

Vagabonds

The three of us had been close friends since our days as Venture Scouts and later as members of a loose knit group called the Vagabonds, bikers who camped and fished all over Scotland, mainly on the West Coast and out to the Western Isles, searching out natural lochs for wild Brown Trout, Sea Trout and Atlantic Salmon, always on a catch and release basis.

From the Vagabonds, a few of us who were studying Law at Glasgow University decided on a three week trip from Seattle up to Vancouver as a reward to ourselves for our years of study.

Back in 1982, before the widespread use of the Internet and mobile phones, we used advertisements in magazines to suss out how to organise ourselves. Tom, a natural organiser and our de facto leader, took on the responsibility for sending faxes and collecting money from us which he arranged to pay through his bank. All we had to do was provide a photocopy of our passport and driver's licence and cough up the money on time.

It was at this point our original group of five was reduced to three, Tom, Hammy (Hamilton) and me, Ricky. Although we were confident we would pass our finals, we decided to time our trip to leave for Seattle the day after the last exam, before we got our results.

At Seattle we were picked up by a van and taken to a workshop/adventure outlet which sold and hired out motorbikes. The plan was sketchy but the outlet guy sold us a map and put crosses at remote spots where we should find suitable camping spots, stressing we should stick to regular campsites, ones with enclosures to keep out the bears.

By late afternoon we were around thirty miles north of Seattle and there it was, a perfect campsite nestled on the banks of a huge lake. From the pull-in we could see fish plopping and the urge to cast our Scottish patterns at them was at the root of what happened next. I was the last of the three to get moving and on the downhill ride I took a bend too fast and slithered off the road.

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When I came round, the young nurse smiled at me. Her name badge said Angie. She was gorgeous with minty breath, spicy perfume and lovely soft hands.

'Well Ricky, you were very lucky. I nice clean break to your fibula, about three inches above your left ankle. Not as serious as it might have been but it looks like you will miss out on your bikers road trip.'

'Angie, when will I be able to walk?'

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'We put a lightweight cast on it. In my experience these breaks heal quickly. You'll be out of crutches in a couple of weeks at most. I mean, look at you, you are a young, fit, healthy guy.'

'When can I get out of hospital, please?'

'My guess is tomorrow, with crutches. Depends on the X-Rays and the swelling. Doc McTaggart will check you out when she does her rounds tomorrow morning. Now, how about I fetch you a coffee and a cookie. Breakfast at eight tomorrow. Tom and Hammy are along in the waiting room. I'll tell them you're awake.'

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Tom explained what he had arranged.

Our hired bikes had been returned and credited. The outlet manager had signed us up with his cousin Greg who took us up in a float plane into a spot at the south end of Lake Atlin just inside Alaska near the BC border where he had a four-person plywood wigwam right on the shore.

Greg's pamphlet said this lake was located in a seldom fished wilderness area and was stuffed with Lake Trout up to 15 lb, Arctic Grayling up to 5 lb, Northern Pike up to 30 lb and Lake Whitefish up to 8 lb.

With a refuelling stop our flight took nearly six hours. After we landed Greg said the weather back in Seattle was closing in. He stayed only about 10 minutes, just enough to show us how to arrange the sleeping platforms inside the wigwam and how to work the blue kit bag hoist to ensure we stowed all of our food high up in a tree which was located a short walk from our wigwam.

'Hey Greg,' asked Tom, 'are bears an issue here.'

'No, man. They're more scared of us than we are of them. Just point your rods and them and shout BANG-BANG and they'll disappear. Just make sure all your food is up in the canopy and you'll be fine, OK?'

'What kind of bears are there here?'

'Mainly Browns and the occasional Grizzly. But hey, they're mostly after berries and fish taken from the edges. Sorry guys, gotta go, OK?'

Then he was clack-clacking off, scheduled to pick us up in 19 days to be sure we caught our return flight home.

The weather was perfect with a light easterly breeze to keep the flies away.

There was a single boat, sturdy, long and heavy, in good condition but no engine. It was a double bottomed GRP job which could take all three of us with the middle man working

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the oars to keep the boat in position to enable the other two to cast from the prow and stern from upright swivelled seats.

We settled in, packing our gear in the wigwam, eating a quick meal, keen to get fishing. We dutifully stowed all our food in the huge blue kit bag and suspended it from a pulley lashed to a slender overhanging branch thirty feet above our heads.

Greg's pamphlet advised we would have a long dusk until about eleven o'clock. Fish were plopping everywhere and Tom and Hammy were itching to fish along the shoreline, hoping to bag a few Arctic Grayling with barbless Scottish Brown Trout flies.

They helped me into the boat and I drifted offshore on a tether and cast sideways towards the reed beds, stripping vigorously with a long salmon fly and hoping to attract a Northern Pike.

Within minutes all three of us were catching hand over fist, bringing fish to within netting reach then releasing the tension on the line, allowing our quarry to wriggle free as we had agreed, wary of taking any fish in case they might attract a bear to our campsite.

Bonanza!

That first night we lay in the darkness talking, agreeing we had struck pure gold.

Using his torch, Tom added further information from Greg's pamphlet and we learned Lake Atlin is long and thin, stretching 85 miles from the wilderness national park near British Columbia in the south, reaching almost due north to the Yukon. As far as we could see, both sides of the lake were steep with no obvious landing places.

At our location in the south, Lake Atlin was around 4 miles wide, dotted with islands large and small. It felt not unlike the southern part of Loch Lomond but more than three times longer. Unlike Loch Lomond, it seemed as if we were the only inhabitants, enjoying a true outback experience.

The next morning we decided to use the boat, three up. I took the first shift in the middle seat using the oars and edging us along the shore looking for drop-offs to deeper water where we were hoping for Lake Trout and Lake Whitefish who preferred to feed in deeper cooler waters. Although smaller, the Whitefish proved easier to catch but I hooked a beauty of a Whitefish (just over 4 lbs) which we agreed to keep and barbecue for lunch on Tom's portable BBQ set, landing at a small cove on a tiny island within sight of our wigwam.

While we were enjoying lunch Hammy spotted a wisp of smoke rising to our left on the western shore, its source hidden by an outcrop. It was a slight disappointment, spoiling our delusion that we were the only inhabitants of 'our lake'. We discussed visiting 'our

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neighbours' but Tom estimated it might be 5 miles away, too far to visit without an outboard.

That night we fished on into the dark and after a few false attempts, we eventually found our landing place beside the wigwam. The breeze had dropped and the swarms of biting insects were ferocious so we raced inside and plastered ourselves with repellent. Dressed in our outdoor clothes, we zipped ourselves into our sleeping bags with our heads inside, like mummies.

After a full day on the water we were exhausted and fell fast asleep within minutes.

It was fully dark when the bear came calling. The first we knew of its presence was when it huge claws thumped into the plywood. The wigwam began to rock and roll. Fortunately the door held firm.

After about five minutes of terrorising us by repeatedly smashing into our plywood siding and grunting, growling and huffing it gave up and trundled off into the night.

Although we could not be certain, by talking about our experience, we convinced ourselves it must have been a Grizzly, not a smaller Brown bear.

Using Tom's torch, we double checked the door fastenings and could see that about half of the fixing screws had dropped out or were slack. Hammy had a Swiss army knife and we did our best to pack the screws with wood splinters to re-fix the fastenings although we knew if the door gave way during a further attack, we might end up being trapped inside the wigwam by the bear.

It is fair to say we were thoroughly spooked and although we joked about it we knew deep down we were exposed, under threat. On my crutches, I was the most vulnerable. If this huge intruder was 'resident' it may come back and if we were outdoors cooking, an attack could be fatal. Our idyllic wilderness experience had become a nightmare.

We talked around our options which we soon concluded was limited to one. We must try to make contact with our neighbours to the north and ask for help and advice. Tom's torch began to weaken and we switched it off to preserve the battery for a further emergency.

Lying in silence, listening intently to the nightlife on the other side of our plywood skin, we eventually fell asleep.

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We wakened to another sunny morning with a slightly stronger cooler wind from the north, funnelled by the steep sides of our wilderness lake. Checking around the campsite we saw that Tom's jacket had been chewed and shredded. We sniffed the cuffs and smelled barbecued fish.

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Suspended high in the tree canopy, our blue food bag was untouched.

Acting quickly we packed a light breakfast into Tom's rucksack and rowed offshore to our picnic island where we brewed tea and made porridge before setting off into the stiff breeze. It was hard going. Although we could not see any smoke, we could smell it, together with breakfast cooking smells.

I was in the bow, watching for signs of life when the first bullet zinged over us.

Tom and Hammy each had an oar.

We all ducked down. A second bullet flew overhead, then a third and a fourth.

We looked towards the outcrop and saw four standing men, each shouldering a rifle. The smallest man raised his hands to his face and shouted at us but whatever he said was lost on the breeze.

A further volley of shots rang out but Tom insisted we keep going, now heading more to our left, moving closer to their shore until they could not see us.

It took a further hour of strenuous rowing to reach their landing pier. As we got nearer we saw they had two impressive RIBs with huge engines.

All four men were waiting for us, their rifles shouldered on straps.

The tallest guy with a huge beard threw a haul line at us which I caught and began pulling us towards them.

'Right guys, that's close enough. If you have weapons, drop them overboard right now.'

Tom replied;

'Why the hell are you shooting at us. We're unarmed. We're here to fish, not to attack you.'

'Hey, are you guys Scottish?'

'Yes, we came up from Seattle by float plane. Last night we were attacked by what we think was a Grizzly. It scared the hell out of us.'

Hammy said:

'We saw a plume of smoke yesterday and came to ask for your help.'

'Any injuries?'

'Not from last night but Ricky had a motorbike accident three days ago. He's on the mend but still needs crutches.'

'We saw the float plane. Who brought you here?'

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'Greg from Seattle Wilderness Experiences.'

The smallest guy spoke:

'He dropped you guys at our wigwam? And that's our old boat too. He aint' got no right to put you there.'

The bearded guy said:

'Hey, sorry 'bout the shots. We was aimin' high, right? We was juss' tryin' to scare you off. You hain't otta be here, you know. We hold the lease for summer fishin' for the whole of this lake. Your guy Greg hain't got no right to drop you in on us.'

I said:

'Greg said we were the only people fishing on the whole of the lake. He won't be back for another sixteen days. We need your help on how to deal with the bear that attacked us. That's why we're here.'

The smallest guy said:

'Okay, okay, we get it. Not your fault. Look, no hard feelin's, right? You guys want some lunch?'

He grabbed the haul line and started pulling us ashore.

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They had a hoist basket with a double pulley system and a reversible circular ratchet handle which they used to raise me to their lodge. It was surrounded by a 15 foot high fence with a rolltop of barbed wire to keep out bears and other intruders such as cougars, coyotes and wolverines. It had a ribbed green metal roof to deter ravens which we learned were bold and frequent pests. The colour blended with the hillside making it hard to spot.

Facing their circular dining table, there was a wrap-around picture window with great views north and south over the lake. In the distance we could see our wigwam and a hint of our blue bag.

Apart from their separate bedrooms, the lodge was open plan. It was warm and comfortable heated by a log burning stove. An external gas canister was used to run their cooking range and a small electricity generator for lighting. In one corner there was a long narrow fly-tying table and boxes of their hand made flies. Like us, they were barbless hook fishers.

Over lunch we exchanged names and backgrounds.

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Our hosts were Wills (William Bullock, the short wiry guy, their leader) who introduced us to the others called Alfie (Alfredo Catani), the tallest one with the steely grey bushy beard. The final two were non-identical twins, Grant and Murray Mack (Mackintosh), clean shaven with short curly red-hair, the babies of the group, newly fifty.

Retired after cashing in by selling out to a larger competitor, this group had been in business together in the oil industry where they had made good money running a service operation refurbishing valves, huge valves.

This was their second trip to Lake Atlin since the end of May. They had seen Greg's float plane before and were annoyed by his assumption he could rent it out without their permission. They listened to our tale and were amazed and angry that Greg had left us without an outboard and had not provided a weapon or deterrent.

As we had no experience of firearms, they considered loaning us a short shotgun and a box of blanks as a bear deterrent but after a debate among themselves changed their minds saying firing blanks could be almost as dangerous as using live cartridges. Instead, they loaned us a portable Marine Boat Horn operated by high pressure Carbon Dioxide with three back-up cannisters. Although designed for use by starters and officials at sailing regattas, it was said to work well as a bear scarer.

They took us outside and gave us a demo. It gave out a VERY LOUD high pitched banshee screech, sending a family of 6 ravens high into the air, circling, complaining loudly.

As a back-up they also gave us a six-pack of HALT pepper spray, the brand issued to postmen to deter aggressive dogs. They had used this spray with success to fend off coyotes but warned us its smell was disgusting and could sting our eyes and sinuses. In light winds, the stench could linger for days.

Over lunch of grilled Lake Trout and roasted veggies we moved onto listen to their fishing war stories, including a weird tale about a very expensive two week salmon fishing trip to Russia where they had been protected from night raiders by KGB special forces. Throughout each night they had heard intermittent gunfire, sometimes in the distance and at other times nearby. The river was deep and swift and wading was not allowed. Their boatmen were also armed at all times and there was constant radio traffic in Russian which unnerved them.

The salmon were plentiful but all about 4 lbs and easy to catch - a costly adventure and not as much fun as they had expected.

When leaving Wills gave Tom a two-way walkie talkie for use in emergencies and two six packs of replacement batteries (which also fitted Tom's torch) and two 12-packs of beer.

In a final act of kindness, the Mack twins towed us behind their RIB back to our wigwam where they checked the claw holes and confirmed we had been hit by a Grizzly.

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It was late but still light. Talking loudly and armed with our 'Bear Horn', Tom and Hammy made a detailed inspection of the woods and along the shoreline near our camp looking for spoons and scat (bear poop), using HALT to squirt anything that looked suspicious.

We snacked on peanut butter crunch bars and drank beer before turning in. Snuggled inside our sleeping bags we listened to a succession of quiet grunts, snuffles and shuffles from unidentified nocturnal feeders until tiredness enveloped us. That night passed without incident and early next morning we were back out on the boat.

It was a perfect day with thin overhead cloud and a light wind from the north. Spelling each other on the oars while the other two fished, we had another successful day and returned to our BBQ island and used Tom's portable set up to cook out first Lake Trout caught with a fly from a selection provided by our kind neighbours.

While we were tidying up and burying our debris, Wills called up Tom on the walkie talkie and asked for an update.

This set the pattern and the rest of our stay at Lake Atlin passed in a blur. My leg was healing fast and I was able to hop-walk using a single crutch.

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We were taken by surprise when Greg returned a day early. He was all hustle and bustle: 'Guys, weather here tomorrow could be very tricky. It's changing from minute to minute, There's a low front racing down on us from the north so go for it and get packed asap, OK? I want to get us outta here in fifteen minutes tops, OK? '

As had been agreed, we left all our borrowed equipment inside the wigwam.

During our refuelling stop Greg was unapologetic, belligerent, claiming he had rented the wigwam from an agency who had assured him the lake was a true wilderness area. He then went on to say he had done us a big favour because of my biking accident and with the cost of fuel and extra maintenance, he had lost money by taking us on.

Afterwards we agreed he had almost certainly scammed us but decided we would let it go.

When we got back to Seattle, we took a taxi to a motel near the hospital where I had been treated.

They X-rayed my leg.

Angie came to the waiting area to update us.

She was smiling, radiant, even more gorgeous than I remembered.

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'Well Ricky, as I predicted, your leg is already almost perfect. You can walk using an ankle support boot and a stick. Guys, would you mind waiting in the canteen area, I have something personal I want to share with Ricky?'

At the door they both gave me surreptitious 'thumbs up', big grins on their faces.

'Ricky, I won a Nursing Travel Scholarship and I've booked a six month trip which will include a two month spell in Glasgow to study at the Western Infirmary. Look, I've set it all out in this schedule. I know this is not really allowed but I checked up on your address with an old guy in the accounts office who immigrated here from Glasgow years ago. He told me Byres Road is near the Western Infirmary, is that right?'

'Yes, well I was in a student flat but now that my finals are over, I'm moving back in with my parents. They are both lawyers and I think Tom must have given you the address of their office on Byres Road although we actually live on the south of the river, in Pollokshields. Look, Angie, if you want digs we have lots of space now my two older sisters have moved out.'

'What are digs?'

'Digs are lodgings, a place to stay during your visit. It's only a few minutes' walk from our house to our local Subway which takes you to Byres Road and the Western Infirmary. I bet Mum would be pleased to have you stay with us. Dad too. And me, of course. I have the use of a Mini. It used to be my sister Katie's but she's married now and lives in Auckland in NZ so I have the use of it now. I could take you around, show you the sights, when your off duty.'

'Wow Ricky, that's real cool. I'll ring Mom and tell her. Hey if you guys are free tonight, why not come over to us for a barbie. Pops does a real mean T-Bone with all the trimmings.'

'Sounds great to me. We have no plans as far as I know.'

'Ricky, I gotta tell you I hate motorbikes. It worries me you're so keen on yours. I heard you guys talking about your next trip, you know, about when you get back to Scotland. Biking is so dangerous. My older brother Donnie was killed five years ago when a car pulled out to overtake a truck and totalled him head on.'

Angie gripped my hands tightly, squeezing and sobbing:

'We all still miss him. He looked just like you.'

'Yeah, Angie, I know, I know. My Mum and Dad are really, really against motorbiking too. They were dead against this trip. But hey, if I had not come here, I wouldn't have met you, eh?'

'Okay, sorry to bring it up. I don't want to spoil your last day in Seattle but please ask your guys not to talk about biking when you come to our place tonight, okay?'

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'Yeah, just one more thing Angie. Is it unprofessional to ask my nurse for a kiss?'

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In the canteen Ricky gave Tom and Hammy the news.

Tom said:

'Does she have a twin sister for me by any chance?'

Hammy quipped:

'Maybe she's a triplet, could happen, eh?'

Unfolding and flattening a crumpled sheet of thin paper, Tom added:

'Ricky, would you like to know how we got on in our LLB exams? I telephoned Mum to let her know we are safe and well and she sent us a fax listing our results.'

'Only if its good news.'

'Just to say Hammy and I both got Upper Seconds?'

'Well done. Excellent. So I got?'

'Ah, poor you, you only got a *First Class Honours*, you great swot!'