Cancer at Sims Creek

by Aileen Penner

A man I knew, John Clarke, who lived much of his life on the Coast Mountains trekking through ancient forest died in January 2003 of brain cancer. Now in Toronto, I received an email from my friend in Vancouver announcing his death. Immediately memories flood back about the Witness weekend I spent last summer with John and others at Sims Creek.

In the backseat of Duane's four-door tracker, its shocks lost long ago, I feel every bump along the rough logging road, and taste the dust kicked up by the cars in front as we head into the Elaho Valley. Located about one and a half hours north of Squamish BC, this area sees more clear-cut logging every year. Careful of the logging trucks that may be barrelling down to unload at the mill in Squamish, Duane has the headlights on and the six vehicles drive as a unit. After about 40 minutes of being jostled in the backseat, our carpool convoy stops along the side of the road to let campers out to pee.

I choose a semi-secluded spot behind a large slash pile from the open clear-cut across the road. I squat and watch the stream of hot pee splash up on my hiking boots. Amateur. Everyone piles back into the cars and I watch the green and brown landscape through the window as we drive another 45 minutes to Sims Creek where we will set up camp.

John Clarke's idea of being 'in' nature is to bushwack through the underbrush, blazing your own trail. This, however makes me nervous; I am anxious about losing the trail, the spiders I might run into, the bears I might see. He is one of three people ever to receive the Order of Canada for mountaineering. A naturalist who spent 35 of his 57 years exploring over 10,000 square kilometres of ancient coastal rainforest, John rarely gets lost in the forest. In fact, I am certain he would never consider himself 'lost'. Today the old growth forest will swallow us all for a few hours.

A sharp blast of the air horn calls the group to gather at the middle of the sandbar stretched along Sims Creek in the breathtaking Elaho Valley. I rouse myself from the shady place beside my tent where I've been writing. I walk to the river and watch John dunk his orange and blue striped sweater into the glacial river and wring it out. He then slowly pulls it overtop his head and walks over to the circle of people. Feeling unsure and anxious, I dig my toes into the cool sand, and listen as Aaron Nelson-Moody, Squamish artist and wood carver, welcomes us to the land and recollects the history of his people, the importance of the territory and the significance of what they consider to be illegal logging taking place in the valley. With a traditional blanket draped over his right shoulder he says, "We would like everyone gathered here today to be a witness to this land." He pauses and looks up the valley. "To be with open hearts and to tell others what we have seen and heard today," he says as he folds his hands at his waist.

The weekend wilderness education camping trip I am on at Sims Creek is called the Witness Project. It is a sacred honour to be called to 'witness' in the Coast Salish tradition. This 8000-year-old ceremony, called 'Uts'am' often goes on for three days. In a Witness circle, everyone is an active listener in a shared process of remembering our connection to the land and to what is being said. In the summer of 1995 John helped develop this unique partnership with the Squamish First Nation that expanded into the Witness Project. The Squamish Nation awarded John the rare honour of a traditional naming ceremony in which he was given the Squamish name of Xwexwsélken, or Mountain Goat.

John is dressed in blue shorts and a long-sleeved white dress shirt underneath a knit sweater with orange and green patterned lines. He wears thick grey socks inside brown battered hiking boots. His plastic brown-rimmed glasses seem too big for his thin, pink face shaded by a blue baseball cap. He has just come out of intensive radiation therapy. The treatments for his brain cancer have made his wild white hair fall out long ago. I question my right to write intimately about John; I only knew him for two days.

John has cancer: a malignant brain tumour. There are no scars under his baseball cap because he hasn't had surgery. Ironically, poisonous radiation is likely the only thing that will allow him to see his son'[s first birthday. His cancer started in the brain, it didn't spread from another location in the body. Silently, cells multiplied for months uncontrolled in the valleys of his brain. The cancer cells don't recognize this man is in love, newly married with a baby, and an experienced mountaineer and environmental educator. These particular cancer cells are also aggressive and have formed a mass with momentum to steal his energy. Cancer is unpredictable. Apart from a known association with exposure to vinyl chloride, there are no known chemical or environmental factors that cause brain tumours like his.

Unlike his great treks in the summer months, this is an adventure without challenge for John. He has automatically lost. As the cancerous mass continues to grow, John's immune system must deal with both the radiation and the cancer. Treatment can only stall the violent reproduction of cells for so long. Soon death will come as a result of uncontrolled growth within the confines of the skull. I imagine being in nature is a form of resistance for John - resistance to illness, death, hospitals, and toxic chemicals as treatment.

I know death is a part of life - I know.

The other campers and I pile into Chief Bill Williams' truck. John slowly pulls himself up into the cab alongside Chief Williams. As we round the bend in the flattened grass corridor that leads to the main logging road, John points out a known grizzly path and shouts, to us in the box, "Shel! Remember when we found fresh grizzly scat here last summer?"

Grizzlies? Shit - don't panic. I know how interconnected the spiders and the grizzlies are in the forest ecosystem - I know.

I am really afraid of two things: spiders and bears. Two of my greatest fears are dying from a spider bite or a bear attack. Where I live in Vancouver BC, there is little chance of dying from either - the odds are greatly in my favour.

Last year while hiking the Diez Vistas trail at Buntzen Lake a spider

bit me, only further confirming my fears. The trail of 'ten views' runs along the top of a ridge of mountains surrounding Buntzen Lake north of Port Moody. As my friends and I were hiking, we didn't realize the two forks reunite farther along the trail at its highest point, and we veered off the path. As I hiked through the thick brush to meet up with the trail, single spun silk threads grabbed my face and I felt something pinch the inside of my right leg. Panicked, I quickly brushed it off. I know there are no black widows in this area yet I couldn't push down the concern that rose in me as I quickly went through the symptoms: Immediate pain and swelling? Yes. Headache, rash and/or itching? Oh god, yes. Anxiety and sweating? Yes - but this is normal for me. Nausea, vomiting and tremors? Well. o.k. no - not yet.

The truck bumps along the rough logging road to the area where we will start our hike. The path will pass through an old clear-cut and then an approved cutblock to witness two Douglas Fir trees over 1000 years old - 'the sisters'.

To government and industry, this area is known as Tree Farm Licence (TFL) no. 38. To the Squamish Nation, it is known as Nexwáyantsut, and is designated a 'wild spirit place' in their land-use plan. The clear-cut looks like the area had been mowed by giant lawnmowers. Large squat stumps litter the area the size of five soccer fields. A dirt and gravel road winds through the open space with piles of tree waste collected alongside for burning. This particular area was logged a year ago and there is the hint of green vegetation sprouting up from underneath the debris left behind. Stepping off the road the sound of my boots creates loud crackles as I step on dry, brittle leftover branches on upturned earth.

Despite my neuroses about spiders and bears I still love to hike. I like the repetitive motion of placing one boot in front of the other on a narrow footpath under a canopy of branches. The sun is hot as we walk up the winding switchbacks through the grey corpses in the clear-cut. Below, the Squamish River cuts the valley in two. Looking North, patchy mountainsides seem to layer in front of one another to an invisible end point. John and our small group of eight listeners pause at the first bend in the open clear-cut.

"When we finish our hike you'll see that Interfor's logging road ends about ten kilometres from here," John says. "Five years of intensive clear-cutting in the Sims has seen the lower valley be nearly logged out." He puts one hand in his pocket and pulls out a map of the area.

John continues, "In the steeper and narrower upper Sims valley," he makes an invisible dot on the map, "the forest is of much lower timber value, but it is incredibly important to grizzlies."

"Grizzlies are creatures of habit," John says in soft tones.

"When I explored beyond Interfor's proposed road route into some of the last old growth of Sims valley, I found well-used grizzly trails," he adds placing the map back in his pocket and putting one and up to shade his eyes from the direct sun.

"What do you mean creature of habit?" I ask.

John answers, "Well grizzlies often place their feet in exactly the same place on the same path for generations. And I found one of those trails in that upper Sims Valley. Because of the narrow nature of the Sims Valley, Interfor's roads would have to go right over the bear trails and through the middle of their summer feeding areas - the avalanche chutes where leafy annuals grow." He walks slowly up the road and our group follows.

Half-way to the second switchback he stops to survey the clear-cuts beyond the river valley. "That clear cut was done last year." He speaks slowly and carefully as he directs out attention east.

"Do you see the way the clump of trees in the middle of that clear-cut have all fallen over?" Everyone in the group nods. The blistering heat reddens the backs of our necks.

"That's what the logging companies call 'variable retention strategy'." He takes a long pause. "You see if they leave small islands of trees in the cut-block, it isn't considered a clear-cut." John then adds, "of course it's useless for wildlife habitat. And as you can see, these small clumps of trees can't stand up to strong winds."

John is in no hurry to get out of the searing heat. We come across a trickling stream and he lowers his body into a push-up-like position. With one arm deep in the pool of water, he tilts his face up to the falling water and drinks in big gulps. The rest of us slurp from our plastic bottles anxious to cross the last hundred meters of clear-cut.

I cross the arbitrary line where clear-cut meets ancient forest. The sensations are immediate as my body cools with the shade of the tall trees. My hands and feet slip as I cross moss that is soaking in all the forest juices. John is first in the forest and tells us to follow the red tape hanging from the tree branches. Taking a closer look, the red tape trail-markers are actually markers for the continuation of Interfor's logging road.

Inside the forest of douglas fir, sitka spruce, western hemlock and western red cedar, I immediately have to crawl under a fallen tree. Downed, rotting trees are a good sign of a healthy ecosystem. On my way out from under the log, I notice several species of fungi popping up from the floor. The rainy, foggy and cool climate on the coast has sustained some of these forests for four thousand years. The forest is quiet and I can barely hear the steps of my boots on the path. Narrowing to a slim footpath, the trail winds past tall, brooding firs and I head towards the sound of a stream.

This terrain is home to John even in the last months of his life. He lived a large part of his life on the mountain and in the forests and valleys along the BC coast. But today he seems lost.

John, along with Chief Bill Williams, are at the font of the group and experienced guides Shel and Duane, are at the back of our large group. I am following the steps of Scott in front of me, who is following Lindsay, who is following Matt, who is following someone else, and suddenly we are six separated from the larger group. The red-tape trail markers have long since disappeared. Suppressing panic, I have to pull more and more invisible spider threads off my face as we trudge through thicker and thicker brush. Our 'path' is now a mix of twigs, needles and leaves, indistinguishable from the rest of the forest floor. Shel comes quickly from the back and asks where John and the rest are? I tell him that somehow we got split off and we can't hear them anymore.

Shel calls out, "John! Bill!" No answer. I try hard to keep myself from the sense of alarm rising in my chest as I notice Shel doesn't know where he is either. Shel has been involved with Witness for years and is one of the reasons I am here. He has spent many summers with John on month-long treks to various peaks and valleys. A photographer, popular educator, musician, and today wilderness guide, Shel's manner of tucking his long curly brown hair behind his ears gives me comfort. Shel goes ahead and looks for John and the others. After about 20 minutes, he comes back to where we are and says he's found them at the stream.

Relief. When our group of six arrives at the edge of the cliff, John is clearly irritated and annoyed. At us? At himself? I don't know. The four men huddle and discuss the situation.

John tells Shel, "I'll do a wreckie up this way" he gestures up the mountain. "Shel - you go that way." John points east.

"Bill - maybe you and Duane can head towards the ravine," John says to Chief Williams.

They all hike quickly in different directions and distances of 100-150 yards to get a better vantage point. John is up and down faster than the others and says, "There's no way through up there."

Chief Williams climbs back up the slope and tells John that there is a way to negotiate a path down to the river.

John then takes the first steps down the steep ravine, ignoring the tangles of prickly devils club to choose good footholds and trees to support the traverse. Shel stays behind to make sure everyone gets down safely. John quickly works a path to the roaring stream where he knows there will be a good place to cross. Negotiating thorny vegetation and branches that threaten to whip our legs, we cross the stream and meet up with the path a few feet up the mountain. John is sure-footed as he sets out a quick pace at the front of the group and he ascends as easily as he descends. Sword ferns decorate the bank opposite the stream as I trip over a root from the complex system that intertwines with the path. In this multi-layered canopy, moss-padded branches hold up lichen dangling over the edge. Although they nest here, the spotted owl and marbled murrelet are not out today. Past the grove of red cedars, Shel shows me the bark-stripped scars from a culturally modified tree. A living artifact. He tells me that the Squamish women have stripped bark from this tree for centuries to make clothing and baskets.

After hours of slogging through the bush my tired, hungry, mosquito bitten, branch-whipped body finally arrives at the two 'sisters'. And the two firs are truly immense - at least 15 to 20 feet in diameter. This is what thousand-year old trees look like? I think: is this it?! My reaction is unpredictable, and I'm disappointed in myself. What right do I have to write intimately about these trees anyway? I am too tired to stop and reflect.

Then I see John standing off to the side, quietly contemplating these ancient beings. I wonder what he is thinking. The tree is said to be about 1200 years old. John's life will only measure 57 rings.

John again doesn't follow the winding path down the mountain, but instead hikes through to the next switchback. In about fifteen minutes, I reach the fading sunlight at the end of the logging road.

It may have been the cancer or the chemical treatments, I don't know, but John did almost everything in slow motion. He spoke in slow, soft, deep sentences. He gestured in slow waves. He even ate slowly. In fact the only thing he did with any great speed was hike through the forest. He was incredibly nimble for a 57-year-old cancer patient.

Interfor continues to push their logging operations into the last remaining old growth in the upper Elaho valley. In January 2003 John died of his brain cancer, nine days after his son Nicholas turned one.

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Opposite page: Bert Oldershaw, Flotsam & Jetsam, found objects