



# Back and Beyond

(or The Very Experience We Were Looking For)

by Jennifer Kingsley

**T**he wolves slipped between the tents where my sleeping companions lay. They seemed to take everything in: me and the boats, the ice and the shadows, but if they made a sound as they blew through camp, I couldn't hear it.

I wandered over the rocks with a cup of tea and stopped to stretch my arms above my head. It felt good to let some air find my belly. It was usually too cold for that.

Six of us had paddled Nunavut's Back River in 51 days, but a solid mat of sea ice, extending north from our camp on the Arctic coast, prevented us from getting out. With broken communication to the outside world and little experience on the sea, we had to choose: call a plane to fetch us, or

above—**Tundra Portage**, photograph by Tim Irvin, [www.timirvin.com](http://www.timirvin.com)

wait it out with a dwindling food supply. Our group discussions, probing for consensus—*how do we end this?*—had become grueling. We had talked about little else for three days, until it seemed I hardly knew my friends anymore. The wilderness felt less and less familiar. I wanted to go home.

Four caribou clicked up to the shoreline in the long morning light. I wondered what would happen to them. *They should have migrated south by now.* It was too late to be that far north.

The Back River bisects a black hole of Canadian geography. It runs east-northeast from the edge of the Northwest Territories, through Nunavut to the Arctic coast, where it empties into a deep bay called Chantrey Inlet. Its black water flows for over 1,000 kilometres and drains almost one-fifth of Nunavut's mainland, though few people have ever heard of it. We had designed a trip that began on one of its tributaries, followed it to the coast, and ended with some ocean paddling.

My group included two close friends. Levi and I had met three years before on a trip to Nunavut's Hood River. He was slim and dark-haired with a gentle manner and sound judgment. Tim, with his athletic build and bright smile, had been my closest friend for years; he and I had paddled over 200 days together. His mother had died unexpectedly two months before our trip. The other three paddlers, Alie, Drew, and Jen, had been only acquaintances before the trip—friends of friends from university.

Our second week, during an unusual calm, we camped on an island near the north shore of Upper Garry Lake, number two in a series of seven freshwater seas that stretch for over 200 kilometres. Early July and summer had arrived. The sun gave a metallic sheen to the land, and flowers blossomed: snow cinquefoil, moss-campion, Labrador tea, blueberries, cloudberries, and three-toothed saxifrage.

The cabin sat alone in the distance. Its shell of thin boards had been burned dark and blackened by sun and cold. The resident of this cabin, Roman Catholic missionary Father Joseph Buliard, had disappeared into a snowstorm in 1956 and never returned. The inside contained some lemming scat and a book propped up against one wall: *The Man Who Mapped the Arctic: The Intrepid Life of George Back, Franklin's Lieutenant*, by Peter Steele.

Alie walked over and picked it up.

The inside front cover had been inscribed in black ballpoint pen: "July 10, 2005. YMCA Camp Widjiwagan Voyaguer [sic] girls of 2005." Next was a short request followed by seven signatures. "If you take this book, please leave another."

In Yellowknife, we had heard of a group of young women from Minnesota who had flown in shortly before us. They were headed for the ocean, too. I had never been to camp, but I knew that senior campers sometimes took long northern journeys, a modern coming of age. My mum and I spent summers at the cottage, so I could only imagine the rituals and traditions these girls might have. Did they already know each other? Who was their leader? It puzzled me to see seven names because canoeists almost always travel two per boat. That meant that at least one of them didn't sign, or that someone was traveling solo or sitting in the middle of the canoe, maybe on a pack. I didn't envy the three-person boat, if there was one. These girls had been in the cabin two days before we arrived. We could overtake them in the next month, or they might pull away from us. I wondered if they felt small out there, if they sang enough camp songs to shield themselves from the silence.

Alie picked up the book and replaced it with her copy of *War and Peace*.

A week later, we arrived at Rock Rapids—a dozen kilometres of ledges, falls, submerged rocks, and re-circulating holes. A pile of gear, too close to the rushing water, sat across the river from our camp. Tim and I paddled hard through the current to investigate.

Two green canoes sat overturned and parallel by the river's edge. Twenty paces further on, five canvas canoe packs slumped in a circle. Thin leather straps crisscrossed over the tops to close them, but other items lay strewn on the ground: a bag of flour, a four-litre Coleman fuel container, one boot.

We approached the packs slowly.

"Hello?" Tim cried, "Is anybody here?"

"Hello?" I echoed.

We spread out on the small gravel island, scanning the ground. A mound of green at the island's downstream tip, only fifty paces away, rose above the rocks. Crowberry and goose droppings tangled down the back of it. No tents. The air seemed still, despite the wind, and the tundra took on the closeness of a deserted apartment.

"There's nobody here," I said to Tim, stating the obvious.

We worked the cracked leather straps from their buckles and peeled back the fabric. The plastic liners inside each pack were open. In the first four, blackened pots, stoves, fuel, sacks of parboiled rice, and cake mixes jumbled in a messy pile; the rubber limbs of hip waders sprang out of the fifth. Each green flank of canvas declared "Camp Widjiwagan" and a phone number printed in faded black marker.

We didn't have paper, a pen, or a camera. We committed four digits of the camp phone number to memory and used the dials on our compasses to record the last six. We flipped the canvas closed again and cinched the straps back in place before heading to the river.

We rejoined our friends and reported our findings while Levi dug our satellite phone from its case. We needed to call the RCMP, but the little black bars in the top left corner of the screen wouldn't come up. The battery was

Levi dug our satellite phone from its case.... The battery was charged but there was no signal. We were getting too far north.

charged but there was no signal. We were getting too far north. Of the two global constellations of satellites used for satellite phones, only one is reliable in the far north and far south. The Radio Shack in Yellowknife didn't rent it.

We also carried a small satellite device called a Personal Locator Beacon, or PLB, that would summon the search and rescue crews if we got into serious trouble. It had only two instructions: *Remove cover. Push button.*

We decided to search. Now that we had portaged the first rapid and found ourselves below the abandoned camp, Levi and I would head back upstream, Tim and Alie downstream. I worried for Tim, buried by grief and searching for more. Each party took a first-aid kit and extra clothes. Jen and Drew stayed put, cooked lentil barley stew, and kept dialing our useless satellite phone.

As Levi and I skirted the upstream canyon, I stared down into rapids you try not to dream about. You know they are there because you've read the map and because the current beckons and, when you look from upstream, the river seems to disappear. Stop paying attention and the slick talk of the current will lure you in. The water picks up speed. It turns black and glossy—a photograph, a vinyl record, a thick braid—then explodes into whiteness. The boiling undercurrents promise to break you or hold you under. *What will I do if I see a bright lifejacket down there? What will Tim do if he finds one?*

Levi and I climbed the banks in silence until we could see unexplored ponds and streams, Lower MacDougall Lake, and the girls' abandoned camp in the distance. Nothing to report.

When I finally took my eyes away from the horizon to look down at the hillside, I slowly reached for Levi's arm. He looked at me, then followed

my eyes. Four wolves were climbing straight toward us, padding easily over angled boulders.

We stood still at first, mesmerized by the casual rhythm of their gait. Their legs chose each rock blindly, yet never missed. Yellow-white twists of fur lifted and dropped with each step; their eyes fixed me in place. They climbed straight for us and showed no sign of stopping until two broke off to our right. Were they flanking us? Levi and I shrank back on our haunches behind a boulder, and we waited for the wolves to crest the rise. After a few moments, Levi and I stood again, but the wolves had vanished. I scrutinized each boulder with my binoculars, picked out lichen and cotton grass, but I never saw those wolves again.

Our own camp came back into sight as we headed downstream. We had twenty minutes left, but the other searchers were back early. Tim and Alie stood by our camp kitchen with Jen and Drew. The four of them stood in a circle and stared down into the middle of it. In the centre sat a large, soggy backpack, just like the ones at the camp. Levi and I stepped into the circle, but nobody spoke. Clipped to the outside hung a small beige teddy bear.

George Back, the river's namesake, began his first Arctic mission at the age of 23 when he was appointed lieutenant for John Franklin's first overland expedition. Franklin's men, as part of the push to discover the Northwest Passage, were to descend the Coppermine River, map it, turn east, and map the mainland Arctic coast. He and his men had no experience in overland travel. They could not canoe; they did not know how to hunt or prepare wild meat, yet they were determined to claim the land for England. In the fall of 1821, two years into the journey, Franklin's men ran out of food as they ascended what would later be called the Hood River. They were forced to eat a nearly inedible type of black lichen called "tripe de roche"—rock tripe—which gave them severe stomach cramps. On September 14th, after a month of living off almost nothing, one of the voyageurs presented each man with a small piece of meat he had saved from his allowance. The gift filled the men's eyes with tears. That voyageur was allegedly murdered only a month later by an Iroquois named Michel. After two of the voyageurs "disappeared," Michel returned to camp bearing "wolf meat" which he fed to the starving men. The following week,

On September 14th, after a month of living off almost nothing, one of the voyageurs presented each man with a small piece of meat he had saved from his allowance. The gift filled the men's eyes with tears.



**Back River watershed at midnight**, photograph by Tim Irvin, [www.timirvin.com](http://www.timirvin.com)

Michel was charged with shooting and killing a starving young officer after whom the river was named. At the end of this death march back to Fort Enterprise, Michel himself was executed by the surgeon and naturalist, also starving, who feared for his life.

Franklin's first expedition—three years and almost 9,000 kilometres—was one of the British Navy's most disastrous. Only nine of his twenty men returned with him. But from the Admiralty's point of view at the time, the mission was a success; they came back with a map. Franklin returned to England a hero and received a promotion. The ignorance, starvation, and murder transformed into a victory. There was an alarming gap between the experience and the story.

Three years later, Back joined Franklin for a second overland journey. Their trip down the Mackenzie River was less disastrous, but the relationship between Back and Franklin deteriorated. That was likely a main reason Back did not accompany Franklin on his final and fatal mission in 1845. When he was thirty-six years old, Back took command of his own overland expedition to the river that would bear his name—twelve years before Franklin left on his last voyage.

In July of 1834, after a winter of famine and near starvation conditions, the short and stocky George Back climbed into a 30-foot York-style boat

with his carefully selected crew of nine men. Over the summer and fall he would descend and then ascend the Great Fish River, or Thlew-ee-choh-dezeth, as it was then called by the Chipewyan people in the area.

What kept him going north? Perhaps he didn't know anything else. Or perhaps, when the British Navy was slashed from 150,000 men to 20,000 after Napoleon was defeated, he was simply happy to have a job. Maybe he wanted fame or felt out of place in England. In the end, the north became part of his identity. It has become part of mine, too. But that doesn't mean we understand it.

Alie opened the pack and began lifting out dripping objects. Running shoes, sleeping bag, a paperback, a half-finished knitting project, a wallet, stacks of cotton clothing, and a river stone. Then a journal, still dry. My stomach flipped when Alie opened the cover to reveal loopy blue handwriting.

"Her name is Sarah," Alie said. "Her last entry is from July 14th."

"Six days ago," Levi said.

Alie flipped through the pages and read a few sections, little tidbits about the journey. Enough for us to see she was having fun.

"They left the book at Buliard's cabin on July 10th" said Drew. "We found it on July 12th, but there is no way they could have made it here by the 14th." Sarah hadn't been keeping up with her journal.

Safe inside my tent that night, my mind raced as my body sank into slumber. I wanted to know where those girls thought they were going. How had Sarah imagined this landscape?

The pre-departure imagination determines what you put in your bag. What you pack is a reflection of where you think you are going. My tundra didn't have space for hip waders, fistfuls of colourful underpants, or a romance novel. Maybe the objects we carry help create the landscape for us.

The day after we rooted through Sarah's bag, the men went downstream to scout the river. Drew returned around suppertime with another wet canvas backpack—same writing in black marker, same leather straps to close it. Drew opened the lid to reveal food stores, different from ours. He reached down the side of the pack and unearthed a hard, black waterproof case. Their satellite phone.

The phone deepened our worry, but it also solved our problem. I un-snapped the lid, slid the phone from its foam nest, pushed the power bar, and watched with relief as the service bars came up.

I dialed the RCMP in Yellowknife and managed “Hello?” before we got cut off. The next time, I got out the lines I had been practicing.

“My name is Jennifer Kingsley, and I am travelling with the Irvin group on the Back River in Nunavut. We came upon an abandoned campsite yesterday, and we want to know if you have any information about a group from Camp Widjiwagan.”

“Just a minute, please,” the dispatcher answered.

A moment later, “Jack Kruger here, Yellowknife Search and Rescue.”

I explained our situation: the camp, the search, the abandoned satellite phone, but Kruger hadn’t heard of the girls.

“Call me back at 1900,” said Kruger. “I’ll look into it.”

Jen made supper with one of the girl’s onions—our first fresh vegetable in weeks. My mouth filled with saliva even as a lump swelled in my throat. Nausea rose, and I tried to force it down with reason. *They don’t need it, no matter what happened. You shouldn’t waste it.*

At 1900, I dialed Officer Kruger again.

“Quickly, before I lose you,” he said when the connection finally held, “I talked to the RCMP in Baker Lake, and the campers are all there. They were evacuated on Monday.” The day before we had found the camp.

The line started to crackle. *The girls must have had a satellite beacon.* No time to ask questions, and I couldn’t afford to run the battery down.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Enjoy your trip,” Kruger replied before he cut our contact with the rest of the world.

The next day, we found another personal pack in the river. Further downstream, we found one of their canoes. Waterlogged maps and cameras dangled from the thwarts as we lifted the boat ashore. It had survived twelve kilometres of rapids and Sinclair Falls with hardly a scratch, and it was a perfect copy of the craft Tim and I kneeled in: a red seventeen-foot Esquif Prospecteur made with Royalex™.

“This is getting weird,” Drew said, speaking for all of us.

We crossed paths with those girls so blatantly; we crashed right into their journey. But we were braiding ourselves into other journeys, too. We wondered at the same inukshuks, paddled the same water, and scouted the same rapids as other travelers. We became part of the uneven fabric of that place.

In the summer of 1955, Arthur Moffatt, an avid canoeist and river guide, led five young men, aged 18 to 22 years, on a 1,400 kilometre canoe expedition north on the Dubawnt River, into what is now eastern Nunavut.

Before Moffatt kissed his wife and two daughters goodbye for the summer, he doubled his life insurance policy. He was 36.

It would be a fateful journey that George Grinnell, one of the paddlers, would write about in his book, *A Death on the Barrens*. Before we headed north together for the first time, Levi insisted that we read it as a cautionary tale.

Moffatt ordered all of the provisions and had them shipped to Stony Rapids, but they never arrived, so he scrounged what food he could find from the Hudson's Bay Company store and a local trader. The food was heavy, and there wasn't enough of it. Only tea and sugar were not controlled, and men started wetting their spoons to snag extra sugar crystals. As the summer wore on, the men grew hungry before, during, and after every meal. Hunting kept the party fed through August as supplies ran down. Group dynamics became increasingly strained, and the men grew suspicious of each other. By August 29th, three days before they were due to arrive in Baker Lake, they had travelled barely half the length of the Dubawnt. The men were hungry and hundreds of miles from their destination.

During August, Grinnell began to see the tundra as a Garden of Eden. The blood of the first caribou, the one that saved him from hunger, became the blood of Christ and symbolized a holy communion. By early September, Grinnell entertained thoughts of deserting the expedition and dying alone on the tundra in the arms of "the wonderful mother earth who gives birth to us all." He wrote, "Death in paradise seemed preferable to life in civilization."

The men talked less and took more risks. On September 14th, a few days after the weather had turned cold, all three boats plunged over two sets of waterfalls the paddlers hadn't bothered to scout, and two of the boats capsized. By the time the third boat had dragged everyone back to shore, five of the six men were severely hypothermic. Grinnell managed to unpack a sleeping bag, remove his clothes, and climb inside. Before losing consciousness, he called to Moffatt, "Get undressed and get in this sleeping bag with me," but Moffatt was too cold to move and Grinnell too weak to help him. By the time Grinnell regained consciousness, Moffatt was dead. Grinnell never forgave himself for passing out, near death, in his own sleeping bag.

During August, Grinnell began to see the tundra as a Garden of Eden. The blood of the first caribou, the one that saved him from hunger, became the blood of Christ...

The next day they laid Moffatt's frozen body under an overturned canoe and sprinted, half-starved, the remaining three hundred kilometres to Baker Lake. They ate their last meal on September 23rd, the day before they reached town: the remainder of a jar of curry powder, split five ways.

The Moffatt expedition was clearly unprepared in the material sense. Not enough food—neither in quantity nor quality. There was no satellite technology in those days to provide either the illusion or the reality of decreased risk, but they didn't even bring a radio. And Grinnell considered himself so physically superior to the other men that he didn't bring gloves or a warm sleeping bag.

Grinnell followed Moffatt into the woods "like a caterpillar awaiting its miraculous transmutation into a butterfly." His wilderness ecstasy alternated with panic attacks and deliberations of suicide. He never recovered from the events of that summer, and it took him almost fifty years to write his book. It reads like a psychological thriller.

Perhaps this expedition's first mistake wasn't a lack of material supplies. Maybe it fell victim to its own imagination and stereotypes about the north. There are plenty to choose from: healer, transformer, soul-searcher, provider. I have been tempted by these notions. I wanted the land to absorb Tim's grief and help me encounter the best version of myself.

I spent five years wondering what it was like for the Widjiwagan girls to be in that wilderness. I felt sure they must have been terrified, despite the happy ending (happy, or simply not disastrous?). If the rumours we heard were true, one of the boats dumped, and its occupants climbed out of the river before the rapids. Somewhere in the chaos, the group got split up: some on one side of the river and some on the other. The satellite phone gone, but a satellite beacon strapped to someone or stashed in another pack. Severed from each other by a river that was too frightening to cross, one of them made the decision to follow the instructions on the plastic case: *Remove cover. Push button.* A matter of hours (overnight?) before a helicopter whisked them away.

The story made a small splash in the canoeing community when a paddling magazine published an article criticizing their "\$100,000 rescue" (their evacuation would have been funded by public money) and suggesting that some people should "learn to bowl." A staff member from the camp told Tim that a few days post-evacuation the girls flew back to the tundra to finish their trip, to "bring it home." So maybe the summer adventure was salvaged. At least they all got back in the plane.

Two years after our trip, Alie wrote a story about it, thereby creating the first public distillation of our journey. I got to read about my bluish-purple lips and the big drops of water on my eyelashes the day I dumped my canoe. I read about the abandoned camp and evacuation from her perspective. Mostly, I could match it to my own recollections, but not exactly. No two stories are the same. Two of the campers responded to the story online. The author of the diary thanked us for returning her journal to her, invited us to contact her, and ended with “I’d love to hear more!” The second response was more clipped. She simply said she would like to hear from us and discuss the “actual” experience. What had the “actual” experience become by then?

In early 2010, I called the RCMP in Baker Lake and made a formal request about the events of 2005, but didn’t get any information. I used the names I could decipher from *The Man Who Mapped the Arctic* to track the girls down on Facebook and then email. I got one positive response, but right away something changed. She was going to call me, but then emailed to say she didn’t want to talk anymore. There were aspects of the trip she was not willing to speak about. “Please don’t use my name,” she wrote. No one would answer my messages after that.

Was there a flurry of emails as they consulted each other? What could be so hard to speak about after five years? I imagine a lingering terror or profound embarrassment. I wonder how such an intense experience affected their relationships with each other. Moments on the land, surrounded by weeks of isolation, can become heavy with meaning. They can change the plot. I am left with an invented image of bug-bitten girls, some of them dripping wet, waiting for the helicopter’s whir.

By Day 38 we had reached the final rapid on the Back River. The river, which had grown to more than two kilometres across, squeezed between stone gates barely four hundred metres apart. A black tongue of water flashed steeply into a series of standing waves at least twice my height. After the portage, we stood on the edge of the rock at river left, above a terrifying hole, shouting to be heard.

The next morning, as we headed for the salt of the Arctic Ocean, we spotted three yellow tents, one beige tent, and three canoes off to our left. I heard the woman before I saw her.

“Hi there!” she shouted across the river.

We grew nervous. We had almost forgotten how to greet a stranger and weren’t sure if we wanted to; the solitude had become familiar. We contem-

plated not stopping at all, but the woman was quite insistent. She talked louder than I thought she should.

We changed course and headed in.

“Where are you from!” she called.

As we got closer to her waving arms, I could see they were both wrapped in white gauze. One hand enveloped entirely in a bright mitten, waving.

She chatted but did not refer to her condition. A second woman clambered down from the tents to reach us. This was George Drought’s party, she revealed. Drought is a well-travelled Arctic paddler who had met Levi in Toronto and given him a series of annotated maps. We had followed his arrows and triangles for weeks. That day, he was lying in his tent with severe facial burns and possible lung damage. The woman who greeted us was his wife. Her chattiness a product of morphine.

She and George had been cooking inside their massive beige “tundra tunnel” when the stove caught fire. The fuel bottle exploded before they could back away, and flames melted the woman’s nylon pants and fleece top, severely burning her arms and chest. George took the heat in the face. We arrived an hour later.

The woman who told us the story—while we sat dazed and drifting—was one of their fellow paddlers who also happened to be an emergency

physician. She had been bandaging while someone else arranged for a med-evac. The helicopter would arrive shortly.

After 39 days on the tundra, these were the first people we had seen. If we had arrived two hours later, they would have been gone. We asked what we could do: did they need food? Help carrying

something out? Someone to stay for a while? A phone? The only people who could help them were hundreds of kilometres away and reachable by phone or satellite beacon. As it says in the Widjiwagan newsletter, “Camp is just a phone call away.” Technology can lure us into believing that we aren’t so far away from home after all. Maybe that sense of safety helps to send us north in the first place.

There was nothing to do but keep going.

We stopped for lunch an hour later. We yanked oily cheese and crackers from our lunch barrel as the helicopter flew over our heads.

Out on the land, I crave pure experience. There is plenty of time to think when I get home. That’s when I begin to choose how I will turn my experi-

Technology can lure us into believing that we aren’t so far away from home after all.

ences into story, how I will re-create myself in words. The Dead Girls, the Burnt Lady, the River Itself. I savour the space between an experience and its telling—a shadow time in which I cling to the truth. When the story lives only in my bones.

It took us six weeks to break free of the river, followed by six days wind-bound on a small island. When the wind finally dropped, we made the final dash—110 kilometres in 48 hours—to our pick-up point. We had planned to have a boat from the community of Gjoa Haven come and get us. We called to say the wind had delayed us, and that's when we found out about the ice.

I heard Drew's surprised question through the tent wall: "Do you think it will blow out any time soon?"

At first I thought the ice was already forming in Gjoa Haven, that winter had begun. But during the first week in August, the villagers were still waiting for spring break-up.

"He said that the ice is really late this year," said Drew. "It normally breaks up by August 4th." I laughed. It was August 8th.

No dessert that night. No more extras. Twelve days of food left.

The next day Drew called his dad, Greg, our safety coordinator, and asked him to research options for flying out. We pulled out the girls' phone again. Its one battery still worked, but it wasn't interchangeable with our phone, and it didn't have a spare. The battery signal was already showing one bar out of three. Fortunately (or unfortunately), Levi discovered how to send and receive text messages to conserve our battery, and communication with Greg became part of our routine. Drew let slip that his dad had stopped going to his job at IBM so he could monitor the sea ice and work out the logistics of our exit plan. We started to get daily updates like "Gjoa Harbour 90% coverage, ice 4 ft. thick."

The next morning, sea ice bore down on us from the north. We received another directive from the phone: "Do not attempt to swim to the mainland." I could see the disconnect between Greg's information and ours. He had satellite images and weather reports, and we had our senses and our wits. Our brief and broken conversations were attempts to bridge the gaps between his imagination and our experience, but the gulf was too wide. Yes, we were pinned in by sea ice and unsure how to get home, but we were warm, dry, fed, and not about to make a break for it by swimming. I cringed to think what some of the other parents and partners might be thinking. A text message on dying batteries, no matter how well-crafted, wasn't going to calm anybody. Without the phone, we wouldn't have had to make the choice. The only information would have been whatever we could see.

We talked about the decision for three days until I hated the sound of my own voice, the hollowness of my logic, the repetition of my ideas. Tim hung back a little, and I envied him his disconnect. We volleyed statements back and forth:

“If we don’t get out now, we might not get out at all.”

“You guys can go, but I’m staying.”

During those talks, we were no longer on the tundra. We imagined ourselves home. What if I couldn’t be a bridesmaid at Liann’s wedding in Toronto, just a few days away? My custom-made pale green silk dress—which I couldn’t imagine getting into while I sat on a rock in the long underwear I had been wearing for 53 days straight—would hang forgotten in the bride’s overstuffed closet.

What we had gained in 53 days, a feeling of being fully present—at least in moments—was evaporating. The weather had turned bitterly cold, but even the wind’s tug on my hands and legs couldn’t keep me in the moment. Our phone and our PLB were supposed to be safety measures. They would provide security, both practically and psychologically, but I had never contemplated their true power. They could threaten the very experience we were looking for.

We ended yet another discussion in stalemate. I grabbed the soap and headed to the beach. I stripped my clothes off into a stinky heap and marched into ice water that stabbed my ankles and thighs. Waves splashed the thin skin of my belly and squeezed my lungs and xylophone ribs. I would not let the ocean force me out. I would wash my hair, even as the water cinched a band of steel across my forehead. I tried to relax my neck and stop thinking about home.