

## THE PROOF IS IN THE POODLE

One summer afternoon, as fog filtered into our rich, sweet forest of red cedar, I decided to ride my ex-racehorse, Charlie, up Sumas Mountain behind our yurt. If the mountain was located back east, people would consider it formidable, but around here, it amounted to little more than a foothill with a complicated crisscrossing of old logging roads. Had Jeff been on the scene with his trusty compass and uncanny pigeon-like knack for finding home, things would have been safer. But as it was, only Smudge accompanied us; I'd given in to her shrill protests at being left behind.

Charlie is petrified of all small things from the natural world, most notably sticks, small birds, large birds like grouse, and even dragonflies. Ironically, things that should scare him don't. Bears don't really faze him, nor do double-wide semi-trucks, but weather patterns drive him berserk—snow, rain, wind and even sun, which brings out all the insects. Each time something catches him off-guard, like a daisy poking up through the grass, all four feet splay out like a saw horse and he springs up, lurching about unpredictably, looking like a cartoon character, eyes wide and hooves in all four directions. And of course there's me, up there hanging on for dear life. Friends have suggested I get a more trail-ready mount, one that doesn't break out in hives the minute May rolls around, but I ride Charlie for the entertainment value and to keep life fresh. Although it may not be the safest hobby, riding a horse alone in nature is one

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of my most rejuvenating pastimes. Wildlife is less afraid of a human on a horse. Charlie and I once stood face to face with a magnificent buck with antlers like branches, so close I could see our reflection in his eyes.

We headed out, my little dog, Smudge, following Charlie and me, coursing our way through ravines, river valleys and coniferous forests of second-growth fir and cedar. Named by the Native Americans “tree of life,” the bark of the cedar appeared particularly deep orange-red that day. Depending upon my mood, its boughs sometimes resembled a Victorian skirt. But on that day, the cedar was reminiscent of a row of soft green feathers, each one drooping atop another, forming layers of green plumage in delicate curtains. The Douglas fir trees had stubby sharp needles that projected from branches like fingers, each pointing in a slightly different direction. If nature ruled over the greed of logging companies, I thought, these cedars and firs would grow to monstrous sizes.

My thoughts centered around botanical questions. *Is that a wood or lady fern? Can I tell a cottonwood from a maple by its bark? Is that a large salmonberry or an elderberry?* The world of plants held many mysteries. Preoccupied with investigating native plants along the path, I scarcely noticed the increasing fog, slowly becoming so dense that, after two hours, we had doubled back in the wrong direction.

It was starting to get dark so I dropped Charlie’s reins to the

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buckle, relaxed my legs and left him free to go wherever he wanted. I hoped to create a moment of understanding in my trusty steed, so that he could depend on whatever vestige of instinctive sense of direction might remain, his pre-racing thinking cap. I hoped that eventually he might lead us home. But Charlie just stood there, staring straight ahead, all four hooves planted uncharacteristically on the ground. Charlie's giant ribcage expanded beneath me and he chewed on his bit, settling into waiting mode. He was a horse with virtually no survival skills and way too much faith in me. I finally gave up, took up the reins and proceeded to get us more lost.

After reviewing my dwindling options, I started to look for a place to settle down for the night. At that moment, Smudge ran out in front of Charlie as if to say "I know the way back!" So we followed her little black head around corners, across streams and apparently down the mountain. Smudge would occasionally peer back at us, her overgrown ears perched expectantly like wings, bouncing with her new-found responsibility. At the edge of ravines, deep river beds and gullies, Smudge waited for us, bolting forward when we caught up.

Because I am an expert at getting lost, I can say from experience that the moment you feel the most lost is often followed by a moment of clarity. After an hour, just when I was about to doubt Smudge's navigation abilities, I saw the outline of our round house in a backdrop of misty clouds. I looked up at the green canopy

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of trees and the last bit of light, thankful for Smudge's sense of direction. I longed to hold on to her strong-willed essence, that opinionated edge I usually cursed. As we rode into the barn, she trotted in, leading the way. Proud. Confident. Terrier. She had led us home.

A few months later, Jeff and I took a kayak trip through the San Juan Islands. As we quietly paddled through the emerald green water, a soft breeze swept over the boats and a grey-spotted seal followed the bubbles in our wake. For seven years, Jeff and I had been kayaking buddies, secure enough in our friendship to give advice to one another. And I surely needed it. "Are you sure you know where we're going?" Jeff asked, seeing that I had led us to an island rather than a peninsula. To say Jeff was understated would be an understatement. So he probably knew we were lost but would patiently follow me into open ocean if necessary.

I wondered if everyone in Minnesota had a built-in compass like Jeff did, and if his navigational intuition had anything to do with the flat terrain, long stretches of snow and ice or the lack of memorable landmarks in his home state. On his canoe trips in northern Minnesota, one island looked just like another and you needed a special kind of instinct to distinguish between them.

Jeff's wilderness survival and directional skills came from his father, a man who'd think nothing of squashing a half-dozen ticks with his fork at the dinner table before eating his salad. During