

My Inside Passage

by Julie Lockhart

DAY 1: I've kayaked in this vast, stunning seascape before, yet memory is such a mysterious thing now that I'm in my sixties. Like an accordion, when the bellows are contracted, my past is all scrunched together—bits and pieces emerge in a mixed-up chronology. When the bellows expand, I can breathe into the vistas of past events and their timelines, putting the pieces of my story back together.

The bellows are expanding today. I'm seated on a steel-colored fishing boat with twelve other people about to begin a guided group kayak tour in Johnstone Strait and the Broughton Archipelago—the inside passage of British Columbia.

The last time I encountered this area was twenty-five years ago with my now deceased former husband Michael and our good friend Sam. That trip was supposed to include four other friends who backed out at the last minute. The expedition, without the assistance of a tour company, would become an athletic feat through the Broughton Archipelago, then northeast to the end of Kingcome Inlet, a fjord into the mainland of BC. Very few kayakers, including tour companies, brave the Inlet because of the inherent danger of a narrow waterway when bad weather hits. Michael and Sam had originally planned to leave me with the rest of our group in the Archipelago while they braved the Inlet for a vigorous side excursion. Now they would have to tolerate me coming along. I vowed that I wouldn't hold them back from an amazing adventure. Besides, I'd already packaged delicious meals for the trip. Although reluctant, they said yes.

Today, as I look out at the open water and islands in the distance, clouds dot the sky while sunrays streak through, casting an enchanting silver glow on the calm sea. Threads of memory from the expanding accordion bellows enter my consciousness. The chart on the fishing boat's table shows Hanson Island on the right. I see a beach that looks like the one where Michael, Sam, and I had camped on the first night after kayaking

across Johnstone Strait. I envision us back then hooting with joy as a pod of orcas jumped and played all around us during the crossing.

The boat driver is a man named Bruce. I look past his profile to get a good view of where Michael, Sam, and I kayaked all those years ago. Bruce. His name tugs at my memory. He's balding, with scraggly shoulder-length, reddish hair. I remember that hair. As I look at Bruce, our lead guide Dan asks him a question. Bruce's voice draws another piece of recognition to the surface. He answers Dan's inquiry about weather and they discuss the number of kayaks that Bruce has waiting for us at Paddler's Inn. In my mind's eye, a reclusive character from twenty-five years ago stood on a wooden platform as we paddled around a spit. Could this be the same guy? I don't remember the name "Paddlers Inn." Regardless, that place felt like a refuge for me after the rigorous paddle into Kingcome Inlet and the storm that could have dumped me out of my boat. Bruce's plot of land included a platform for our tents and an on-demand hot shower fed by a lake above his property. I had shown up there cold in my bones, and that shower is still the best I've experienced in all of my years. I remember staying under the hot water for twenty minutes or more, washing away the chill and grime, gathering strength to paddle for another week.

Coming back to this exquisite seascape so many years after that unforgettable storm and the tension it caused between me and Michael and Sam, gives me an opportunity to recognize how the wisdom of years has given me perspective. I welcome the bellows expanding my memory of that time.

I turn around to look for Asha, my partner of nearly six years. He's the most supportive man I could ask for. Adventures with him are mellow and exciting, and we work well as a team. I can feel the contrast from my difficult relationship with Michael, and feelings of gratitude wash over me as I look at Asha's bearded face.

Bruce says he's spotted a humpback whale in the distance. I stand next to Bruce, hoping for another sighting. I'm scanning the horizon when I see the spray. Everyone on the boat cheers. Although I'm feeling a bit timid, I ask Bruce how long he's been at his place, and he says, "Since 1980." I tell him that I think I was there in the mid-1990's when it only offered a platform for our tent and that magnificent shower. He cracks a reserved smile and says it has changed a lot since then.

When we arrive at Paddlers Inn, it has indeed changed. There's a big house on the hill, and on the floating platforms, a kitchen building with rustic rooms on the second floor where we'll sleep for the night and a bathroom with an on-demand shower. Quite deluxe for the middle of a sparsely populated set of islands in a harsh climate. I wander around to make sense of this place as it now exists, and see a painted wooden sign, which reads "Paddlers Inn." On the backside it reads "The Buffer Zone." That's the name that lingers in my memory.

Day 2: It's raining large drops on the metal roof. Today we will pack our gear and kayak to the first campsite. I'm tucked in my sleeping bag thinking about that saying of my mother's: "Rain before seven stops by eleven." *Not too likely in this place*, I say to myself. Rain like this can be chilling, and I'm worried we will get as cold as I got on that trip up Kingcome Inlet.

As I lay in my cozy bag, my thoughts drift back to that day Michael, Sam, and I traveled up Kingcome Inlet in single kayaks. I remember that we had awakened to nonstop drizzle on calm water. On the previous day I had a tough time keeping up with the guys as we paddled through the Broughton Archipelago and across Fife Sound into a powerful headwind. High walls flank Kingcome Inlet, a fjord, with waterfalls and lush green mosses and ferns dangling from cliffs. I wore a good quality yellow paddling rain jacket, yet had a naiveté about chilling rain in that ecosystem. The waterfalls seemed to draw me in, and I kayaked under one of them. I loved the feel of the water coming off the rocks above splashing on my head and shoulders, soaking my hair. I loved making the guys laugh by deliberately paddling underneath it, even though it turned out to be a poor choice on such a damp day.

That day had seemed endless—an inaccessible shoreline with no place to get out of the boats. As our paddling drew on, I felt colder and colder, in spite of the heat I was generating inside my raincoat. When we neared the top of the inlet, we saw a dock and a dilapidated graying wooden shack. We searched around for possible campsites, but nothing looked likely on the rocky, thickly vegetated shore. The shack would have to do. We rolled our bodies up onto the dock, tied down our towlines, and walked into the room,

empty save for some old fishing nets piled around the floor. It reeked of dead fish—years' worth.

Sam and Michael wanted to paddle up river to the small Indigenous village that still existed in that harsh place, but I was done for the day. They seemed happy to be rid of me for this part of their adventure, and I needed to get warm. Neither of them thought to give me hot tea or soup before they left, yet my body was screaming for warmth. The cold left my brain too foggy to understand that I should ask for help. After the guys left, I laid out my pad and sleeping bag on the uneven plank floor and crawled in with all my clothes on except for my soaked raingear. My weary body kept shivering in the dark stench of that place while they were gone.

As I look back, I feel sad for my younger self being left like that. What if the wrong person happened upon the shack? What if I didn't ever warm up? My predicament was a mirror of what my relationship with Michael was like. Compassion and teamwork were not qualities we embodied as a couple. At that time, we'd been together for five years. We struggled to find healthy ways to communicate and connect, even though we shared similar values and passions, including outdoor adventure. Each of us had been divorced, and we both recognized that our relationship was so much better than our previous experiences. But as I reflect, I suspect we stayed together by inertia. Low self-esteem also wedged me in a stranglehold. I was terrified of being alone, and my pleaser tendencies kept me from speaking up for myself.

Shaking the memories from my head, I roll to my left side to face toward Asha. I hope that today's rain will stop and we'll all have a good time. His eyes are open. We clasp hands, pulling close for a quick morning kiss. Our caring connection fills me with gratitude. I then crawl out of the bed in this rustic wood-paneled room. In the kitchen we find others in our group drinking coffee, joking around. I tell them what my mom used to say about rain and they laugh. Our guides are cooking, and the smells of bacon, eggs, and fruit float up my nose.

After breakfast, the rain lets up a bit, lifting our spirits as we figure out how to pack the gear into our kayaks—personal gear and sleeping bags, cooking equipment, safety gear, tents, sleeping pads, water, and food. The guides know from experience that all of it will fit. So do I. Everyone else is skeptical. After an hour of stuffing and re-stuffing gear,

we lift our heavy boats off the floating dock and into the water. The guides stabilize the kayaks to keep us from tipping as we get in. Pulling away from the dock, I take one last look around Bruce's place.

I'm at the back of the white and green tandem kayak that will be ours for the journey. Asha sits in front with his paddle ready. We set off in our fleet of eight boats with the rain softly bouncing on the water in sparkling splashes. I pull my raincoat hood over my sun hat and paddle.

I've kayaked only a handful of times since Michael's death. A couple of years after Kingcome Inlet, we married and had a baby girl. But our marriage began deteriorating, as did his heart. A cardiologist diagnosed Michael with a mitral valve prolapse. What Michael didn't tell me is that doctors had recommended surgery. On a hiking trip in high elevation Utah when our daughter was three, Michael's inability to catch his breath scared me and he fessed up. By the time he went under the knife, the surgeons declared his prolapse to be the second worse they'd seen. Earlier challenges in our relationship had pulled us together, but this one dragged us apart. I withdrew into tax returns, house chores, my new management role at work, and childcare. I watched him withdraw into food excesses, his job and volunteer roles, and taking risks in his kayak. Couples counseling didn't aid our ability to meet each other's emotional needs. The fragile container of our marriage was shattering.

Rainwater pooling on my sun hat brim trickles down my nose, jolting me back to today's paddling rhythm. A great blue heron squawks and flies past us. Its vast wingspan and prehistoric shape remind me of why I love kayaking in the wilderness. As we navigate along the shores of the first two islands, time appears to have stood still in the Broughton Archipelago. What I'm experiencing today seems as pristine as it was twenty-five years ago.

The guides point to a rocky beach and suggest we take a break. Rowan, the younger of the two guides, hands me a chocolate bar, asking me to break it into pieces for everyone to share. I love being the bearer of good dark chocolate. My companions break into smiles as they each get their piece. The smooth flavor lifts our soggy spirits. After my chocolate fix, I duck under a large cedar tree to pee, and look back into a magical forest dripping with moss. I long to merge with the beauty of this area so that it will always

be with me. Dan says that we have another hour of paddling, and the guides will make us a late lunch while we set up our tents. I shiver at the thought of setting up camp in the rain.

Back in the boats, my steady paddling elicits the accordion to expand my recall. Twenty-five years ago I did wake up warm that next morning in the smelly fishing shack. Sam made us a quick breakfast of oats and coffee before we got into our boats for the paddle back down Kingcome Inlet. Leaving that horrid cabin calmed me. Yet the wind blew steadily and the weather radio scratched out a forecast of a storm approaching with winds up to “five-zero knots.” I remember thinking that five-point-zero miles per hour didn’t sound too bad. Sam and Michael didn’t say anything to rectify my misinterpretation. The previous day’s paddle had been strenuous, but not dangerous, so I expected more of the same. As we left the protection of the cove, following winds kicked up, pushing us along at a good pace. I performed well through swells that lifted my boat, like surfing. Unlike the challenging previous days, my stamina was strong, and I placed each paddle stroke with confidence. The winds increased as we travelled, but still my boat-handling skills felt amazing.

Later that morning, the winds began building to gusts and howls. Then I noticed that the walls of the fjord on our left gave way to another inlet. High waves with whitecaps loomed in front of us. Before I could discern what the sudden change in conditions meant, we were in it—I was in it, because I felt completely alone in the steepest waves I’d ever seen in a kayak. The front of my boat dove forward and then lurched back up onto the next wall of water, which sent me into the trough again—and again and again. I paddled fast, frantic to keep upright while the winds kept propelling me forward. The rapid drumbeat of my heart felt like it might burst and my mouth went dry.

I can’t tell you how long that terrifying situation lasted. On my left, I felt something slam into my boat—Michael’s desperate effort to raft up and keep me from tipping. I reached my hand out to grab his boat, which steadied my kayak in the swells. The first thing he said was, “Jules, why didn’t you brace to slow yourself down?”

“You always told me that in danger to just keep paddling,” I muttered.

Then I felt another strong knock to my boat, as Sam rafted up on the other side, equally struggling. Our practice sessions in the calm lake at home had not adequately

prepared us for the reality of trying to do this rescue technique in such treacherous waters. When the fjord had opened on our left, the winds from that direction mixed with the winds from behind us created a life-threatening situation.

With the guys on either side of me, I could finally catch my breath, although tension trembled throughout my being. The three of us stayed connected as the storm continued to push us to safer waters past the side inlet. My agitation continued as Michael and Sam talked me through what I should have done. They were shaken as well, although they laughed about how my boat looked like a balloon with the air just let out. I suppose I also mustered a laugh to release some of the anxiety. Yet fear racked me. I felt reluctant to have them let go, even after the winds had calmed. I couldn't stop the continual replay of what-ifs. What if I'd tipped over? Trauma had sunk into my belly.

I begged the guys to stay connected a bit longer, and when the sun peaked out from the ominous sky, reluctant calm crept through my limbs. Our boats no longer made progress without the help of our paddles. I coached myself into being ready to paddle on my own again. Michael got out trail mix to give us all energy, and soon I put my paddle back in the water.

Looking back, I don't know why I didn't flip over. There's no way I could have survived the frigid high waves of the unforgiving sea. Did I have guardian angels or just a great boat? I can only say now that I had an experience of *grace*.

I shiver at the memory. Asha's even paddling matches mine. With no wind today, I am safe. As we paddle the double toward our next campsite on Tracey Island, I see a boat wake heading our way and practice the bracing technique that Sam and Michael had chastised me for not doing. I remember practicing that technique a lot after the Kingcome expedition, making sure that should I ever get in danger again, I could handle the situation with strength and calm.

DAY 3: A drip on my cheek wakes me up. A haze of light washes into the tent. I rub my eyes, slip on fogged glasses, and wiggle my toes. My feet were soaked and cold when I got into my sleeping bag last night, but they feel warm now. A fine mist of condensation covers my bag. I check the time and listen for rain; it's quiet. Yesterday drenched us all, but today might be better. Setting up camp with cold raindrops running

down the back of my neck chilled me. Our group huddled under a leaky tarp for the remainder of yesterday, but there's a sense this morning of having survived the worst.

This feeling of accomplishment and relief reminds me of that evening after the storm in Kingcome Inlet. The sky cleared as we set up camp for two nights. Sam and Michael recognized that we needed to land for a couple of days after our traumatic incident. I felt relief at the coming downtime after pushing so hard for the previous week. That next morning, they paddled out on their own to explore the area. I puttered around the campsite.

As the September sun warmed the shoreline, I took out my bottle of SeaSuds and washed my hair. While brushing out days of tangles, I heard a loud crashing through the forest. Remembering that our camping spot on Simoon Sound was on the mainland of BC, I imagined a large grizzly bear bursting out of the trees into my serene spot, just as I had finally felt my body relaxing. Thinking fast, I grabbed a cooking pot and started to pound on it with the end of my hairbrush. At the same time, I began throwing equipment and supplies into my boat. With my hairbrush and pot still in my left hand, I plopped into my kayak, pushing away from shore. After paddling into the calm bay, I listened and heard nothing more. It was amazing to feel safe in my boat after the previous day. Renewed courage trickled into my chest after days of being soaked and scared. I put the paddle across my boat and ran fingers through my fluffy hair. I peeled open a snack bar, chewing slowly to make it last. The deep blue of the sky caught my attention, and joy rose in my throat while gazing around that amazing place.

I took out my fishing pole. Wouldn't Michael and Sam be surprised if we got to feast on a fresh salmon? After attaching the lure, I cast out beyond my boat and waited. I wouldn't call myself a skilled fisherwoman, but it seemed like a good thing to pass the time while I let whatever large animal wander away.

And then I felt a strong tug. Elated, I reeled in, holding the pole with a strong grip. It felt big, really big. I wondered how I would get it into my boat. Then I saw it—the horrid toothy grin of a dogfish, the small sharks that inhabit these waters. I shuddered and my adrenaline kicked in for the second time that day, as I rifled through my dry bag for my knife to cut the line. Before I could grasp it, the shark darted out to my right and broke my pole clean in half. Reaching the knife at last, I cut the line and set myself free.

I paddled back to shore reviewing the challenges of the past few days—pride at accomplishment mixed with feeling overwhelmed at the unpredictability of nature. Back on land, I stretched out on the small stones near the shore and let their sunbaked heat ooze into me.

The next day, Sam, Michael and I paddled south out of Simoon Sound, eventually following the shore of Gifford Island. That's where we startled Bruce standing on his platform that would become our next campsite. Even the smallest of creature comforts in the wild can brighten a weary spirit, and Bruce's endless shower made all the difference in my attitude—my buffer zone for the night.

After breakfast, the group needs to get all of our gear and the boats down the rocky shore to the water at low tide. This tour is anything but cushy. We must work together to get camp packed, cleaned, and then ready our kayaks—a two-hour process. Each of us needs to take a portion of the group gear. Getting boats in the water at low tide requires six to eight of us per boat, as we make our way carefully through the slippery rocks to prevent a fall or ankle twist.

Once in the kayak, Asha and I paddle out into the bay to wait for everyone else. To our left and beyond a small island, we can see the current ebbing in the direction we are going and I hear the distinct puff of a blow. Our guides tell us that a humpback whale is traveling the same direction. We all keep our eyes focused and catch the next blow as we head west, keeping a good distance from the whale, who then disappears farther down the channel. With the clouds breaking up, the sun's rays sparkling on the water, and the sighting of a whale, I feel energized for the day.

Our first crossing of the narrow Arrow Passage requires that we angle to the left so that the ebbing currents won't take us too far off course. A seal pops its head out of the water, notices us, and slips back under. Seagulls fly overhead, chattering to each other, while a few stand in a group on a log slowly moving with the current. The mountains of the mainland rise in the distance. I breathe in the sea air, elated to be right where I am.

We make our way to the next crossing. My spirits soar as the sun warms my damp sunhat. To my right, the north end of Vancouver Island with the open ocean beyond

evokes a longing inside my belly. God, I love this wild and sacred place, and I can't get enough of its staggering splendor.

I recognize the familiar cry of an eagle. Looking up, I notice hundreds of eagles above, one-by-one heading toward the islands ahead. Squeals of delight erupt from my traveling companions, as everyone looks up. Soon we are close enough to the islands to see eagles perched high in the trees. This glorious nature astonishes me.

As we near Owl Island, the guides direct us to paddle around to the west side to a campsite. I spot another bald eagle in a cedar tree rising from the shore. This will be home for the night. As we unpack, we spread tents, sleeping bags and wet clothing across the large logs scattered along the shore in the warm sun. One of our friends pulls out a liter of wine and the guides prepare a late lunch.

Our group chatters happily while munching on cold cuts, cheese, cut up fruit and veggies. Occasionally one of us gets up to flip a sleeping bag or tent fly drying in the sun. Someone asks the guides if they've ever run into a bear. I spout out that bears can swim between the islands, and everyone stops to look at me, eyes wide.

"When I was in this area twenty-five years ago, we had a bear come into camp on an island. My partner Michael and I awoke one morning to our friend Sam yelling wildly. We scampered out of our tent to see Sam, buck-naked, throwing rocks and shouting as the bear tried to bite open the back hatch of his kayak where our food was stored. The bear scurried away. It was the funniest thing."

Some people laugh, but others look freaked. Rowan jumps in to say, "The tour company has never had an encounter. It's good to remember that the bears really don't want anything to do with people." *Except for good-smelling food*, I say to myself.

We encountered the bear the morning after Michael had caught a salmon. I can still remember the succulent bites after cooking the fish over a fire. Yet the smell of salmon lingered, tempting the ravenous bear into our camp. I had also caught a salmon during that sixteen-day adventure. Even though my fishing pole was useless after the dogfish experience, I also carried a drop line. On a calm afternoon, the three of us put lures on our lines and dropped them into the water. Sam and Michael paddled behind me. Soon, they began yelling that I had something on my line. I looked back to see a salmon jumping and following my boat; I pulled the line in, but the only place to put the large salmon was

into the cockpit between my legs. I remember feeling it squirm, not knowing what to do next. My mind blanks when I try to remember how we killed the fish, but I do recall satisfaction when we ate that juicy salmon for dinner.

DAY 4: I wake up to the smell of breakfast cooking and wiggle out of my sleeping bag. The tent sags with dew despite all the work we did yesterday to dry it. Nothing stays dry in this environment. Out beyond the beach, thick fog blocks the view. The guides look nervous, since we have a long way to travel to our next site.

Once on the water, our lead guide radios ahead to let all boats know we will be crossing Knight Inlet. We paddle close together. After passing through the main channel, the fog lifts its heavy skirt and we spot the sunlit Swanson Island ahead and travel east along its shore. As we near the end of the island, Dan stops us to warn, “We are about to head into a flooding current.”

I’ve experienced fast currents in a kayak. It takes a lot of arm and back strength with a steady forward momentum. The guides instruct us to paddle single file as close to the shore as possible to keep away from the faster flooding in the main channel to our left. A surreal feeling washes over me as adrenalin floods my system—the sensation of fast, hard paddling doesn’t match what looks like little movement forward when compared to the shoreline. This current is strong. Yet I feel high with the challenge. As we move into calmer waters, I savor the sense of momentary respite.

We are about to round Swanson Island when I see a small island on the left with an opening that we will paddle between to get into Fresh Water Bay. I recognize where I am.

Michael, Sam, and I had rounded this island on what was supposed to be our last day. We woke up that morning to cloudless, sapphire skies and a steady wind from the north—the first strong winds since Kingcome Inlet. The previous days of paddling had been calm. But that day’s winds scared me. I said as much to Sam and Michael, who waved their hands to brush me off. We had planned to head across Blackfish Sound and Johnstone Strait. As we made our approach to the crossing, fear squeezed my chest. When we entered Fresh Water Bay, I could see huge whitecaps in the Sound and declared to myself that I would not be heading into that kind of danger. Yet what could I

do about my enthusiastic paddling buddies, who looked giddy at the prospect of a great adventure in the throbbing seas? We landed on the beach only to be greeted by an older woman who said the beach was her property. Georgia stood about five foot eleven with uncombed scattered blond-gray hair and wore a rugged look of long-term wilderness isolation. Sam and Michael talked her into letting us pull our boats up to look at our route across to Telegraph Cove. In exchange, they would help her lift a few large beams for the house she was building. I stepped out of my boat onto a pebble shore and turned to look at the churning waters beyond the bay. I blurted out, “I am not going across that today. You two can go if you want. Send a rescue boat for me, because this is not the day I am going to die!”

I have often reflected on taking a stand for myself, and how the guys reacted—as though what I had said was inappropriate. Perhaps they couldn’t reconcile the usually sweet and compliant woman with such a strong statement. Michael expressed his disapproval and Sam turned away, but I didn’t care. They could risk their lives, but not me. To cool off, I wandered the shore and woods while they helped Georgia lift the heavy beams. That’s when I found it—the most amazing eagle feather I’d ever seen. Black for about half of it, white the other half. I picked it up. The decision to stand up for myself was black and white. Risking my life bore no shades of gray.

We did not cross that day. Georgia appreciated the help so much that she let us camp in a spot away from her living quarters. The next morning, we woke up to smooth, silky waters as far as we could see. I felt relieved, but Michael and Sam complained; flat waters weren’t exciting enough. The tension between the men and me hung like the heavy bows of the cedars along the shore. They made me feel that I had been wrong to say “no.” Yet a few weeks later, Michael admitted that he also thought the danger that day had been life threatening. Why he didn’t stand up to agree with me, I will never know.

My paddling feels light and easy as we approach the shore where Georgia had lived. After getting out of the boats, we wander up to the grassy area to look for a campsite for the night. I see the paving stones and a few remaining beams still standing upright from Georgia’s house. Flowers grown out of control grace the surrounding area—most likely planted by Georgia as she created her homestead. I tell the guides the story of meeting Georgia twenty-five years earlier, and they tell me that she still owns the land,

leasing it now to the kayaking company. We all chuckle at what a tough character she is. She must be over eighty years old by now.

Day 5: I wake up to the sound of a boat motor zooming across the water near our bay. Asha is still asleep, lightly snoring. Turning onto my back, I gaze at the orange and white panels of the tent converging above me. Droplets of water hang from the rainfly. A boat wake surges onto shore, that very shore where I stood up for myself twenty-five years ago.

A cold drip from the top of the tent lands on my forehead at the hairline as I ponder how many times in my life, prior to that trip, I had asserted myself like that. Very few. Moving west when I was twenty-three against my parent's wishes stands out as one. Leaving my first husband when I was twenty-nine is another. Mostly, I was a pleaser, almost never standing up for myself. Because if I did, I'd get shot down—by my parents, my first husband, my friends. I rarely expressed my own voice.

My voice is strong now, but I had to break years of conditioning. Asha stirs next to me, and I'm flooded with thankfulness for having found a partner who is not intimidated by a woman's strong voice. These days, I am my own buffer zone. These days, I feel blessed.

We crawl out of the tent and amble toward the group gathering on a long log with a view of the bay. We can see across Blackfish Sound, our big crossing for today. The calm sea glistens as the clouds move in and out of the sun's rays. Once packed up to paddle, we head out toward Hanson Island. Two seals pop heads out of the water as we glide by. In the middle of the channel, we notice a pod of dolphins cruising toward a spot not too far away where seagulls are swooping and fishing. We stop paddling to let others catch up and I sink my hand into the silent water as if to grasp this exquisite experience and bring it with me.

When we arrive at our final campsite on Hanson Island, I recognize the beach. It's the same one on which Sam, Michael, and I camped on our first night. It stuns me that we are spending our last night of this adventure on the same beach. I can't help but wonder if Michael would be happy that I'm here again. After the anguish of our divorce dissipated, a sweet and supportive friendship replaced the gaping hole left from our

broken marriage. Forgiveness was about freeing my heart for what came next and co-parenting our daughter in a healthy way. I saw Michael for the last time when I picked up our girl at his apartment so he could fly to Mexico for a surfing adventure. He died on a northern Baja beach of heart failure—only a year after our divorce was final—leaving me with deep grief and the sole responsibility for raising our six-year-old.

I pull myself out of the kayak and turn to look at the view toward Johnstone Strait. An isolated place back when Michael, Sam and I had relished it, this last camp now serves as a regular site for the kayak tour company, equipped with a cooking tent, benches, and platforms for tents. Beautiful cedar and Douglas Fir encircle us as we set up for our last night. Rowan and Dan get to work on an early dinner so that those of us who wish to paddle one last time can kayak as the day blends into dusk. Tonight, we feast on a Thai curry dish that rivals my own.

Not everyone wants to kayak, so I slither into a single boat, feeling free and powerful as I propel myself forward. With light fog mostly lifted, we skirt around the point, heading into a narrow, long bay. Michael's image paddling his single boat seeps into my thoughts. He paddled like a true expert. In spite of the challenges of that trip, I appreciate his love of adventure and what I learned from being with him. Rowan is paddling next to me, and I tell him about that first evening twenty-five years ago with the orcas jumping while we crossed the Strait. He tells me about his adventurous mom, who taught him to kayak.

Then I see it: an eagle feather in front of my boat floating on the water. I grab it as my boat floats by. Finding one on this trip feels synchronous, like a gift. I put it under the deck lines at the front of the boat as we turn around to finish the last paddle.

Day 6: We wake up to another foggy morning. Yet today we don't need to kayak through it. We will safely cross the Strait in Bruce's fishing boat.

We begin to pack, separating our personal gear from the company's equipment. Everything is slathered in dew. The guides call us for our last breakfast—pancakes and fruit. I splurge on a cup of their delicious dark roast coffee. As I sip, I gaze out at the water and across Johnstone Strait, which is starting to clear with swaths of the small islands and Vancouver Island coming into view. I miss this place already.

As we finish packing, I glance around one last time at the magical forest behind us. I lift my heavy bags down the trail to the rocky beach. Several from our group are already sitting on a big log chatting happily. As we wait, my cohort of kayakers begins to sing songs to pass the time. Notes float by as I savor being on this special beach again.

Our group starts to sing “Amazing Grace,” and I feel tears on my cheeks. This was the song we sang at Michael’s memorial service. It seems fitting in the final hours of this healing adventure. No one seems to notice that I’m crying—for Michael, for our divorce, for our daughter who grew up without her daddy.

As we leave Hanson Island, I remember that in ten days it will be the fifteenth anniversary of Michael’s death. I stand in the wind at the back of the boat with tears coming again. I look back at the aching beauty of the Broughton Archipelago and experience the vastness of my heart: to love then and now and to see the depth of wisdom and strength gained over these many years.



Julie Lockhart loves an adventure in wild places. She spent most of her career in academics, where she published in peer-reviewed journals, such as *Critical Issues in Environmental Taxation*; and *Advances in Accounting Education*. During the last years of her career, she led a grief support nonprofit, where she discovered the beauty and depth of personal stories, writing about her experiences to help grieving people feel less alone. Her essays have appeared in the *Ashland Daily Tidings*, *Minerva Rising*, and the *Journal of Wild Culture*. She has twice placed in the top ten in the Women on Writing essay contests. Julie lives in Port Townsend, WA.