

Trust the Mountain

Saturday August 26, 2006 Air Canada flight somewhere over Alberta

Seven days of hiking to come. I am scared and excited. I am looking forward. Not much more than just gazing forward at the life ahead of me.

Vancouver

We have arrived. Somewhere in between. Its supertime here in Vancouver and all I want to do is crawl into my bed. I don't have a bed here. We'll be in the Yukon this time tomorrow camping at the bottom of the summit before the climb begins. There are six of us braving a seven day hike through one of the most beautiful places in this country, The Tombstone Territorial Park in the Yukon Territories. I meet my mates, some for the first time - Nancy has muscles, Fiona is an angel, Stephen looks like a mountain goat, Marc has brought us all together, and Malcolm wants to start. I somehow feel like the fake amongst them. I haven't carried anything heavier than my computer bag this summer yet in twenty-four hours I will be carrying sixty-five pounds up the mountain. My stomach is in my throat as we pack our gear into knapsacks.

Day One: I am overwhelmed by the beauty below us as we approach Whitehorse. The land is vast, isolated, beginning to show hints of the colours of fall. I didn't sleep; my internal clock is off kilter, and I'm anxious. We land and find ourselves in a little, tiny airport of one carousel that doesn't go round. Marc's friends are there to greet us and give us the quick and dirty overview of the hike. I sit in front of my egg, as they throw out tidbits of information that will come in handy. I normally love to eat, it is my usual answer to everything thing bad or good; my crutch. Today the egg looks like rubber, and I push my plate away. "Do not go into the North Klondike," I hear. This comment wedges in my mind.

We hit the road, drive to the grocery store to buy supplies, pile into our rental cars and drive north. It's an incredibly beautiful drive, nothing at all like the place where I come from in its physicality. There's a feeling of vastness here, there are no cars for miles and miles and miles and miles, eight hours of miles in fact. We reach the Tombstone campgrounds late day and to our dismay there are no sites to be found. I feel a slight sense of panic. I want to set up our tent on solid ground, pee in the park sanctioned outhouse, and cook our last meal at a park issued fire pit. I say none of this out loud. We pile in the car and find a gravel pit. I cannot suppress the thought of animals coming to eat me, bears in particular. There's signage everywhere indicating a different kind of wildlife than I'm used to. Moose don't eat people.

We set up three tents, cook something, I have no appetite. Its colder than I'd imagined, must be 2 or 3 degrees. We clean up, ready to turn in for the night. I scoot off to have a final pee. I find a rock (there are no trees here cause we're north of 60 degrees), squat to pee and I'm greeted with my period. Great.

Day Two: I am more attractive to the bears in my state. Fiona's good night story before bed was about bears. I sleep fitfully, fearful of ruining the sleeping bag I have borrowed for the trip. Big breakfast

before we hit the trail. I can feel every inch of the topography of my skin, tense. I am thinking about the weight on my back and the bears. And now Aunt Dot.

I'm psyched too. I've wanted a hike like this for a few years, a challenge; an experience. We tuck the last few items into our packs, loaded down with supplies to sustain us for the next week. We head to Grizzly Creek. My pack is very heavy; I am gulping air and imagining the 10 km ahead of us this first day. We begin to climb and strip off our layers as we go. I am tired at about hour four, and I can feel a blister coming on. Marc cautioned me months ago, "buy a good pair of boots, and break them in. You'll be carrying at least half your body weight." I ignored this for the most part and spent my summer bragging about the adventure ahead. I bought boots but never put them on my feet.

I suffer quietly as the back of my ankle rubs its way off into my new hiking socks. Eventually I can bare this no longer and Nurse Nancy tapes me up. Day one and I'm an immediate inconvenience. We continue to climb another 2500 feet, the height of Gros Morne. We meet a father and a son descending who've been out for a day hike. I'm so happy to stop and chat. I have found my rhythm but the peak is perpetually unreachable. They suggest it's at least another two hours to the top. I am praying for the end of the climb. Every step hurts.

We finally reach the top – no further ahead in terms of the distance in to our first night's site, but we have conquered the peak. We begin our meandering descent along the valley; up, down, up, down. The terrain is tricky, nothing like I've ever hiked before. Everything here is on a grander scale. Carrying weight makes me top heavy and I am slow. We are met with rough low growth, and boulder fields; thousands of giant rocks in a field. I'd never seen it before. It's a game of hop, hop, hop, balancing yourself as you decisively pick your way along. Coupled with the challenge of moving forward, I am continuously scanning the horizon for animals. I think every bush is a bear. We stop every hour or so. I am already beaten, tired beyond. I am running out of water and I feel the weight of the wild.

There are three of us ahead and three back. Nancy, Marc and I hang back. Malcolm, Fiona and Stephen start to pick up the pace to secure a tent pad in the backcountry. There are three lakes in this valley and our first destination is Grizzly. The next four hours are hellish and glorious. Soft lush walking littered with treacherous boulder fields. It's unending. We see what I think is a bear and I begin to freak out inside. The adrenaline is crushing. I have a sick feeling in my stomach. It turns out to be the biggest porcupine known to man - the size of a boar. Marc laughs away the tension and the pace picks up.

The dogged rock fields continue, and then suddenly we're sliding in scree; sharp loose stone that slides around underfoot. The trek is never ending – "how long more?" I think. My legs are noodles. Marc reads my mind "3.4 km to the lake" he says. Boulder fields, scree, grass, now willows. Willows hide the bears I think. I slip, a big bruise but no real damage. We are so close - I experience the first glimpse of Grizzly Lake and the tents surrounding it farther down in the valley. My spirits are lifted. The next two hours are hell through willows and roots. I see the river ahead – and there's Stephen, offering assistance to get across. With only 500 meters to go I swear to making it on my own.

I am euphoric, and sweaty, and hungry. I find Fiona and our tent, all set up. I somehow manage to get out of my wet clothes, and eat a few bites of food. I'm so tired I can hardly chew. Grizzly Lake is

magnificent. Monolith Mountain towers above us. I feel the magnitude of being so small in such a big place. I am experiencing a true sense of being on my own. I crawl into my tent alone. The others stay up and exchange stories and drink wine. I go down hard, but sleep fitfully with constant thoughts of the bears. I lick my wounds and dread creeps in. What am I doing here?

Day Three: I awaken to the sun but cooler temperatures. Today is fish and brewis. We have a fine feast and meet two park rangers who were dropped in by helicopter to check the backcountry sites – Alice and Lolita. The helicopter gave me confidence that if I was desperate I could escape. I make a mental note.

Today is a day of “rest” Some of the boys climb Mount Monolith but I hang back. I bathe in the river. I am the saltiest I have ever been. I wash my hair in ice cold water from the glacier and it dries as soft as silk in the sun. I am so small in this landscape. I nap and read.

Day Four: Today we are headed up Glissade pass through to Lake Divide. I am intimidated by the sheer height and grade ahead. Fiona and I head out first. I want a head start. The climb is comfortable to begin, much better than I had imagined. My blisters are terrible and I add a second pair of socks an hour in. I tie the boots as tight as is bearable and slowly ascend. We make our way one step at a time - I conquer the next 2000 feet in fine form after only two hours. At the top it is 0 degrees Celsius and there's a 180 degree drop down a glacier on the other side. When you're climbing a mountain you can't see the descent on the other side. I peek over and nearly throw up. I am afraid of heights and it is treacherous scree all the way to the bottom – another 2000 feet. I am sure I will never make it. I ask for a few pointers, waste as much time as is allowable, hold my breath and begin the descent. I am second last to go. I worry I will lose my grip and tumble arse over kettle and end up in a big pile at the bottom, dead no doubt. I slowly put one foot in front of the other, terrified and rigid as a board. My tenting buddy is behind me softly sending encouragement, Saint Fee. About half way down - I can't tell you how tense it was in this body of mine - I hear in my head "trust the mountain." All of a sudden, I feel my centre of gravity float down out of my throat and into my hips and I begin to glide down the scree at ten times the pace. It's as if I've been lifted by an invisible force and before I know it I have reached the bottom. Waiting there is another river from the glacier surrounded by a little fairy village. I feel a charmed presence. In minutes we're on route to the next campsite but something incredibly powerful has changed within me.

Lake Divide greets us with at least twenty-five hikers. There are tents everywhere, in the middle of nowhere. We end up camping by the lake on soft ground, not a pad to be had but its ok. My feet are now fucked. I am contemplating walking out with Alice, the park ranger. We eat, administer first aid to my tootsies with the idea of sleeping on it. I want to make it to Talus Lake. Today is Tuesday and I could hike out with her through the North Klondike – bear country, on Thursday. North Klondike, the very same that heralded warnings not three days ago. Wherever I go there I am confronted by my fears. I crawl in and sleep fitfully, yet again, the silence here is deafening.

Day 5: It's a glorious day to wake up to. Should I stay or should I go? I don't want to give up. The gang wants to pack up and move further into the back country. My feet are broken. We break camp and I ball

my eyes out. It's a great release. I know I can't hike in 20km and then turn around and come out without doing damage to my feet or holding up the others. I decide to walk out the next day with Alice through the North Klondike.

I will hike to Talus for the day today. I give my feet a break, I put on my sneakers. The walk is beautiful; it really feels like the wilderness here. I cannot describe the quiet of a place that is so vast. I have never experienced large like this, I feel so wonderfully insignificant and the colours are changing as if someone has flown over with a spray gun. Fall descends as the temperature drops. We stop for tea at the mouth of the lake. I'll be turning around to walk back to Lake Divide shortly. I am leaving my friends behind.

We make a plan to rendezvous at the campground in two days. I walk back to camp, sup with the park rangers, and feel an overwhelming sense of having made the right decision for me. I always tend to put others before my own priorities. I'm sad, but it sits right somewhere inside of me. As small and insignificant as I am feeling, there is this strength.

Day Six: I awake to cold wind and pecking rain. It is hardly auspicious. I am up alone and the loneliness of the land emphasizes the hollow feeling of fear I have inside. Is anything ever easy? I write a quick goodbye note to my tent mate and eat a simple meal.

Alice and the two other rangers are breaking camp when I arrive with knapsack in hand. The one plus is that this pack weighs almost thirty pounds lighter after five days of hiking. I've left what food I had in the bear cache for the taking. Alice is quiet. I have this foreboding feeling that she is not looking forward to the walk out, then again all I have are these feelings, fear sits in my belly but I'm getting used to it. We begin our trek out through the willows, the path leads us through true bear country. We have sixteen kilometers to go.

Despite the lighter load, my feet ache. I'm glad I made the decision to come out. The path is not easy to find or follow. It is wet and thick, like quicksand. The first hour is fast and we make good time. The once light sack now feels heavy and burdensome. We stop for a break on top of a big rock. The terrain is so different here in the valley, rainbow moss and berries, bright red and yellow willows – we eat lunch alongside a roaring river singing "bey yo" to let the bears know we're here. Singing at the top of our lungs. From then on it's all we do. We belt out these words in melody, a charm of sorts to let them know.

The next four hours are tough in the rain, I am forever tired and my throat is raw from the singing. Still underneath it all I feel this powerful sense of being. We see moose prints, bear holes, scat from wolves, horses, and moose but nothing in the flesh. Not one sighting. We come upon a river about four km from the park headquarters. This is the last obstacle of sorts. I am so tired but it feels too close to break. We make our way across a huge river which takes a good hour, find the path and walk the final few kilometers. I stumble blind for most of the last kilometer. All I can think of is the car in the campground.

We arrive. There is no fanfare. I don't even pee. I crawl into the back of the car and sit there. I am catatonic. Eventually, I crawl out of my clammy clothes, my feet are raw. There's movement in front of

me. I notice a black dot in the hill in my immediate view. I grab the binoculars and there, as large as life is a black bear. I laugh out loud.

I get behind the wheel and drive although I don't know how I can keep focus and attention. I head down the Dempster highway, stop at the first corner of civilization I see. The bell on the door clangs and makes me jump. Rows of chips line the store wall, coolers that make noise, everywhere there's noise. I grab a sandwich and a bottle of water and head back to the car.

I drive to Dawson City, find a no tell motel and fall into bed. I draw a bath, submerge my body in water, and breathe in. Everything in me comes out. I made it. Every day held a new fear. It was difficult and challenging but wonderful on a whole other level. I felt oddly helpless yet strong and accomplished. I didn't get eaten by a bear, or break my neck. Somewhere deep inside I discovered something special and quiet and small. I trusted myself. I discovered my instinct to take care yet the ability to challenge myself as well. Something wonderful happened up there on the mountain. The world is a large place and my small place in it is all the more significant with trust in myself to guide me. This will be a pivotal moment in my life's story.

I wake up sometime later to a mouthful of tepid water. I crawl to the bed with a towel wrapped around my wet hair. I cannot believe I cannot sleep. It's too loud.