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Tears, Fear and Adventure

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Prologue

The first panicky rush of adrenaline has passed and I am sitting in the cockpit of a kayak desperately sucking air.

The whale passed under me by mere inches and I saw his white saddle patch reflecting sunlight as he slid under me. Time, that had been stopped by fear, has begun to crawl slowly forward once again and I look for reference points to assure myself I am still alive.

My total experience in a kayak has been less than an hour and yet in that minimal time I have come face to face with a wild ten-ton carnivore. My heart is racing and I am sweating profusely. I notice I am holding a camera in a shaky hand but have no memory of taking a picture. I am terrified and exhilarated; and I do not know that my life has been changed forever.

We are usually blindsided by such events that overtake us on the path of life, knocking us from the road we have chosen to the one we are destined to follow. I have just received a body blow.

Orcinus Orca, commonly known as a killer whale, has just passed below me doing at least fifteen knots with a full mouth of teeth wide open. At twice the length of my boat it took him less than a second to do this and yet it seemed like an hour as I watched every inch of his body glide within inches of me. Even though ten years have passed since that day I still return to that moment and for me it will always happen again and now.

The route that brings me to this point after a decade, is filled with events that that went mostly unnoticed at the time, flying under the radar of daily observations until they became so numerous they could no longer be ignored. What had passed as routine in my life gradually began to whisper from someplace deep inside that there were stories to

be told; stories that because of their very uniqueness demand an audience.

I once read that the longer you live, the more words are needed to remember you. My life seemed to be a very long story that was carrying me along for the ride.

Some books write themselves because a story is so important it compels a person to become an author. This book came about because a series of events kept imposing themselves on me until they gained enough momentum to sweep up my life and carry it along on a journey I never sought or even imagined until recently.

The thought of writing about it seemed at first, nothing so much as homage to my own ego, but when enough people say, ‘You should write a book about all this,’ it eventually gets through even the thickest skull.

I have been blessed with a life that has taken me to remote and isolated corners of the globe to meet people, observe events and encounter wildlife that most people will never have the opportunity to share unless through the written page.

I have written this book for myself as a kind of journal to recall events that most probably will fade in the fog of time, but it exists in the hope that those who are unable or unwilling to wander the earth except from the confines of their armchair in front of the Discovery or National Geographic Channels will be able to say in the end, “That was a good story.”

There are three specific events that nudged my life from the middle of the road and onto the path less taken. At the time none of them seemed like a major alteration, but the old saying goes, “Life is what happens while you are busy making plans.” I look back today and recognize two distinct times when I got up from the television, put down the

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potato chip bag, and went out the door in pursuit of adventure. The first was in June of 1996.

My wife, Irene and I had traveled a bit but it was always “tourist” travel; the resort in Mexico or tooling around Hawaii in a rental car. We had spent three youthful months rambling across Europe in a two-man tent, but that was out of curiosity and what one did during the 60’s and 70’s. It did not seem like much of an adventure at the time but few things do until viewed through the filter of hindsight. When one is young, adventure is usually predicated on a lack of money.

I was 27 when I first slipped the bounds of these United States and entered the vast and scary world. The three months we spent wandering around Western Europe in a two-man tent, visiting ten countries, cooking over a one burner stove and letting our whims carry us each day was the greatest learning experience I had yet encountered. It was a glorious time and there are no words to express such freedom.

That was the true beginning of my education and along the way, adventure found me. Looking back now, I confess to being an “Ugly American,” one of those who go abroad hoping to find similarities in all things foreign rather than reveling in the differences. I plead youthful ignorance for this; not that it is an excuse.

Travel is an acquired taste and not for everyone. Sometimes it takes a while to grow on a person. Those who require their food neatly wrapped and labeled, or with a dollop of secret sauce, should definitely confine their trips to their own kitchen. If you must sleep with a light on or expect a newspaper outside your door at first light, stay home and watch the world on CNN. I believe there is a great difference between a tourist and a traveler. Tourists go someplace for a vacation. Travelers go to learn. I don’t care so much about the accommodations as long as I am seeing new things and meeting new people.

In the first century a Christian mystic named Augustine wrote, “The world is a book and those who do not travel read but the first page.” I

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