



Penny Falls, above Clayoquot Sound, on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, a short, rather steep hike up from the Clayoquot Wilderness Lodge.

Lost Horizons

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Hello, Vertigo, my old friend. I grin nervously at my fellow passengers as the floatplane hefts itself out of the muddy Fraser River and heads toward the snow-capped mountains of Vancouver Island. The pilot gets the ten-seater aloft, banking up by a skating arena built for the 2010 Olympic Games and then over a series of suburban homes set in tidy, fenced-in tracts. No doubt each of the plane's nine passengers has a mix of reasons for leaving all of this behind—the competition and conformity of modern urban life—and heading for an isolated lodge on an estuary in Clayoquot Sound.

My mix feels a bit of a muddle, something I want to sort out in the wilds, away from my always-demanding devices. But first there's the vertigo to weather—the mild nausea, the feeling of spinning and overall unsteadiness. Oy. Eyes forward, I search my brain for some half-remembered trivia, a rosary to dispel my fear of flying in a small plane; Vancouver was named after English naval officer George Vancouver, right? Or was it John? Ringo, maybe? Google won't be at my fingertips where we're going.

Clayoquot—pronounced “clack-watt”—covers 1,000 square miles of land and water, an area half the size of Wales. A part of Canada's only temperate rainforest blankets its islands and the lowlands that border the saltwater inlets and fresh-water rivers. A range of tall mountains, much older than the mainland's Rockies, protects the UNESCO world biosphere reserve, located halfway up the rugged Pacific Coast of Vancouver Island.

Our plane weaves through the peaks, so near-seeming now that they call to mind, to this mind anyway, the mid-Himalayas plane crash that begins *Lost Horizon*. But our landing is gentle. The plane just slips into a fjord turned golden by the afternoon sun. Cupped by mountains, an estuary is dotted with big one-story log buildings and white safari tents on large platforms. My phone has zero bars on it—and I'm thrilled.

The Danish Prince Joachim and his French bride, Princess Marie, spent their honeymoon in seclusion here at the Clayoquot Wilderness Resort—as European tabloid reporters tried, unsuccessfully, to track them down. I'm also here celebrating recent nuptials, though no paparazzi are after my fellow, now husband, and me. And I'm turning 50 in two days, so there's that. Most importantly, we're marking the end of a rough couple of years.

In June 2015, David came home to tell me, in his careful, undramatic way, that apparently there was an unusual growth in his brain. Three months later, a top surgeon removed the tangerine-sized tumor. To prevent its regrowth, David has since endured a long course of chemo, working all the while at a demanding job. Such things as these focus the mind, and after 11 years together, we decided to make our bond official, to do a small, slender gay wedding at San Francisco's City Hall. All of this feels—and is—more important than my hurtling too fast toward 50, but there's still a part of me wanting to tote up the wins and losses to date. This is the muddle I've come here to process.

A wagon pulled by a team of caramel-colored Norwegian draft horses brings us from the dock to the main lodge (con-

structed of logs recovered from the river bottom), where flutes of champagne and sushi rolls await by antique armchairs and lit fireplaces.

This luxe lodge, the unlikely dream of a Canadian financier, Rick Genovese, aspires to be among the world's most ecologically friendly. The son of working-class Italian immigrants from outside Toronto, Genovese came to the Sound to fish and liked the place so much he bought this site, an old gold-mining camp. "We cleaned it up some, and now we have that doctor's goal in mind," he says. "First, do no harm."

And so, he added closed waste and composting systems to keep the resort's pollutants from escaping. After hearing that fish counts in the nearby Bedwell River were low, he invested \$3 million to restore salmon spawning grounds—and the fish counts are now up.

"Basically, I want our guests to fall for this area like I did." And so, in front of an outdoor hearth, the young, eco-minded staff begin signing us up for excursions to see this mostly untouched wilderness up close. A Zodiac trip to see marine wildlife. A surf lesson on an isolated beach.

As we sip champagne, it all feels ultra-civilized, but we're reminded of where we are when we're asked to empty our suitcases of any food since bears will not hesitate to claw their way into our riverside safari tents in search of the same. One of our fellow floatplane passengers, a tall, gregarious blonde from Louisiana, empties enough food from her luggage to nourish herself, easily, for a month.

We're to stay, for the next few days, in an absurdly well-appointed tent worthy of *Out of Africa*, one with an Oriental

rug, carriage bed and antique dresser. (Tents, we're told, because they are more easily removed each winter.) Ours overlooks the place where the river and the sea greet each other, the salty tides that come in and out keeping mosquito counts blessedly low. I wash up, pre-dinner, in an outdoor shower, looking up into some tall conifers, breathing in that loamy smell of decomposing needles. Some of the forest's noises are familiar: crows cawing, woodpeckers rat-tat-tatting away. Others are not. Was that weird keening followed by a coo an owl? Spooky.

We wander over the grounds, coming across a big shipping container that has been perched next to the estuary, given a glass side and converted into a nautical-themed room with a lifejacket from the Queen Mary hung on a wall. At the center is a billiard table with its balls arranged in the customary triangle. "Surreal," David says, and I break. For spectators, we have a pair of black-and-white mergansers who sit across a channel from us on a gravel bed exposed by the low tide.

In the late morning the next day, I find myself belaying up a conifer when halfway up, my arms and nerve both give out. David calls up to me offering encouragement from below. The truth is that for a while, I've been the cheerleader in our twosome. It feels great to have him egging me on, and I nearly get there. (I'm not too proud to admit a guide hoists me the last ten feet.) The reward: some friendly, chipmunk-sized squirrels visit, evidently not yet jaded by frequent contact with humans.

On the day of my birthday, a mountainside hike near the lodge brings about a different kind of challenge. Brain surgery often compromises one's sense of balance, but David adeptly

makes his way through this hike's challenges over a shale field with rocks that give way underfoot, up bits so steep that we need to pull ourselves up by the trailside ropes. At hike's end, we happily stand by the cold spray in front of 50-foot-tall Penny Falls.

"We made it," I say, referring both to the hike and the mainly upward slog from David's operation.

That evening over delicate, citrusy crab ravioli with foraged wild chives and lamb that's been slow-cooked in black garlic and balsamic, we recount the day's adventures: the hike and a surfing lesson. At the meal's close, the Swiss pastry chef serves up a candlelit chocolate cake on a flat rock used as a plate while the kitchen team and other guests sing "Happy Birthday." I often feel awkward when the limelight falls on me, but this evening I think, simply, "Bring it" as I blow out the candles and let the bittersweet chocolaty cake melt on my tongue.

Late that night, the stars wheel above the deck in front of our tent. They come in various colors here, far from any big city's bright lights, and around the Big Dipper and the belted Orion are thousands upon thousands more, less familiar ones. We sit in companionable silence, both of us, I suspect, feeling that peculiarly comforting sensation of minuteness.

There's a brisk headwind coming at us from the ocean, and the swells are such that they lift our inflatable Zodiac motorboat at a 45-degree angle then slam us down. Sheets of cold saltwater soon drench us. Even our seasoned pilot, a built, bearded former barge captain, is concerned.

A nearby sea otter seems less anxious as he lies on his

back among bull-kelp heads, using a rock to open a mussel. Otters here were hunted almost to extinction, but their numbers are recovering thanks to conservation efforts and hunting restrictions. So says our guide, a young woman whose resort name is Baby Giraffe—this because she’s tall and adorably awkward. She tells us the otters spend 90 percent of their lives lying on their backs, floating on this huge waterbed. “Must be nice,” says David, diligent to a fault.

The wind and swells pick up even more, and after some particularly violent slams, our captain decides we’re done seeking out orcas, taking the boat into a sheltered cove. I’m disappointed, but where we head instead is a place I’ve been hearing about since I was a kid growing up in Ontario: the Big Tree Trail on Meares Island.

In the 1980s and ’90s, a ragtag group of environmentalists and local native leaders fought to preserve the old-growth forest on Meares Island, among others. The long-simmering struggle—the so-called War of the Woods—came to a boil in 1993 with what has been called the largest act of civil disobedience in Canadian history (police arrested more than 800 of those blocking the loggers). Baby Giraffe, who grew up around here, remembers that they used her school as a jail after the regular one filled up. But, in the end, the protest worked, and this forest, among others, has been saved.

Today, it’s still home to hundreds of giant red cedar, among them a tree known as the Hanging Garden, a 1,500-plus-year-old colossus with hundreds of ferns and other plants growing on it. No wonder this coast’s indigenous people call the cedar the “tree of life”—traditionally, they made many

uses of the trees, stripping sections of bark to make rope and clothing, taking chunks out of the trees as building materials. “The trees can generally survive these things,” Baby Giraffe says. I think of one of David’s doctors talking about how his brain would rewire after the operation to compensate for the lost bits of his frontal lobe.

Two years ago, after the removal of the tumor in his hospital bed in Redwood City, they asked him a standard test question: Where are you? His reply was St. Pancras; the train station was a place we’d driven past once in a taxi on a trip to London. That was a species of vertigo, too: I worried I’d lost him then.

On the boat ride back, we spot a brown bear with her two cubs on a beach at low tide, the mother turning over stones to feast on barnacles under them. Their eyesight is as poor as their sense of smell is keen, and as the wind is coming off the land, we’re able to bring the boat in close. The cubs are playful, cat-sized, their brown-black fur more lustrous than their mom’s. She lifts her snout and sends her cubs back into the safety of the forest. She continues eating for a bit before following her little ones into the bush.

“You can read the land’s history—where the landslides were, where long gone native villages were—because that’s where the red alders are,” says our guide Jamie during a kayak outing. Bearded, with a gymnast’s body, he’s an amateur botanist and historian who’s nearly completed his design degree at Vancouver’s top art college. “People are proud of Canada with lots of justification. But in this area, there hasn’t been all that much to be proud of.”

He’s speaking about the treatment of the people who

have long occupied this coast, the Nuu-Chah-Nulth, a group famous for its dugout canoes and totem poles. Jamie describes the pre-contact life in such villages, the foods they foraged from these woods, the days-long ceremonies called potlatches in which hosts gave away many of their possessions to guests. The Canadian government banned potlatch festivals for years, he says, and removed children from their families, placing them in Christian religious boarding schools.

The next day, I hear more about how this land's first occupants have fared. The resort often arranges helicopter tours of the area, and a hereditary chief of the Ahousat, one of the tribes of the Nuu-Chah-Nulth nation, joins us on ours. Wearing a T-shirt with a raven totem on it, Maquinna Lewis George is a soft-spoken, dignified man of medium stature. I get into the chopper's front seat, noting with dread the glass bottom below me. I extend my hand to George, seated in the back.

The helicopter goes up over a rise and (gulp) plunges down the other side. "My great-great-grandfather climbed that mountain before making war on another tribe, one that would not share the resources," he says as a bald eagle flies nearby. "He cleansed himself in a lake halfway up. You have a place to do that, where you get your power, but you don't tell others where it is. He prayed on the mountaintop. We won the war and took over their lands—and we took their war song."

The helicopter lands on a gravel creekbed, and holding hands to keep from falling, the Chief and I wade across a swift-flowing channel to the shore. Our bare feet sinking the luxuriant moss, we walk into another old-growth forest and pass a bear den in the hollowed-out base of a red cedar as he

speaks of his own, brutal experience in a residential school. "They wanted to educate the Indian out of you. Or, if not, to beat it out of you."

The tall cedars let sun shafts penetrate the canopy all about us, lending a Cathedral feel to this space. George's grandson, an aspiring photographer, takes shots of the sun-pierced woods while George sings the war song, undeterred by the mosquitoes buzzing about him. It's in a minor chord with about five notes, the lyrics full of long ahs and ohs that are gentle but determined.

I ask him about the Nuu-Chah-Nulth's recent legal victory in its long legal fight to manage the commercial fishery in Clayoquot ("We won round one, but the decision is under appeal") and about the native-owned forestry companies that are taking the lead in a new mode of logging here, one that identifies particular trees to cull, rather than clear-cutting ("Jobs—in fishing and lumber—they're as important to us as to anyone else.")

As a result of the press coverage of the War in the Woods and the UNESCO designation, tourism is up, and George tells me members of his tribe are also increasingly finding jobs in the growing ecotourism sector, leading whale-watching tours and guiding hikes through tribal lands. "We're on the road back," says George. "I mean, we never went away, but our rights, they're beginning to be recognized."

On the floatplane ride back to the City of Vancouver, winds off the Pacific buffet the plane, and the vertigo comes back. In a few minutes, we'll land in the still muddy Fraser and my cell phone will light up with a slew of urgent emails and texts.

A sight out the plane's window helps to distract me from

my stomach's relentless churn while also clarifying what I made of the mental muddle that came along with me on this journey.

Below us, I see a copse of what I now know to be red alders running down a mountainside. Jamie's lesson: The trees have probably grown on the site of a former landslide. Snatches of the lyrics from an old, much-covered Fleetwood Mac song present themselves: "The landslide brought me down... Well, I've been afraid of changing, 'cause I've built my life around you."

The song talks of the growth that can happen after a big crisis, a landslide. I stretch the metaphor a bit, maybe past the breaking point.

Here in Clayoquot, the otters are back from near-extinction caused by the landslide of overhunting. With Genovese's help, the salmon are returning in greater numbers to the Bedwell, a river threatened by runoff from the old mines and the camp that used to sit where the resort now does. Chief George's people are doing their best to recover from and to persist through the ongoing landslide that began for them when the first Europeans, George Vancouver among them, sailed into Clayoquot Sound, bearing their dread guns and diseases.

On the more personal side, two years ago, a landslide hit David—and me. We weren't buried by it, though it felt like a near thing sometimes. I wouldn't have imagined at the time that, under a waterfall's spray, we'd be able to manage a triple celebration of my 50th, of our marriage, of his strong comeback. When we sit under the stars, we know how small, how temporary all our victories are, but that doesn't make them any less sweet.

In the jump seat ahead of me, David's oblivious to my vertigo, unburdened by my rather earnest internal monologue. Instead, he's chatting away with the pilot, evidently enjoying the hell out of the ride.