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Meditating On A Moose and Metaphors and A Red Canoe

My first book will be published in the fall of next year, just as I am turning 65. Milestones of a kind, I guess. The book is a picture book and its working title is In The Red Canoe. I am excited and look forward to seeing the illustrations. I think are going to be beautiful. There is more to it, though, than finally, after rejection letter upon rejection letter, being able to say “my book”.

I wrote the first draft about 6 years ago, at a time when I was starting to long for grandkids and had no idea if, or when, they might be part of our lives. Dementia and Parkinson’s were not even remotely imagined possibilities. I daydreamed scenarios in which Lincoln and I shared our old red canoe with our children’s children, showing them all the extraordinary natural wonders that are best experienced by quiet paddle strokes and slow drift, the magical things that had been part of their mom’s lives.

And so I wrote a poem, in which each verse, or pair of verses, held an image of its own, and every one a memory. I tweaked and added and changed things and when an editor at Orca Book Publishers expressed conditional interest based on a rewrite, I tweaked and added and changed again.

And here is the more part: That old canoe is now brittle and faded but still water-worthy enough for a calm lake on a summer day but Lincoln and I won’t be in it. Our girls will share it with their families.

And there is more to the more part: Shortly after I met Lincoln, we canoed the Bowron Lakes circuit. This extraordinary loop of 5 gorgeous lakes in the Cariboo-Chilcotin region of British Columbia is a canoeist’s dream. Our new relationship barely survived the first two days of very long, very muddy, very hot, mosquito-driven portages before we settled into two weeks of tranquil paddling and one white-knuckle, white-water run. (I think there is a metaphor in there, somewhere.) One morning, we rounded a bend and came face to knees with a huge cow moose. From my seat in the bow I was looking almost straight up at her as she bobbed her head up and down. I had a few brief seconds in which to think how funny she looked — as if she were checking us out through bifocal lenses and having trouble finding the focus point. But moose have long legs and sharp hooves and my next thoughts were about how quickly she could be on top of us, should she so choose. I began a fear-fuelled back paddle while Lincoln, juggling his camera and paddle, protested.

No! He told me. No! I want to get a picture of her.

Ah, the story of our lives...Lincoln boldly pulling toward adventure while I imagine worst-case scenarios and act accordingly.

I paddled backwards and he paddled forwards while the moose bobbed her head and huffed indignant and possibly threatening breaths in our direction. I don't remember exactly how it all ended, it was that long ago. I know there is a picture of her, not a very good one, by Lincoln's extraordinary, photographic standards. I suspect the canoe was still moving backwards as quickly as I could propel it while he frantically snapped away. I often think of that moose-moment and know for sure there is a metaphor in there. We have not always paddled in the same direction; we have often worked at cross-purposes; we have always managed to stay in the canoe. The memory, like the photograph, might be fuzzy and a little out of focus but I treasure it. It makes me laugh. And then it makes me weep. If I could choose only one of all the submissions that I have ever sent to publishers, and there have been many, In The Red Canoe would be the one I would most hope to find acceptance.

So you see, this little picture book, when it finally finds its way into the world, will hold for me so much more than the gentle, imagined story of a child and her grandpa in a red canoe.

It will hold the pain of loss and the healing born of love and memory. It will hold family, and all the beautiful and wondrous things of the wild world, and it will hold laughter. And I am grateful, beyond all expectation, just for the thought of it.