

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/3

David Sommerville
TWO HEARTS

It had become my custom every year around my birthday on or near March 31st to try and do something memorable. One spring rainy season hoping to encounter the moon stars and mountains in complete isolation and solitude I decided my wife and I would pack into West Virginia's Otter Creek Wilderness and like Lewis and Clark be two intrepid hearts daring to explore the unknown. Since forecasters got it wrong fifty per cent of the time I took no stock in weather reports and oblivious to the rain falling and water rising driven by a mixture of zeal arrogance and stupidity armed with that half chance I assumed the rain would stop the water'd recede and we'd be fine.

"Water's still rising," Cher noted.

"It'll go down," said I.

Leaving the city we pulled into the parking lot at the Condon Run Trailhead where what clearly should have been a warning sign no other cars sat. We parked unloaded and locked the van. We looked at the log-book in a covered wooden box at the entrance to the trail where there'd been no recent entries except for the one we made then we set off into fresh air and freedom happy to be on our way.

The gear we'd hoisted on our backs consisted of two framed backpacks loaded with freeze-dried food fire-making/cooking equipment water sleeping bags and a small Eureka backpackers' tent. It being Friday noon our intent was to stay the weekend so off we'd gone on a rocky muddy often wet and slippery trail into the wilderness. About a half mile in above a small dam and lime-dispensing building the trail had become even more rocky muddy wet and slippery and as we trekked along we could only laugh at the sound of our boots pulling from the muck a sucking sound we christened donkey farts.

Four miles in the crows watched curiously from the tops of the trees. The sun shined briefly. With astonishment and wonder it was the moment I'd come for to experience the restorative power and primal beauty of the wilderness underneath the sun and sky in isolation and solitude among rocks trees and mountains a contemplative environment in which to reflect and infuse my life with fresh new meaning for yet another year. Cher had rubbed her eyes and looked around and I could see she recognized it too and I snapped a picture of her seeing it. But it was spring it began to snow underneath the sun big flakes floated and tumbled in alternating breezes of warmth and cold and as the trail meandered at various distances from Otter Creek a water crossing soon confronted us and it occurred to me I'd not researched how many there'd be. Otter Creek had become a wide and furiously running torrent though it didn't appear deep it was still a deflating sight as it whisked along through the middle lapping up at us from its edges.

On the other side we could see a ramshackle three-sided wooden shelter where we figured we could swap wet socks out for dry and crossed. After changing socks and a short rest we set off again. Not where we

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/3

expected to be and since it wasn't quite dusk I decided we could add more distance if we persevered.

...but what two unsuspecting hearts hadn't seen was the steep wall of rock that was about to force them into another crossing where the water had become deeper narrower and more turbulent...

Having to make another crossing I began to question whether to turn back or stay put but it was not so cold and with no wind we opted to continue while thinking we could make a fire later to dry out. With water over our knees facing upstream we shuffled sideways against the current. Hidden boulders threatened every step. Cher stumbled started to go down before she went under with enough strength to keep her erect I snagged her belt. We finished the crossing and went on.

Having achieved only half our first day's anticipated distance bulbous dark clouds obscured the sky again a fine mist hung in the air as steep mountains towered above us. With the water still rising even if we wanted to there could be no turning back. The mist became a fog that enveloped us made it difficult to search the distance for a place to camp. Wet tired cold and hungry water squishing out from every footstep donkey farts were not so funny now. At length we came to a small bottom suitable to pitch a tent and make a fire. I looked around and took note of how trees loose at their base could crash down on us how water could rise quickly and inundate us how looking for an easy meal bears could come to intimidate us.

We set about making camp. I rolled out the backpacker tent began to stake it but the ground was too wet the stakes wouldn't hold. I put rocks and tree limbs over the drawstring ends. Though it looked grotesque and dilapidated the tent would still offer shelter. Cher gathered rocks for a fire ring put sticks and twigs in it the wet wood only sizzled as we used up our igniters trying to start it. Having eaten cold meals with no motivation left we crawled wet into our sleeping bags and as it rained off and on I heard Cher give out a quiet cry a moan a whimper of what sounded like resignation.

A thick and heavy darkness had descended on us like a leaden blanket and I realized I could not afford to sleep. Looking and listening I lay with my head toward the entrance of the tent. I heard a tree snap and through the din saw it crash down on a bear that had lumbered in to sniff the fire ring. Then rising water from Otter Creek began to inundate us. I pulled Cher from her sleep and we stumbled up the mountainside. As the rising force of the water overtook us I could hear her screams ring out over every corner of river and slope crest and ridge in front of us.

I woke up. There was silence compounded by more silence. My wet clothes stuck to me but I felt a strange comfort it was warm. I peered out at a soft glowing darkness. The molasses of night had begun to fade the sky was clear again. Under moon and stars the water had receded ceased its roar. Struggling from the tent I went a short distance to the river and climbed up on a boulder. I'd had a dream though I'd had another birthday where I'd tried to do something memorable instead of exhilarated I felt chastened the fresh new meaning I'd come to find was a realization that my judgement and preparation needed fine tuning that my zeal arrogance

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/3

and stupidity required some serious consideration and tempering that instead of the contemplation and reflection I'd come for I'd been consumed by a situation I had no control over.

But Cher had injured her knee at the second crossing coming in it was blue-black and swelling. We had to pack up and at daylight we left. On the way out we had to stop and rest often. We met two backpackers on their way into the wilderness. They looked at us surprised that we hadn't waited for the rain to stop and water to recede before entering the back country and I was not anxious to tell them of my folly but instead said we'd had a great trip and wished them luck. Cher would be fine but having avoided a disaster and given a second chance before my next birthday or for that matter any future exploration I thought how I'd always consider this lesson learned from one night in Otter Creek and when I got to the house stood fully clothed in the shower bracing myself hung my head and let it pour over me.