

Stranded by the Moon

A Last Trip with a Growing Son through BC's Discovery Islands

by Don Nelson



The island just ahead, assuming we make it there, would be a refuge in the rapidly changing conditions. A leisurely day of paddling along wooded shorelines had become, quite suddenly, an upstream struggle against an increasingly strong current. Such a strange turn of events: to be paddling calm flatwater and now find ourselves working against a very large river of water. A great drainage was taking place. We were in the midst of a tidal flow that would ultimately become one of such massive scale that we would literally stand in awe, watching a timeless phenomenon of earth-moon relationship inconceivable to us before this moment in time.

Almost born to paddle, I still felt an immediate, primal sense of safety when my bow touched the island's firmness. We are a creature ultimately secure only on land. The water surrounding us, having receded to its lowest point, was rising once again. A tiny shell fragment, strategically placed, confirmed the water had risen not only to its previous level, but was now steadily, ever so slowly, creeping upward, sand grain by sand grain, pebble by pebble.

A rising sea, in and of itself, would have been a non-event, but this rising sea was altogether different from anything we had ever experienced. It was developing a definite and very strong current. A current that was increasing in speed, rapidly. In the few minutes of contemplation, and observation, the swirling waters had now become too risky to enter by sea kayak.

The hint of a whirlpool was already forming to the lee of the island. Small, scattered, standing waves were appearing. A new sound was in the air. A torrent of unimaginable proportions was building on all sides of us. Water from a large basin to the north, and in reality above us, was draining to another large, lower part of the Sound to our south. The long, narrow, funnel of a channel between the two distant areas of shifting water is where we now find ourselves, stranded on a tiny rock and grass islet, about to witness in full the

twice daily gravitational pull of countless billions of tons of water from one place to another.

Jesse and I weigh the various aspects of our situation. While there are a number of unknowns, happily, death by drowning is not one of them. The island we are stranded on, though a mere islet, has two tiny grassy, rocky knolls that will remain above the highest tide, barely. As the water rises, our island will shrink, inch by inch, eventually to about the size of an average bedroom. A small, but dry, speck of world from which to mull over the other unknowns.

How long will we be stranded? Where are we in the tide's cycle? When will it turn? Will enough daylight remain to travel, or will we be forced to paddle in darkness to an unknown camp?

Luckily the sun is high, and hot, and the GPS tells us it won't set until 9:28. It is now just after 3:00. Interpreting tide tables and marine charts, we learn the tide will turn, coincidentally, within minutes of the setting sun. The seas will calm and we will be released to paddle off the island into a darkening, but navigable evening.

Questions have been answered. Anxiety wanes. We have nowhere to go and hours to wait. An unexpected, unplanned luxury is now ours.

The water covers the place where we came ashore, and we can see its incremental upward movement. A tiny pebble, a small stone succumb to the encroaching waters. A dry stem of seaweed, pasted to a rock, in surreal slow motion, now begins to drift lazily in a tiny back eddy. Miniature, complex landscapes, by the thousands, are slowly flooding all around us. Water spills over finger-sized waterfalls, and flows into palm-sized bays. It's happening everywhere at the same time along the contour line surrounding our minuscule, and shrinking world. We move our kayaks to higher ground.

As the waters creep back into nooks and crannies they filled only hours before, they bring with them life anew. Fingernail-

sized crabs, by the hundreds, magically appear, feeding on things invisible, chasing one another through their growing watery world. Barnacles by the millions open their feathery parts to the rising water. Many colored sea stars, clinging awkwardly, and at all angles from nearby rocks, now, too, are awash in salty, life-sustaining water. We move our kayaks to higher ground, and contemplate dinner.

The larger, but immediate world surrounding the island, is changing dramatically, too. What had been a fast, smooth current has now become a raging torrent. Small, standing waves are now two to three feet high. Table-sized whirlpools, having grown to half the size of a tennis court, are emitting sucking sounds, and seem capable of easily upending any human powered craft, pulling it, with its human contents, deep below the surface. The churning current's salt spray dims the sun's rays to the west. We sit tight, gazing at the turmoil, safe but unnerved. We move kayaks again, and wait.

The sun is lower in the sky. We have more than two hours to go before the tide turns. I unpack the miniature kitchen, light the stove, and begin heating water for a rice and chicken dinner. Slowly chewed jerky and a slice of dried apple taste good to me. I pour a ceremonial finger of bourbon in a cup, and settle into my pack chair, waiting for steam to appear above the pot. I watch the noisy, astounding world around me.

My son and I are on our last trip before he heads off to his first year in college. We are two fortunate men. I watch him explore the intricacies of the rising water, and wonder where his wandering and exploring will take him in the years ahead, to what places so far from this tiny islet of safety. He joins me, and we eat, mostly in silence. I clean up, repack gear, watch crabs, and smile at him and at the world. The water has turned into a mill pond. The sun is down. We paddle to where it hides behind the mountains.