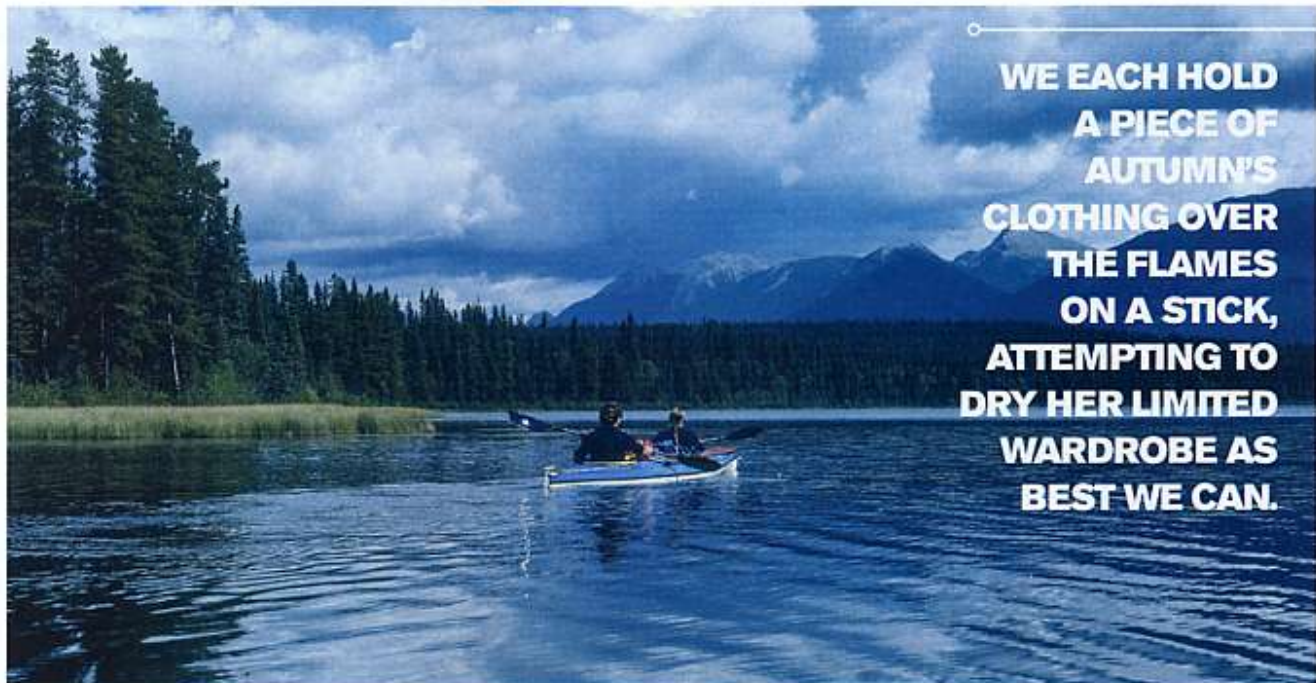


A Storm to Remember

BY DOUG WOODWARD

NAP TIME: Sheltered by her father's hat, 2-year-old Autumn dozes in the rain.



**WE EACH HOLD
A PIECE OF
AUTUMN'S
CLOTHING OVER
THE FLAMES
ON A STICK,
ATTEMPTING TO
DRY HER LIMITED
WARDROBE AS
BEST WE CAN.**

I SHOULD HAVE EXPECTED it, I suppose. This was the fascinating woman whose canoe routinely disappeared around the bend while all the other paddlers were still getting their gear together. The same woman who had invited me for a first date on a whitewater river. The one who had survived the loss of both of our kayaks on the Tatshenshini, deep in Yukon Territory, and come back for more. Trish. My partner and soul mate.

Even so, she caught me by surprise.

Our daughter Autumn was not quite two, but Trish and I had been introducing her to the wild country of rivers and trails ever since she could hold her head up alone. We had planned a backpacking trip in the Olympics of Washington State, Trish's home territory. Our flight from Atlanta to Seattle had been reserved weeks ahead, our trail days planned, camping gear fine-tuned, and backpacks ready. Two days before we left, the latest issue of one of our favorite outdoor magazines arrived in the mail.

"Hey, look at this article!" Trish handed me the magazine.

"Beautiful country," I replied as I continued to run through my checklist of tasks needing completion before we left. "I'll read it later."

"No! Read it now. It's a ten-day canoe trip in British Columbia. We could do it instead of this backpacking trip."

My gut began to get a familiar, uneasy feeling. I knew she wasn't kidding.

"Look, it could be a great trip. We fly to Seattle as planned, rent a car and drive the 500 miles north to the Bowron Lakes. I'll check on renting a canoe there, and if it's a go, we start switching our camping gear from backpacks to waterproof river bags. I'll call Ross and see if he and Karen can go with us." Ross Brown, a long-time friend of Trish's, was a National Outdoor Leadership School instructor.

Sure, I thought. Karen is six months pregnant with their first child and we're giving them a whole two days of notice to get it together. Not a snowball's chance in hell they could go.

I was dead wrong, of course.

~

Three days later, on September 3, the five of us are sacked out in a tiny cabin in British Columbia's Caribou Range, resting for our morning departure. Rain pours down on the cedar shake roof

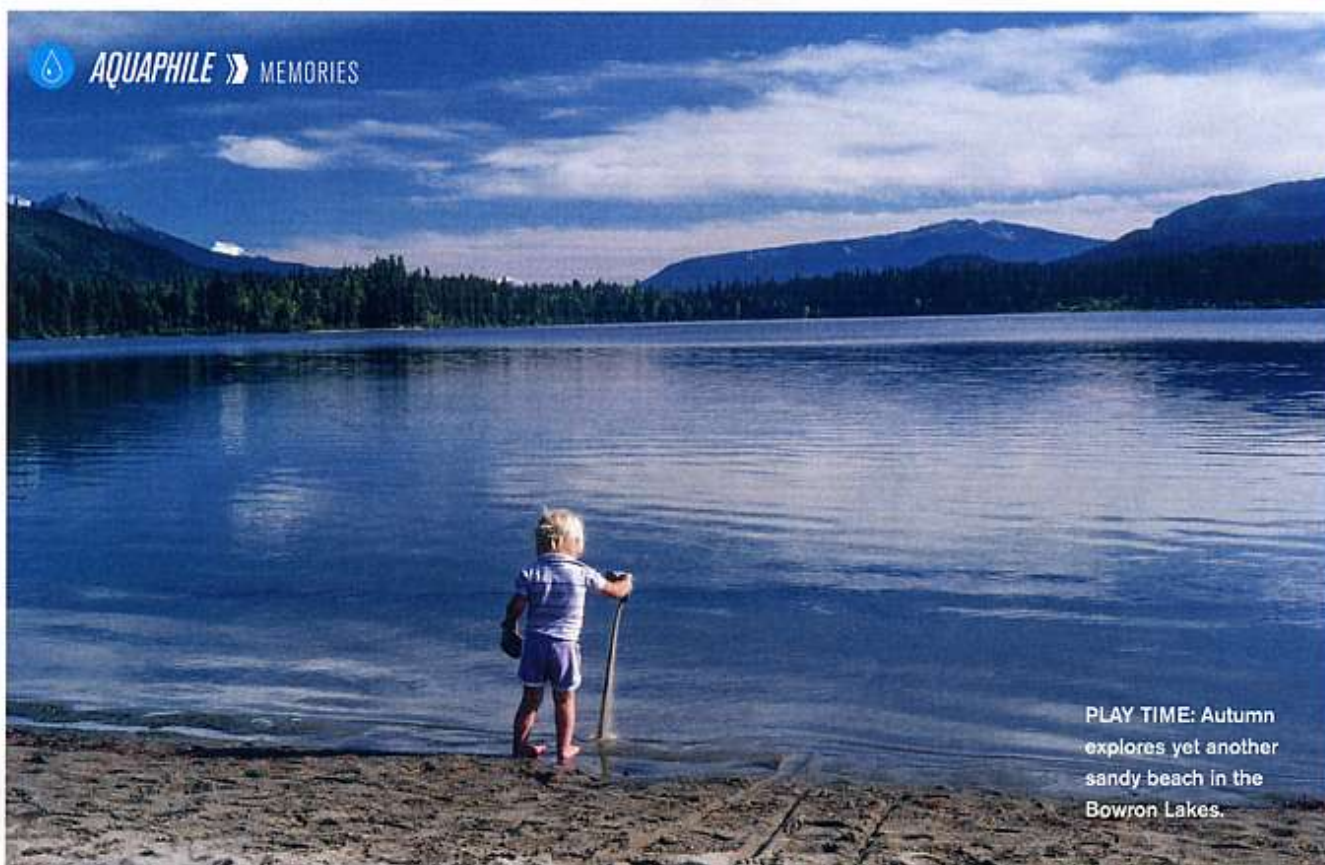
all night long, punctuated by canon shots of thunder.

By morning the downpour has subsided, but dark, ominous clouds hang low. Karen and Ross are packing gear into the center hatch of their tandem sea kayak while we load our sleek eighteen foot rented lake canoe, carefully fastening Autumn's life jacket but leaving her seat loose in case of a capsize.

By the time we depart on our 72-mile circuit of lakes, rivers and portages, the sun has broken through and the clouds are scudding for the horizon. We quickly cross the north end of Bowron Lake and unload for the mile and a half portage to Kibbee Lake. Portages with a wee one are



MOMMY TIME:
Trish in a moment
of reflection.



PLAY TIME: Autumn explores yet another sandy beach in the Bowron Lakes.

a challenge, as Trish takes a load while Autumn toddles behind, then stays with her at the end of the portage trail. I return to hoist the canoe onto my shoulders for the second trip.

The paddle across Kibbee is only a smooth, sunny mile and goes quickly – the next grunting portage, a mile and a quarter. How about wheels for the canoe next time? Our bodies are feeling the effects of our overloaded foot travel, and we make camp after paddling less than two miles on Indianpoint Lake.

Ah, the dawn sunshine was simply a seductress. Morning rain catches us in the middle of cooking a pancake breakfast. We pack up a wet camp, Indianpoint Lake glides under us much too soon and we find ourselves at the third portage trail, a mile's trek to the head of Isaac Lake. The rain follows us as we make the multiple, muscle-numbing foot trips once more. The toughest portages are now behind us and we're looking at 30 miles miles of open water ahead.

But Mother Nature says, "Not so fast, my friends." A wind is rising and whipping the surface of the lake into a frenzy. Steady, hard rain continues to fall. Soaked right through our rain gear and badly chilled despite the strenuous exercise, we hug the north shore to avoid the waves and finally give it up seven miles into Isaac. We set up camp at the mouth of Wolverine Creek, which we see rising significantly in the hours following our arrival.

As the rain soaks our camp, the five of us huddle around a small fire, partially protected by a tarp, trying to absorb a bit of warmth. We each hold a piece of Autumn's clothing over the flames on a stick,

attempting to dry her limited wardrobe as best we can.

All night, and throughout the next day the rain and wind continue, Isaac Lake resembles a storm-tossed ocean, the wind blowing the tops right out of the five-foot waves. We discuss alternative plans beside the fire. Karen and Ross will wait out the weather and paddle on, even if we don't. They figure that they can make up a portion of their lost time in the sea kayak, by far the fastest craft on the lake.

Shortage of food is not yet a concern, though we've already eaten half our emergency food supplies. The most pressing question is whether we can keep Autumn dry and comfortable. Even being as careful as we can, her fleece clothing is getting wet right through her full rain suit. At this point, with only about a sixth of the trip distance behind us, it would make sense for us to reverse our direction if we need to escape the weather. The discouraging part of that plan is the fact that we would have to retrace almost four portage miles with our canoe and supplies. The remaining portages are relatively short compared to what we've already done.

At dusk, the storm takes a more ominous turn. The wind velocity has increased noticeably and has a howling voice of its own. We can hear "tongues" of wind racing down the ridges above us with a force that is flattening trees in their path. They fall like dominoes, often ten or twelve in series, one crash rapidly followed by another. Becoming increasingly uneasy, we count hundreds of crashes in an hour.

WE CAN HEAR 'TONGUES' OF WIND RACING DOWN THE RIDGES ABOVE US WITH A FORCE THAT IS FLATTENING TREES IN THEIR PATH. THEY FALL LIKE DOMINOES.

"Do you think any of the trees here in our camp could come down?" a concerned Trish asks.

I try to reassure her. "I don't think so. The dead trees have been cut out near our camp and they'd be the ones most likely to fall."

Autumn is the only sound sleeper in our tent tonight, trusting her parents implicitly, as only a two-year-old can do. Trish and I toss fitfully, listening to the trees crashing as the wind roars down Wolverine Creek from the north.

In Edgar Allen Poe style, the storm chooses the black of night to hurl its worst at us. We hear it coming, but the warning offers no escape. As the violent river of wind envelopes our tiny camp, a tree trunk explodes no more than 30 feet from our tent. I reach for Trish, and together we try to shield Autumn as we wait out the longest four seconds of our lives. With the impact, our tent jumps and the earth moves beneath us as if it were liquid. I shine a light out of the tent door and see nothing but branches.

"We're out of here!" shouts Trish as she scoops Autumn into her arms and bolts for the edge of the lake. I follow as quickly as I can gather the tent and sleeping bags into a bundle that can be carried. A sixty-foot Douglas fir lies between our tent and the spot where Karen and Ross were sleeping, pinning one edge of our tarp to the ground. I shiver as I think of the probable results had the tree fallen a degree or two to either side of the spot it actually hit.

The other four are already on the rocky beach, Autumn no doubt wondering what in the world her parents are doing, dragging her around in the middle of the night like this. I set up the tent at the wind-swept edge of the lake, and we climb in to escape the ever-present rain, trying to find depressions between the rocks for our hips and shoulders.

Morning arrives at last and we drag our aching bodies out of the tent once more. The rain has stopped, but a stiff wind – no comparison to last night's blow – is still kicking up whitecaps on the lake. We inspect the fallen tree we so narrowly escaped and breathe a silent thanks. We resurrect the campfire and dry a few pieces of Autumn's clothing. After a long discussion and some initial hesitation, Trish and I decide to paddle on, keeping our small group together.

A stiff wind, and the possibility of a mid-lake capsizing, dictate that we hug the east shore of Isaac Lake, which has

turned in a southerly direction after passing Wolverine Creek. We're physically drained from the previous night and camp only nine miles farther down Isaac, at the mouth of an unnamed creek. The wind is easing up, the sky beginning to clear, but the temperature is plummeting. We spend a frigid night snuggled together.

Nevertheless, we greet the next day with energy, paddle the remaining fifteen miles of Isaac Lake, run the exit chute into the Isaac River, and make two relatively short portages. The halfway point of our trip finds us setting up camp at a beautiful spot on the edge of the river. Sunshine streams down through the treetops to turn the river mist into a luminous cloud and we take a short hike upriver to see the thirty-five foot waterfall we had portaged an hour earlier.

It is now autumn in the North Country. There is no doubt whatsoever as the air is calm, the sun pleasantly warm and the nights have a sharp bite to them. We glide smoothly along Lanezi, Sandy and the Spectacle Lakes, snow-capped peaks rising from the Mowdish, and Quesnel Ranges. A string of mergansers dives, one by one, from a log as we pass. Sand beaches are a delightful playground for Autumn. She stuffs herself with blueberries from the bushes that surround our camps. Loons serenade us far into the evening. We are paid back in exquisite currency for the pounding we took at Wolverine Creek.

EPILOGUE

Our Bowron Lakes trip took place 30 years ago. Trish still pushes the envelope of outdoor adventure, and makes last-minute course corrections. And during that period, she has somehow managed to raise three sons, Forest, Rivers and Canyon, each of whom is now an active outdoor leader in his own right.

And what of Autumn, that wee one whose narrow escape became part of Bowron Lakes history? At 32, she is still as thirsty for the out-of-doors as her mom, dad and three younger brothers.

Doug Woodward's last feature for the magazine was "Circling Back" (Dec. '14), a story co-written with his son Forest about returning to the Grand Canyon after a 43-year absence. That trip also was the subject of Forest Woodward's award-winning film, "The Important Places."



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