunny lounge chair by the beach. There are fancy, rich-people things to do at the Tigh-Na-Mara Spa Resort, or the much more affordable, and still breathtaking, walks on Rathtrevor Beach. But tonight, we were heading to an open mic.

The Music Café was a real gem. With my newfound faith in the adventure of it all, I poured my heart and soul out on the stage for my fifteen-minute set and people were really into it. After the other performers had taken their turns, the owners had me return to the stage and I played for forty more minutes with a house band of musicians I had just met. I directed the band, entertained the crowd, and had a wonderful time. It felt great to be recognized for the talents that I had spent over twenty-five years developing. I wowed the audience and the lovely owners, Pete and Faye, asked me to return the following weekend to play an entire evening performance of my original music. I had brought my guitar with the intention of playing campfire concerts along my

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journey, but I never imagined I'd be given the chance to perform a paid gig at a brick-and-mortar venue. That, however, was still a week away...

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Beauty and the Beast

To start our duo-camping experience, seeing as how we had not camped together in a car for a while, Mary and I decided to pay for a couple nights at Horne Lake Provincial Campground before heading off-grid. When we finally settled in and hiked up to Horne Lake Caves from the campground, I was disappointed to see yet another case of pandemic profiteering. The caves were no longer accessible to the public unless you paid for a ‘guided tour’—accompanied by the purchase of one of their Covid masks. The prices were incredibly high. I was quite upset. I had been to the caves previously on a self-guided tour and had a wonderful time. This time, I would not win. The only way into the caves was to take my bolt cutters and break through the iron gates that were mounted at their entrance. I thought about it... Then, with a turn and a huff, I sulked for the entirety of my long walk back to camp.

As you can imagine, it is a bit of a struggle for two people to sleep in my 1.8 litre, four-cylinder, 2004 Nissan Sentra sedan together. We did our best to make space and eventually got cozy in our sleeping bags, each on our respective seats. Graciously, Mary took the driver’s seat and had to contend with the steering wheel and pedals at her feet. It was a less than romantic experience, but a nice time for two friends adventuring in the woods. All in all, we made it work and after this two-day trial run, it was time to hit the road in search of more rustic adventures. Provincial campsites may be fine for the young wealthy family or the pensioner in search of an echo of their glory days, but I was not on a quest for recreation. I was on a quest to shed a bit of the frightened child I carry in my guts and find a bit more of the man in me. I think Mary came with me because she has a constant wanderlust, or maybe she still loves me after all these years. But there we were, two star-crossed adventurers, heading out on the road.

Horne Lake Caves was a bust and way too expensive for me. I was hungry for something more off-the-beaten-path, but I questioned Mary's resolve for true off-grid camping. She had grown soft from her city dwelling lifestyle, as had I. Could I still string a tarp, could I impress her with a fire, could I seduce her with my wood chopping? I am a red-blooded man, after all—growl, ooga-booga, and so forth. Ahem... And so, we headed north.

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Sneaking Through Sayward

Not many people know about this sneaky little campground. I should mention now that I hate paying for camping. In general, I've found that campground managers rarely reinvest their revenues into properly maintaining the sites. These days, many organizations treat campgrounds as revenue-generating businesses, but often do so by cutting corners and allowing the grounds fall into disrepair. In days of old—before the full effects of the Gordon Gekko 'greed-is-good' mantra took hold—there were far more camping opportunities in British Columbia, Canada. In the '70s, there was legislation made to force the logging industry to stop hoarding all the best fishing, hunting and camping spots for their employees—creating opportunities for regular Joes to meet with the pristine, wondrous wilderness the loggers had been experiencing since the beginning of the massive forest decimation projects that still roll on strong today—deliberately kept quiet, away from the prying eyes of activists and far from the COVID-19 media news rant repertoire. A little money in the newsman's palm goes a long way in today's propaganda industry. Now, I'm not against logging, but there are right ways and wrong ways to process raw materials sustainably. Not that I'm any expert.

The forestry campgrounds used to be—more or less—free to the public, as part of a trade-off that allowed corporations to harvest ever-larger swaths of pristine old growth, second growth, third growth, and so on. Free campsites still exist, which I will mention, but most people end up paying a premium to stay at government or forestry campgrounds. The problem with pay-for-stay camping in BC is that nearly all the sites are incredibly run-down. There must be mismanagement issues, or perhaps greed is simply trying to squeeze as much profit out of them as possible without reinvesting in maintenance and upkeep, as previously mentioned. There seems to be a common thread: if money is involved and government 'oversight' is in place—whatever

it is—it will inevitably get mismanaged until it sucks. Of course, there are a few exceptions to the run-down rule, but when you're driving into a site that you paid good money to visit, they could at least throw some fill into the giant potholes. Some of these holes could swallow half a car! I'm looking at you, Fairy Lake Campground—you almost killed the Mini RV! But I ramble...

And then there's Sayward. Yes, Sayward. Let's just say it's a quiet community, but do not venture onto any private property. There are three things enjoyed by residents here: loud motorcycles, the kinds of dogs that are bred to be weapons, and privacy. Good bunch of folks, I'm sure. But much like the ocean, treat these backwoods with caution and respect. Better yet, stick to the main campgrounds. My sneaky free-camping favourite is behind the Co-op gas station at the highway junction. There are no directions or markings except for a 'No Dumping' sign to point you in the right direction. However, if you travel 100 metres down this overgrown road, the bushes open up onto a beautiful free campground, fire pits and all. It's basic. There are no amenities, just an open field with campsites, fire pits and a very dry and flammable grass field—use fire safety! I had to run around with my blue water jug soaking the ground after a spark kissed the grass around the fire pit. It scared the crap out of me... but I digress.

This free spot was an absolute gem to rest at. With the setting sun and my increasing fatigue, I pulled in for gas at the Co-op and asked the wonderful lady behind the counter about camping spots in the area. She could tell I was less than affluent and very tired. She introduced me to this free campsite, hidden right off the highway, walking distance from Wi-Fi and flush toilets. It's not exactly off-grid, but a good rest and refuelling spot nonetheless. I am forever grateful for her kindness. I think the site is a bit of a local

secret, seeing as there is a pay campsite down the road. This pay campsite—complete with the cutest little liquor/grocery store, full RV hookups, and hot showers—is amazing, so stay there if you can. But on this night, Mary and I slept in the sneaky hide-away camp behind the Co-op.

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Wagons North!

The next morning was hot. The sun was beating down. We had slept in! Damn you, peach flavoured cider! You nearly had me burn down an entire town with a rogue spark and now this headache?! I fired up the car, turned on the AC for survival, watered a tree, and we were off. The day's goal was to hunt down a memory in Woss.

Woss is an old logging town. I personally love it there—especially the Woss Lake campground. If I had a way to make a living in Woss, I could see myself moving to the area. It's a very small town, nay hamlet. I was told that the community refused to allow a church in Woss because it would change their hamlet status to town status, which would raise their property taxes. So, one of the residents just held church services in their trailer—I love this tidbit.

At the gas station/liquor store/grocery store/outfitter/post office—in that respective order—we stopped to fill up our water jugs using the outside tap. We proceeded to grab some hair-of-the-dog ciders and trotted off towards the campground. But wait! It's the August long weekend. Being a man of little worry when it comes to times, dates, and social media, I had no idea that it was the weekend, let alone the biggest camping weekend of the year. Upon arrival at Woss Lake campground, there was standing room only. A three-foot clearance between lakeside trailers was a generous estimate of the situation at hand. Covid rules be damned! This place was packed, and understandably so. Woss Lake Campground is run, if you can say run, by Western Forest Products Inc.—a logging company with deep roots around the island. It has pit toilets that remind me of the sewage monster from *The X-Files*—no, I will not explain that to you millennials. Just go watch it. There's a monster that hides under outhouses. It's grotesque and traumatizing. Anyways... The campground is not exactly four stars, but the lake is wonderful. However, in this instance, both Mary

and I deemed the campsite to be far too crowded. It simply felt like it wasn't Covid safe, whatever that means these days. So, on we went, up to Port Hardy.

Port Hardy—a place that was clearly once booming—is less so a dead town than a dead city. I likely don't need to reiterate that British Columbia has tragically mismanaged its natural resources for many years now, but I will. The towns and cities, once the hubs for logging, mining, fishing and even farming, are now downtrodden and a bit sad. Almost all of these communities have tried to reboot their economic engines with under-supported and contrived attempts at historic and adventure tourism, usually to no avail. Not to say that these communities aren't worth visiting, or that there's no charm to those who still remain there, but once the mills closed and the softwood lumber began being shipped as dirt-cheap raw logs to China and Japan, the jobs dried up, leaving many families stranded. There are only so many ways to diversify a town in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by forests—or in many cases ex-forests. And you can imagine what happens next: liquor sales go way up and hopes and dreams wash out to the barren sea with the tide. You can sense this sad truth in all of these dying towns to varying degrees. The international businessmen, with politicians in their pocket, don't seem concerned about these issues or the families they negatively affect.

I bought my first proper axe in Port Hardy at a fishing store—a very good quality marine axe. Port Hardy is the last bastion of civilization before the adventurous lands of the wild northwestern area of Vancouver Island—including Cape Scott Provincial Park. I use the name Cape Scott Provincial Park to include the entirety of the massive web of old logging roads that crisscross the Northwest of Vancouver Island, not just the park proper. Here, you'll find a land of grizzly bears, cougars, and amazing adventure...

We embarked in the early afternoon, my Wiki Camps Canada app in hand. We were heading for a randomly chosen site called Georgie Lake. The roads were rough—especially for the Mini RV—but I’ve always said, you’ve got to do the best you can with what you’ve got. So we did. We made it to the incredible Georgie Lake.

Upon arrival, we immediately met a mother and daughter, the only other campers setting up. They told us they felt ill-prepared to stay the night—not enough booze—and were heading back into town to resupply, with plans to try again tomorrow. In true Vancouver Island fashion, they trustingly offered us their two kayaks for the night. We humbly accepted, and that first evening, we found ourselves miles from nowhere, in the most beautiful, pristine wilderness, atop a glass-still lake, enjoying a most amazing sunset. There were no other humans for many miles in any direction. Mary and I were greeted by the song of a solo loon, as the sun gently melted into the mountainscape. This was one of the best evenings I will ever spend on this earth—I am so grateful for all those involved in making it happen.

The following day, we met a couple new friends, Kris and Sara. Kris let me ride on his ATV—a first for me. Who knew they had a thumb throttle?! The rain began to come down hard, so he and I—with the intention of making firewood—dragged some giant logs back to camp. However, with the logs soaking wet, it proved to be a complete waste of time. The rain began coming down even harder, so we all ended up huddling in Kris and Sara's utility trailer. Boy, did we tie one on that night! The booze and smoke flowed endlessly into our brains. I played guitar and we all sang. We howled at the moon! One of us—who will remain nameless—fell into the lake while wine drunk, trying to board a dinghy. It was probably for the best that they didn't

go drunk boating, after dark, in a rainstorm... We all had a good laugh. As the night roared on, Kris brought out his propane firepit in an attempt to dry off our hard-gotten firewood from earlier. Drying the logs was a futile effort, but the propane heat was lovely. There we sat in the utility trailer, warm and toasty, while we watched the heavy rains pour over the lake until the wee hours of the morning. It was sloppy, we were sauced, it was great. What an absolutely wonderful time.

The next morning our new friends went off on an epic ATV adventure and left us the aforementioned inflatable dinghy with the electric motor charged, mounted and ready to go. Mary and I headed deep into the lake and spent hours unsuccessfully fishing, using marshmallows as bait. I think I need to face the fact that I don't really fancy the idea of murdering a fish—although, hypocritically, I do enjoy eating fish. I just don't want to be the one to snuff them out unless it's absolutely necessary. We fished and fished on this trip, but never used proper bait. I love fishing when it consists of lounging in a boat, on a beautiful lake, in pleasant weather and serene silence. I can tie the knots and cast the line with basic competence. I guess I just don't feel the need to catch a fish, unless in a survival situation. They are such beautiful and seemingly friendly creatures. I love to watch them swim and frolic through clear waters. That said, we had bought our freshwater fishing licences early in the trip and we were darn well going to get our money's worth out of them—if only for show.

Just so you know, I won't mention fishing much more in this document, because I didn't catch a single fish. I really didn't want to go all Smeagol on a sweet little trout anyway, but the boating and lake aspects were phenomenal. I spoke with giant ravens—who clearly know something that I don't—but they refused to give up their secrets. Our friend

the loon popped by a couple times and sang its lovely and haunting song some more. I managed to dry some wood with a blend of ingenuity and accelerant (a.k.a. Boom Boom Fuel). I made a fire and we attempted to dry our clothes a bit.

As days passed, the rain did not. We began feeling pretty soggy and decided it was time to move on. We never went deeper into the vast and beautiful areas surrounding Cape Scott—I'm saving that adventure for another year and maybe a proper off-road vehicle. We began making our way back to the south of the island to visit my parents. Mary would be moving to the East Coast soon, and she wanted to make sure to visit my folks before she left.

At this time, I think it's important to the narrative to reveal a little backstory. Mary and I have known each other for over ten years. We were friends, then lost touch when she moved to Edinburgh some years ago. When she returned to Canada, we reconnected, and sparks flew. We even lived together for a few years. As in all of life's relationships, there were ups and downs, but all in all we did a lot of growing and healing together. We battled and overcame health challenges—both mental and physical—clearly loved each other, and worked hard on our personal development. We no longer lived together, but we still loved each other very much. It seems we had become romantically entangled friends...

Love seems to have the ability to overcome all things, stretching and bending over time and distance, if you stick with it. That's an important point because Mary is a wanderlust. For those of you who don't have a wanderlust in your life, these people are simply unable to stay in one place too long, otherwise they begin to rot and fester somewhere inside themselves. Having a wanderlust demeanour is likely

one of the more natural of human conditions. Like electrons around a nucleus, they have an overwhelming draw to move and travel and see what they can see. Mary's lust for travel began to outweigh her lust for me approximately a year ago when she decided to move out of our home and make plans to live on the East Coast.

When COVID-19 hit in December 2019, I was aware of the devastating effect it would have on the world through my Chinese friends in my hometown of Richmond, British Columbia (BC) Canada. For those who don't know, Richmond, BC is a Chinese territory located in Canada. Honestly, the population is over 60% Chinese; there is Chinese signage on many stores, and some Chinese-only advertising has been displayed in the train station and around town—which is a big language law no-no in bilingual (English and French) Canada. Signs can be in Chinese, but they must always include English and French. Richmond is not really Canadian in governance or residence from my perspective at the time of writing this. This is not meant to be a jingoist or racial commentary. Take a visit, experience the cornucopia of Asian foods, brave the crowded Taiwan-style night market, and tell me that you don't feel like you've been on vacation in another country.

As the body bags began to pile up in Wuhan, my Chinese friends kept me informed that this new Chinese virus (COVID-19, the Novel Coronavirus) was coming to the New World in a big way. So, in March 2020, Mary and I reconnected and shacked up for the end of the world. There's a song that still brings me to tears every time I hear it because it brings me back to that moment when we got back together—I can't find it on stupid Spotify right now, but it goes, '...If the world was ending, you'd come over right?'

My rather reliable intuition knew, even prior to March 2020, that millions would die from COVID-19 and that everyone on Earth would be affected in some way—if not by the virus, then by the terrible mismanagement of the outbreak by incompetent globalist organizations and idiot politicians. In my mind I knew the world, as I had known it, was ending. This new reality is still being refined to this day. Humanity will never be the same.

In my life, COVID-19—at this moment—has done more good than bad. How, might you ask? The virus hasn't affected my family and friends too badly so far, but I expect the economic fallout from the virus will be devastating and far reaching for many years to come. As I am editing this, the case numbers in Canada and my province, British Columbia, are once again skyrocketing. So far, I have been lucky. The virus has changed my world, but it hasn't destroyed it. Covid has given me a far better perspective on what is important in my life. The virus, and the hysteria surrounding it, reminded me how important my family is and how rare real friends are.

The virus also reminded me that love is more important than anything else and—most importantly—the virus brought Mary back to me. I loved her even more than before. Because of a deadly virus, she wasn't able to catch her flight to the East Coast this summer. This gave us the opportunity to run away together before separating to begin the next chapters of our lives apart.

In contemporary reflection, I sit here editing this with Christmas 2020 quickly approaching, and reinstated lockdown isolation crippling my mental health. Those now familiar aching feelings of insecurity and abandonment are growing inside me once again. But, on this our final adventure together, the Band-Aid was back on our

relationship and the little boy in me knew we would be in love forever and live happily ever after. On the other hand, the man in me knew—but didn't have the heart to tell the boy in me—that love and life were not quite that simple.

Yes, the world may seem like it's over, as we once knew it, before the Covid plague hit—much like the world seemed to end, as we once knew it, on 9/11. But now, I'm experienced enough to know the world isn't ending—not quite yet—though it is forever changed. And my relationship with Mary, too, has been forever changed. She's gone now—living in a small friendly town in New Brunswick—but for a brief moment, the world was ending and we were together again in love. My favourite kind of love; dramatic, over the top, last night on earth love. The kind of love that—though I repeatedly try—never seems to be sustainable. Part of me is still deeply in love with her, but as time passes I am realizing that I'm going to have to let her go. If you love something, set it free. That is the underlying backstory I wanted to mention. But—apparently—I digress...

My 'Really Big Show!'

Next, it was off to Parksville for my ‘really big show!’ There may have been a few more days of camping along the way, but all I remember is sleeping in my 2004 Nissan Mini RV with a tarp drooped over the car—in Mary’s sister’s front yard! Her poor neighbours must have been quite puzzled to have me car camping in their lovely suburban cul-de-sac—neighbourhood children spying to get a peek at the sleeping beast within. What a sight I must have been, wormed up inside my mummy bag with a CPAP mask hose sticking out the face hole, like something out of a Sci-Fi movie.

It was lovely to be in civilization—a shower, clean laundry, food, and friendly faces—and it was important to get rest and clean up before my brick-and-mortar island tour debut. Up until this point, it had been strictly campfire concerts and one open-mic night. I hadn’t planned to play paid gigs. But then again, I hadn’t planned for most of these adventures I was having.

I was nervous. It had been a long time since I’d performed a full concert, and this wasn’t just any gig; it was a 3-hour musical multi-instrumental extravaganza! So, I asked Mary’s sister’s children if I could borrow their Casio children’s keyboard to polish up my chops. The Casio was a little worse for wear, but it did the trick. Soon the kids joined in with little musical visits and questions. Kids are such sponges. They pick up much more than we’re aware of. With a little practice, I was ready for my gig.

I arrived very early, and Pete and Faye were kind and generous from the get-go. It seemed so rare to have such lovely people greet me at a gig. In my younger performance years, in the Greater Vancouver bar and club scene, there was much more bitter, jaded misery when it came to music promoters and sound guys. Needless to say, Pete and Faye

were a very welcome and enlightening change. Pete and I dusted off the old piano and much like the children's Casio keyboard, the piano needed some love and tuning. I could provide the love...

Six o'clock on a Saturday—the regular crowd shuffles in... followed by more, and then even more people.

The house was as packed as the venue could be, while still keeping up with the ever-evolving pandemic safety standards. Without further ado, I hopped on the piano and warmed up the crowd. After an hour of songs, rounded off with a cliché—if not campy and enduring—rendition of Billy Joel's Piano Man, I took a short break. A beautiful hum of excitement filled the room and I knew they were buzzing about me... and Pete's beef stew, but mostly me I'd like to think. I had never felt so appreciated, nay vindicated! Throughout my life, only small pockets of people have ever truly listened to or appreciated my music. And here, for the first time in recent memory, an entire room was genuinely thrilled to spend an evening with me. It filled me up with positive energy and I was pumped—and fairly buzzed from cider—for the next set. The hour blew by, then a short break, and back at it! I received a standing ovation at the end of the show. For my encore, I ended the night by singing *Tonight You Belong to Me* (from Steve Martin's *The Jerk*—look it up!). I dedicated the song to Dorothy, a big-rig truck driver for over 30 years who, at 90-plus years young, 'can drink you under the table.' What a lovely song to end a magical evening.

Life slips by so fast. Sometimes I think to myself, damn time! Damn time away to another realm. Let us continue on indefinitely so that wisdom is not so perpetually hard to achieve for our foolish species. Old people know so much more than they let on. Ever notice how the wisest people in a

room don't speak their mind unless asked? I have an uncle like that. He reads and reads but rarely speaks about the knowledge he's obtained—maybe I just don't ask enough questions... Personally, I think I'm smart enough to know that I'm reasonably smart, but not wise enough to keep my mouth shut—so, in the end, I must not be as smart as I think I am. With age comes wisdom, but I feel that wisdom is so often lost to time and careful silence. Please take a moment to listen to the wonderful song *Hello In There* by songwriter John Prine before we continue. It's poignant and speaks to this point. I'll wait...

Make sure to talk to seniors, while remembering to listen. Listening to real people in the real world is especially important in these days of mass media, with its loud-mouthed egos and talking heads spouting flatulent rhetoric. I've learned more truth in one conversation with a 99-year-old than in all my years of academic study. If education isn't grounded in independent critical thinking, it's not education—it's indoctrination. Old people know this. But if you have a degree on your wall, there's a good chance you don't.

The morning broke. A quick shower and a few hangover remedies later, it was time to take Mary to see my Mom and Dad. They love her, and she pretty much saved my life from the Hell I was living before she became my partner—although that too is another story for another time.

Mom and Dad's house can be wild. I have one nephew and another on the way very soon. There's a cat named Monster, a dog named Jasper, and a plethora of tiny wild invasive lizards everywhere. On a side note, why are invasive animals the cutest? At least it seems that way in British Columbia, Canada. Besides the less popular—but incredibly populous—urban rats, the only invasive creatures

I've met here in BC are bunny rabbits and cute tiny lizards. Cuteness abounds at the Fillo homestead between young'uns and creatures. It was a lovely visit.

While in signal range, I checked my digital devices for the first time in quite a while. I don't use Facebook or Twitter or Instagram or WeChat or Dingleberry or whatever, so I didn't know what was going on in social media land for the small island village of Parksville. I do, however, know that in my flip phone and email land, I was a hot ticket item! I had another gig! I was a hit with the locals at The Music Café and they wanted me back the following week. 'Back by popular demand!' the exuberant poster stated. But first, I had a week to kill. Once more unto the breach! Off Mary and I went, in search of adventure.

On the Road Again

As you may have read earlier, one of my favourite camping spots lies down a sneaky logging road off Highway 4, heading toward Tofino—that's all I'm going to tell you; 'keep it secret, keep it safe.' A week of chopping wood, floating down a lazy river, hot dogs over a campfire, and fearing for my life when my—more or less—homeless and severely alcoholic neighbour's pit bull dog escaped from a dilapidated RV pen and decided to aggressively visit me...

I am already terrified of dogs—as more than a couple have seen it reasonable to attack me over the year—and I have grown quite attached to my legs, arms, hands and fingers. Not to mention that I am also deathly allergic to furry pets! But, this pit bull was friendly enough, and very pregnant. Soon a pack of wild pit bull puppies will roam these forests—cute and terrifying, in that order.

The aforementioned neighbour, Darren, was quite lovely and kind, as was his family, including the pit bull(s). He did drink multiple kinds of hard liquor, mixed together in a 7/11 Slurpee cup—to his credit, he did offer me a sip—and his RV had definitely seen better days. Like all of us, he had circumstances that led him to where he was and he was happy to have someone to talk to.

Anyone who knows me well, knows to simply walk away when a stranger comes over and starts talking to me. I have this thing where I listen... It's a lost art in this new age of Faceblasting people with your latest brainwashing social media post—only to contradict the post the very next day with a hypocritical yet all-too-familiar quiver of vindicated righteousness.

Darren's life had been rich and full—for better and worse. He shared with me his colourful stories, which included encounters with real poltergeists, his former work

as a paramedic, and accounts of intense personal trauma. He told me about the woman he loved—how she had kissed him on the cheek and told him how very much she loved him, before unexpectedly dropping dead in his arms... This is enough to bring tears to my eyes in recollection while writing this, so it was clearly worth a listen at the time. Darren told his stories with vigour, yet with a certain detachment—though echoes of trauma would flash across his face, and he'd look away when the emotions overwhelmed him. I will also mention that he told his stories shirtless and never stopped moving while he spoke; his frail emaciated body almost dancing with the neurons as they fired his old memories. For moments, I put myself in his shoes and walked down the peaks and valleys of his mind.

Listening is such a crucial aspect to leading a full life. When you listen—and I mean truly listen—you gain knowledge and experience that you wouldn't have otherwise gained in the vacuum of your subjective world. This helps to guide your life and your soul's journey. I often find the need to remind myself to listen. It's important for everyone to do so, but especially important if you're a songwriter.

Darren never asked me for anything, not a dime, not a drink. He had a kind of old-school pride that isn't recognizable on some of the younger fentanyl junkie generation, but 'fent' addicts generally don't get that old. With all his faults and foibles, I still respect him. He seemed the kind of man that would come to the defence of good people no matter the situation. He also seems the kind of man that would slit your throat and feed you to his dogs if you hurt someone he cared about. I respect that—and I would certainly never want to cross him. I gave him a bag of herbal something-something as a gift for being a kind neighbour. He wanted so badly to give me something in return, but he had so little already. So, he offered a bowl of

chocolate ice cream. My heart wept at how sweet this man was. Melty chocolate ice cream in a filthy bowl with an old spit-polished spoon... Sadly, I'm lactose intolerant (a.k.a. lactarded: slow or incapable of digesting lactose) so I graciously declined. But the moment of offering was special in itself.

This reminds me of another story about a man I met near Harrison Lake. He lived in a van and was told—in his words—by Mother Gaia that he was the reincarnated Greek God Ares (God of War) and that the spirit world was coming to take back earth very soon. He knew all about Greek and Roman mythology and regaled me with tales of his (Ares') fabled feats. We stood there in the snow chatting for nearly an hour. Ares was an amazing and captivating storyteller. I think I may still be convinced of his origin story, an old god fallen from grace, forgotten and absolved of previous responsibilities—out with the old gods and in with the new? He had a roll of toilet paper and a custom seat cushion for the port-a-loo in hand and we stood there in the snow, talking and talking. Was he squeezing his cheeks together that whole time? Talk about a poker face... Mary and her brother were with me at the time. They lasted for about 2 minutes of that hour-long chinwag before wandering off. They knew I would be there, listening, for quite some time. Was he (Ares) wrong? End times? Spirit world coming back to earth? Kali Yuga? I have a feeling we'll find out in my lifetime. Oh to live in such interesting times. But again, I digress...

After bidding adieu to Darren and the pit bull(s), Mary and I met up with my lovely new friend Barb at Maple Grove campground near Lake Cowichan. Coming into the site, we were halted in place by a gaggle... or herd?—no, it felt like a gaggle—of elk. They swarmed the car for a bit, and we were struck by their noble stature and humble nature.

SINGING WITH THE TREES

Upon arriving at camp, we were told that we had had an incredibly rare experience, being swamped by this elusive elk family. I turned to Mary and whispered that maybe we should have taken some pictures. Oh well, live in the moment right? We lounged around Maple Grove, and Mary went swimming in the strangely warm and itchy lake. Another campfire concert down, it was time to get some sleep before heading back to Parksville.

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Back By Popular Demand

My second show at The Music Café was packed again. It went fabulously, even with the new COVID-19 spit shield I was required to sing behind. Pete had constructed this ‘essential safety device’ out of a clear plastic sheet mounted in a wooden frame, then suspended the whole unit from the ceiling. But... before he was through with the installation, he added one final touch. He drew TV controls on the frame. It made me smile to look out at my audience with the hand-drawn TV controls at my command. I even managed to smoke a thing or two for the last set and really let loose. Everyone was just feeling it. I felt so much joy letting the music flow from me without effort. I simply stepped out of my body and watched the concert from a third-person view, loving every minute... not that I can remember every minute, mind you, but I know I loved every minute.

With the show being a total success, I was elated. But it was also at this point in my journey that I had to let Mary go. She had places to go and people to see, as a wanderlust often does. Our time together was up. I dropped her off at her sister’s house and I was off on my own again. I was heading to Nanaimo to hunt down a show lead.

I had never been to the Millstone Winery before, but the idea of wine and music always brings out the excitement of Bacchanalia in the deep recesses of my DNA. So, with the help of my new friend Barb, I made contact with the booking agent, Alex. I was in! It was all aces until shortly after being accepted to play the show, it got cancelled. Having just received a laundry list of new COVID-19 safety demands to fulfil, the winery figured it was just too much work to get all the upgrades done in less than a week. So, I began a slow winding final chapter of my trip towards my folks’ house, then beyond to the ferry terminal, and finally home to the mainland. Or so I thought...

Or So I Thought...

I was driving the highway south. My memory drifted back to a fireside chat with Barb from when I was visiting with her in Maple Grove. ‘You haven’t been to Strathcona?! That’s the most beautiful place on the island for camping and nature,’ Barb had said in her endearing know-it-all way; gracefully avoiding adding a ‘Duh-Doiy!’ to the end of her statement. Well, it just so happens—at that very moment—I saw a road sign that read, ‘Hey Dumb-dumb! Strathcona is this way, duh-doiy!’ On a whim, I took the turnoff and my spirits began to rise again. My inner visceral caveman gets so excited when I go off-script and stress the matrix’s processing power. Zoom! Off I went, on the most beautiful drive—I do believe—I have ever taken.

The Strathcona area is chock-full of outdoorsy stuff: amazing hikes, fishing, climbing, caving, bears. With a tank full of gas, a big blue jug of drinking water, a trunk full of food and a little black bag full of grass, I was ready for adventure. What an amazing time! Some of my best photos were easy snaps along this route. I stopped for a salad in Gold River—my body was in desperate need of fresh vegetables and food that wasn’t served out of a can. I remember asking where the nearest grocery store was while filling up at the gas station nearby. The attendant’s reply was, ‘this is it.’ It was a modest gas station at best and certainly not a grocery store—beyond the impressive selection of chips, chocolate bars and bottled pop. But hey, I wasn’t in the mood for shopping anyways.

I came across a worn-down sign with a 1970’s pictorial etching of a ‘Tree to Sea’ highway map. Apparently, there was adventure afoot just up a massively long logging road. If I made it through this treacherous journey, my pot of gold at the rainbow’s end was named Tahsis. So, without mulling it over much longer, off I went. The road was long and rough. In a 1.8 litre 4-cylinder sedan, you must be very aware of

potholes, as I am—with the help of my stylish polarized sunglass clip-ons. It's a skill to develop, but avoiding potholes is very important in keeping your car running and your morale up. However, there is another school of thought on this; if you drive really fast, you'll skim right over the potholes. This technique also leads to the surprise discovery of steep cliff drop-offs at the apex of sharp turns, so I can't wholeheartedly recommend it. But it kinda works...

Tahsis is incredible. Someone will surely make it a 5-star Berghof retreat for the next all-powerful dictator, once either America or China—or both together as one, if Wall Street has its way—annexes Canada. It's going to happen. We have a low population and the most accessible and incredible natural resources in the world. International eyes are clearly on Canada. Ironically, the population of Tahsis is in decline. Like many other towns built around lumber processing and industrial fishing, the work has either dried up or moved overseas. The locals stay because they've found a magical gem of a natural place—the beauty is breathtaking. I'm pretty sure the massive logging road to Tahsis hasn't been paved because the locals prefer it that way—and apparently, so do the bears. So many bears! Bear poop all over the streets.

While camping at a free site, just outside of town, I met a lovely man named Steve from India. He, like so many international workers, decided that a COVID-19 layoff was a great opportunity to take the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and travel. Steve had driven across Canada from his job at Nokia in Ottawa, to see the wild West Coast. He dragged me on a morning hike, and in exchange, I taught him some much-needed bear spray safety. He had removed the safety clip from his highly potent canister of bear mace, and it was just tumbling around in his back seat with the potential to go off at any moment. Steve, a slender man with

a small and bony stature, was afraid of being eaten by wildlife. But we saw no bears, just a gigantic aggressively friendly wolf/dog thing who was certainly not my favourite part of the hike. No, it didn't get bear-sprayed, though I thought about it...

Back at camp, just as the sun was setting, clouds of tiny black no-see-em flies attacked! Then came a massive wave of termites or flying ants. I started a fire and bug sprayed everything, but to no avail. The last straw happened while I was cooking my favourite canned veggie dish, chip-shop-style mushy peas. I had reached my hand out of the safety of my jacket sleeve to grab the pot handle for three seconds and the little bastards latched onto me in a swarm. I dumped water on them immediately, but the damage had already been done. Little inflamed marks, resembling chicken pox, were throbbing and swelling all over the back of my hand. I immediately doused the fire, turned off the stove, threw my pot of peas on the driver's seat and my sleeping bag on the passenger side. Eight-o'clock was bedtime enough for me! I sealed myself in the safety of my car and watched Monty Python's Life of Brian, which I had downloaded earlier onto my no-SIM smartphone with the help of gas station/grocery store Wi-Fi. I ate my mushy peas in an itchy, sulking huff. 'Always look on the bright side of life...'

I awoke itchy and a little grumpy, but I still managed to brave the small river near my camp for an icy cold glacial runoff bath. After my dip, I allowed the burning sensation from the intense cold subside. Then I took a short hike upriver to look at the amazing geological stuff—pretty rocks and what have you. The water was the most beautiful emerald green and the rocks were unlike anything I had ever seen. Magic lives in and around Tahsis, I have no doubt.

Then it was time to hit the road. There was no way that I was waiting to be murdered by a billion tiny flies that I could barely see. Heck no! In a timely fashion—what we intuitive adventurers call ‘just because’—my phone found reception and randomly received a message. Two words from the promoter at Millstone Winery, ‘We’re on!’ When music calls, I’ve found it’s best to answer right away. (Cue *Black Fly Song* by Wade Hemsworth.)

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Barbie & the Millstone

The road out of Strathcona was just as stunning as the way in, just backwards. I stopped at Upana Caves. However, after hiking into the main cave, I chickened out—wisely—when my headlamp light wouldn't even illuminate the cave entrance... Bad time to forget spare batteries or good excuse not to go into a cold, slimy, spidery cave? Maybe I'll try again next year. I stopped at many other viewpoints along my way, each with equally evil flying bugs that all wanted to crawl into my ear holes... My EAR HOLES!!! Gosh darn winged devils! I probably slept somewhere along the way, but let's face it—by this point I was basically a wild, bearded caveman: never wearing a shirt, but always wearing my giant women's sun hat with 'Hello Sunshine' stitched across the front of it. All this was paired with some wannabe aviator clip-on shades and a wicked tan. I just kinda slept wherever I pulled over now. Ain't no one coming to mess with this guy—he's just too weird.

I arrived at 'Basecamp Barb' a bit late. She graciously stayed up with me, and we bonded while discussing philosophies, dreams, and life experiences. She told me about Jackie Chan, a little monkey friend she had made in Thailand, and shared some of her other overseas adventures. She also let me unwind and ramble on. I always have a lot going on in my head. It's both a blessing and a curse at times. This was a much-needed opportunity to let off some mental steam.

I slept in my car, in her garage. She offered me indoor accommodations that were clean and wonderful, but I had become too accustomed to sleeping in the passenger seat of my car. Lately, I've been trying to figure out how to drive the Mini RV into my ground-floor condo so I can continue this trend back in the city. I think I sleep better in my car now than in my own bed.

In the spirit of trusting island kindness, Barb lent me the keys to her amazing home and headed off to Vancouver to work on a film project. With her permission, I raided her bubble bath stash and indulged in my first bath in nearly two months. No other word quite describes the experience as well as glorious—simply glorious. Oh yeah! I was all squeaky clean and relaxed when it came time to perform at the Millstone.

The Millstone Winery is a paradise on the outskirts of Nanaimo—a wild and sprawling city. It was raining when I arrived, but the outdoor stage tent seemed to be doing a good job. The Covid arrangements left all these little grouplets scattered around outdoor tables, huddling under umbrellas. It was so beautiful there amongst the booze bushes—er grapevines! A lovely and talented young woman opened the show and then it was my turn. I ducked out of the rain and tuned my guitar in a little garden shed, away from the crowd and stage. Even after all these years, I still get nervous and excited before every performance. I tried warming up my fingers a bit and went over my song order in a useless OCD-like fashion, even though I knew I was just going to wing it anyways. A set needs to follow the mood of the crowd, which again, requires intuition.

My set turned some heads. I got lucky with some lewd, off-the-cuff humour about a pair of cute sisters I knew in Parksville and managed to work in some pretty artsy segues. I felt very appreciated. After the show, the owner Dale showed me his Mecca of a recording studio and performance area upstairs. OMG! I almost died! My heart was racing from all the amazing and tasteful vintage tape-recording equipment and the meticulously engineered vintage mixing board, though I was most drawn to the grand piano in the corner. Dale left me alone and the piano and I made sweet dirty love. I played the piano in a dreamlike state for forty-

three minutes straight before taking a breather. I was told later that some spies had snuck a listen by creeping up the backstairs. It was a wonderful night. Did I mention there was wine?!

The next morning, I awoke in a garage. Barb's garage. No one home, just me and Gainor the cat. I started to feel like John Prine's song, Summer's End. Summer was ending, but I just wasn't ready yet. I regrouped and shaved my head clean, trimmed my beard, and took one last tour of Barb's beautiful zen garden. It was starting to feel like the journey back to the city was more like a march to face a firing squad. The stress, harshness, and general putrescence of the urban lifestyle was creeping up on me with each calendar day that passed. I couldn't go home. Not yet! I hadn't learned what the trees had been trying to teach me. What was this elusive wisdom I was seeking? Was it simply learning that a good squat outside is the only way to properly evacuate one's bowels and that toilets are killing our colons? Maybe? Make sure to bury it boys and girls...

The Call of the Wild

The call of the wild was beckoning once again! Might I have to head home without the enlightenment I so longed for?! Not ready to call it quits yet, I grabbed my restaurateur friends Dong and Jia. Mooncakes in hand, we headed for my memory goal bonus level. Mary and I never hit Woss Lake in August because it was too busy, and you know... Covid and stuff. So, heading back there with Dong and Jia was a big bonus. We had always wanted to go camping together, and this is the site where Mary and I ran away to when the world was ending back in March—yet another story for another time. Dong and Jia were feeling a little green after the boiling hot, nearly four-hour van ride, during a heatwave, with no shade, and no AC. So, I helped them get the fire started. Hot in the day, cold at night; we were in the mountains now. I marvelled at their setup. They had a vast assortment of camping gadgets, and I think they also had a full-sized composting toilet?! All this in the back of a minivan, in which they also slept. They may have tucked Jia away in a little cubby hole somewhere to fit it all in. She is very tiny and an amazing baker, hence the aforementioned mooncakes.

The lake was breathtaking. Back in March, when I was bathing in this freezing lake, I always had my sights set on swimming across to the sandy beach on the other side. Now that it was summer, I had my chance. Carpe Diem! Dong and Jia left early in the morning on our last day there, leaving me a full day to accomplish my task. Mushy peas and tuna from the can, breakfast of champions! I drank lots of water too because, even though the water was cold, the weather outside was still scorching hot. I had to be properly fuelled for my epic journey upstream to my goal. Safety being of the utmost importance, I put on my salvaged *Hello Sunshine* sun bonnet and clip-on shades and nearly passed out blowing up my ten-dollar air mattress. When the time came, I entered the water with limited hesitation and

minimal high-pitched squealing. Only enough noise to attract a mother and her young son—fellow campers—to the shore. They cheered me on, literally. It was very exciting.

I eventually made it to the distant shores of this new world. The sandy beach I'd expected had a lot more tiny sharp rocks than it did soft, welcoming sand. The shards of sediment worked their way in and around my sandal straps, causing various levels of agony. But I, the brave Columbus... wait, not Columbus anymore... definitely not Columbus... but I, our brave non-denominational explorer and only explorer—certainly not a colonizer—was triumphant in my quest to find new lands. Even if these new lands were threatening to grind my feet into bloody stumps. At this time, I noticed the sun was starting to squeeze behind a mountain. I decided to top up the air mattress and begin my journey back to camp. The downstream current was very helpful as my situation became dire. Bubbles began to appear between my super-hot Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson pecs. Trouble was afoot—in both the hallucinations about my physique and the emergent air mattress leak. I hopped into action! With genius ingenuity, I used my right hand's index finger and saved the day. With some undeterminable words of encouragement and cheering from shore, I entered port and claimed my victory cider. I had done it! I had braved the vast wilds of Woss and won.

The Inward Journey Part 2

One glance in my wallet and it was clear that the good ship Fillo needed to find a friendly port with calm waters to hunker down in for a while and then I would be forced to reluctantly make my way back to the big bad city. It broke my heart a bit, but it hurt my brain more. My mind was so happy to be free of all the signs, symbols, sales, ideologies, politics, and the general illness that came with ‘civilized’ life. At the same time, I felt my intuition pulling me home. I typically weigh that gut feeling with some form of mental logic, which in turn seems to send an adrenal reaction back down to my gut, which then generally just messes with the flow of things. That’s why city life is so hard! We never relax enough to calm the electric butterflies of doom in our solar plexus. The constant stimulation and stress levels hide the intuitive feelings with some kind of adrenal reaction compounded by caffeine, fat, sugar, marketing imagery and digital obligations. It’s no wonder the world is in a downward spiral. We all need to get out of the city for a long period, leaving ourselves nothing to do but eat, sleep, explore, and stare into the campfire. In these sorts of states, we receive wisdom from the ether, channelled through the plants, animals, water, fire, and fresh air. There you have it! With some simple nature immersion and stress detox, we could all think more clearly and—bada-bing—world’s problems solved!

Most of the notes in my trip journal turn inward at this point. As I traveled alone down back roads and forest passes, winding my way from north to south, I found myself in deep reflection. At some point, I took a random turn based purely on intuition. There was no street sign guiding me—just a fateful choice that led into a wooded clearing along the back road from Lake Cowichan to Sooke.

From there, I wandered down a mysterious, unmarked path and discovered something incredible; a small,

abandoned nature park. The entire site looked like it hadn't been serviced since the '70s, and at its center stood something truly awe-inspiring—the largest tree I have ever imagined. Its base was the size of a small house. I named this marvel of majestic old-growth the Grandmother Tree. In her presence, I felt the very hum of God and creation. I cried, but not in sadness. I cried in grateful appreciation for my existential consciousness, overwhelmed by a profound sense of love in the universe—and for my fleeting, yet precious, place within it. I don't know much about trees, but I knew that something about this one was very, very special. The massive, accumulated history she holds is biblically awesome—and there she was, just waiting for me at a random pullout.

The stars beyond the canopy of the Grandmother Tree were breathtaking. I stood out on the empty logging road and stared upwards with both my jaw and heart agape. Stars are so incredibly important—and they're never going to look quite like this again.

I'm so frustrated that wealthy technocrats are given free rein over space. They're cluttering it up with far too many satellites and, inevitably, the massive stratospheric drone swarms that will flash neon soda pop ads across the skies. I also feel blessed that I was one of the last generations to get the privilege of seeing a sky so similar to that of my distant ancestors, before it is undoubtably ruined in the fashion that all things that humankind attempts to control seem to get ruined. I stood in the silent darkness, fearless and still, lost in deep contemplation, void of tangible thought. Then I watched as Elon Musk's Starlink satellites crested a nearby mountain and began crawling across the sky one by one by one by one—and so on—as if on cue. Elon plans to send up tens of thousands of these satellites to broadcast technocratic corporate propaganda to all reaches of the planet. I still

SINGING WITH THE TREES

remember a time, long ago now, when the internet seemed like a good thing... Maybe humans should leave the far-reaching frontiers alone, so we don't repeatedly destroy nature time and time again. But what do I know? I'm just a foolish creative type with a hefty dose of neanderthal DNA no doubt. Maybe I'll be a wise old man someday. It's good to have goals...

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Closure

On my final night, before heading to my parents' homestead—where I planned to rest and visit with family before heading back to Richmond—I took a random chance on a random logging road that scaled the side of a mountain. Logging had left a perfectly straight treeline that underlined the misty Pacific Ocean. From my elevated perch, I watched in awe as the full moon rose, crowning a mythical sky of misty diamonds. It gave me a feeling of soft, squishy, ethereal magic—the kind that pours over the human soul like rich, comforting, golden honey. I built a fire and started cooking.

Last night of camping meant that I was able to eat anything I had, no rationing. I could also use my entire water jug, which was full. Water is a killer. It's heavy as heck, but if you run out in the middle of nowhere, you're in serious trouble. Water is so important to life and means so much more to me after this trip. Water was also especially important that evening, as I had eaten jalapeno smokies tossed into a deliciously spicy can of chili. Then I grabbed my guitar and sang loudly, warding off any lingering demons and sending them back into the darkness from whence they came. You're not a true resident of planet earth until you howl at a full moon. I howled and howled until, suddenly, tears filled my eyes... I felt so alive in that moment, and it struck me that I would miss this majestic beast I had come to know within myself.

I'm so happy I wrote all this down. I wasn't going to. I planned to keep a sparse journal, which I did, and that was going to be the end of it. But this adventure was just too important to me. I didn't want to forget these precious moments. I've already lost so much of my life's story to the annals of time. Time moves fast, with nothing meant to last; all must materialize and dematerialize in respective cycles. My body and yours. Like a fire, from a lonely spark, to

flames and then to ash. We all have our time, best burn bright when the opportunity arises.

In the misty moonlight on my final night of camping, waiting for the epiphany of life-altering wisdom I had strived so hard to find. I had not yet realized the simple truth. I had already levelled up. I had already grown. It was never about man versus nature. That is the biggest lie humans have ever been indoctrinated to believe. Nature isn't waiting to challenge us; it's inviting us to come home. It misses us and wants us to remember who we really are. We are, as all things are, creations materialized from the ether and forever intertwined—beautiful alignments of life, intricately woven to offer a mortal experience that imparts deep and reverent lessons we carry with us unto eternity. I talked to the trees, I sang to the fire, I felt the blessings of the rain and cried with Mother Nature.

We stood at a crossroads some 7,000 years ago in the fertile lands of Sumeria, where civilization was supposedly born... and I now know, we took the wrong turn. Agrarian cultural shift, then the hoarding of goods, to the exploitation of peoples and animals whom the affluent deemed lesser. Pandora's box was opened. Here we sit on the precipice of the Kali Yuga, the darkest times. The internet-of-things meets technocracy; with cancel culture, social credit systems and pseudo-democratic voting that decides our government based on social media propaganda. Bottom line: We done gone and messed up 'cause we dumb. That's the truth of the matter. We had everything we could ever want in nature. God, whomever or whatever you deem God to be, didn't cast us out of The Garden. Lucifer—the material trickster—tempted us away with shiny things and an intoxicating sense of power over each other and nature. We have no power over nature. We are 'sand on a flea's ass' as my dear friend, Barb, has poetically exclaimed to me on more than one occasion.

SINGING WITH THE TREES

With this newfound enlightenment, I can't help but do my part and speak my piece against this grand material illusion. I play my songs, write down my thoughts and place one foot in front of the other. If I can inspire just a few people to see past the veil of cities, governments, propaganda, stock markets, narcissists, and newsmen, then I have done my part here. And so, I set forth, with a newfound sense of induction into the truth beyond the fools-play of—ironically dubbed—civilized society. I am no man! I am an animal and proud of it. Cross me, and I will bite; harm me, and I will eat your face off—and love... such deep love. Love for all things great and small will forever flow through me, as it once did, before man had words and the earth had boundaries. For I am nature and nature is me, and we are all one, born from the ether unto eternity, forever and ever. I am so very grateful... for all of it.

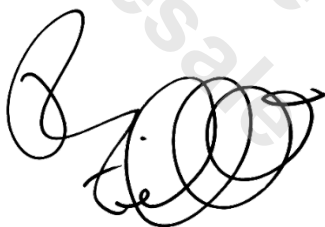
Thank you for reading about my adventures during the Summer of 2020. This was truly a life-changing journey. I am blessed to have met all the amazing and generous people that made their mark on my life and helped me along the way. I am humbled. I am grateful. I appreciate you all very much.

The End

...is now, and forever will be, just another beginning.

Be well my friend.

Yours more truly now than ever,



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