

Chapter Samples

The Ecosystem Collector

If you look closely at a well-worn pair of field boots, they no doubt show a record of the wild places you most often visited. Nicks, gouges, scrapes, and cuts tell tales of the adventures and landscapes encountered. Muddy lugs, seeds in the laces, wear patterns, inform much about the territory you trod, whether flat, rocky, mucky, weedy, or full of thorns.

On a personal level, boots link the wearer with the outdoor settings they traveled through, and allow us to discover intricate and hidden layers of nature. While just sitting in a corner, they can whisper their stories to us through the memories they bring to mind.

As a lad, my curiosity compelled me to explore the nature of landscapes. Over a lifetime of wandering, many of my boots entered retirement with rips and flapping soles, but I usually kept them around a while for nostalgia's sake. A half-dozen worn-out pairs used to sit idle but not forgotten on the basement stairs. They brought warm feelings to mind when I'd grab a working pair, eager to take them afield.

Those retired boots reminded me of my connections with nature and landscapes in the way they gave me access to the wonders I had seen. The experiences awakened insights and truths about myself and the human condition. They allowed me to step into wild places far away and to explore aging puddles just down the lane. Rugged footwear got me there and back, and I never would have collected so many ecosystems through my wanderings without them.

How is it that some of us find a soothing peace when surrounded by natural landscapes, while others cannot see the proverbial forests—except for the trees? Some don't even see the trees, let alone the bark and leaves. Many do not grasp how the forests connect with other realms of nature and the

complex rhythms of our planet. And how can some remain unimpressed by the wonders in trunks, stems, buds and twigs?

Then too, I have always felt a soothing calm in the sounds of gurgling streams. There I heard the songs of the river stones, telling tales of ancient flows and events along their banks. They sang of all the wild animals that had come by to drink the cool water, swim in the gentle current and nest among the sedges and rushes. The songs told stories of my childhood exploring small creeks, watching frogs, crayfish, and minnows go about their lives.

Years ago, I had a friend who expressed doubts about the enjoyments obtainable from exploring natural places. He asked me, "Who really needs trees all over the hills and valleys? What would be the problem if most of them did not exist?" He had a college education, a professional position in the financial field, and lived as a productive citizen from dense east coast suburbia.

In response to his question, I began enumerating the ecological values of forests and natural landscapes. But soon I realized it did not matter. Nothing I said lessened his preference for a concrete and steel environment where the incessant blinking of mechanical traffic signals maintained order.

The sentiment prevails for many urban dwellers and rural inhabitants alike. They are content with an occasional visit to the local park. Not everyone, though, considers the smell of mowed grass a satisfying nature experience. In fact, many more people than ever are exploring the great outdoors beyond brick-and-mortar enclaves. Comparisons with the Outdoor Foundation's annual participation reports show that outdoor participation has continued to grow at record levels. Most Americans ages six and above took part in a recent outdoor activity. And the total number of nature recreation participants recently grew to over one-and-a-half million.

The number of enthusiasts fifty-five years and older has increased over fourteen percent within the last few years compared with younger people. Perhaps an old saw provides an answer—with age, wisdom may come. Seniors seem to know that as the pressures of modern living have increased, nature experiences help them defuse and maintain a sense of well-being.

Non-seniors in general would likely spend just as much time with nature if it were not for their more schedule-laden lives. That more individuals of all ages are heading into the countryside shows a deep attraction humans have for the natural world.

Sometimes, though, I wondered if non-nature lovers like my former colleague might have thought I needed an intervention. They probably would recommend I undertake a twelve-step program to cure my dependency on natural phenomena. Perhaps they felt I should seek help through group therapy with similarly obsessed souls—those with bramble scratch-tracks on their arms, who itched with poison ivy for another nature-fix. One where they longed to bask in the euphoria of a natural endorphin-high in some remote woody glen.

Though I didn't know of any group program with a name like "Ecological Anonymous," I could imagine myself standing before a crowd, unkempt in muddy hiking boots and tattered field vest. There, at the behest of others, I would search for the magic words of admission that would set me on a fresh path toward a cure from wilderness-addiction. To introduce myself, I might say, "Hello, my name is Joel...and I'm an ecosystem collector."

Like-minded folks in the audience might nod with understanding. They would know what it was like to gouge their skin with needle punctures from the devil's walking stick and locust thorns they stumbled into on their last visit to a nearby forest. Perhaps their responses would sound soothing—"We've been there too, brother, lost amid prickly thickets."

Encouraged, I might confess. “I’m an eco-high freak.” “We all feel your mosquito pains,” they would mutter.

Such encouragement would allow me to continue my confession. “I realize now, ecosystem collecting is a dirty thing to do, sneaking around in muddy places and poking into the private affairs of innocent floral and faunal inhabitants, and then spying on them with a hand lens, binoculars, and plant identification guides.”

Beads of sweat might form on my brow as I admitted to more disturbing behavior. “I’ve hugged trees without their consent...or any regard to their sexual preferences or pronouns.”

The clearing of throats would echo off the stark walls, along with halting whispers.

“I swear, though, it was only to measure their girth and take naked photos for my field investigations— nothing more; I didn’t even publish them on social media for revenge. And my personal relationships with trees meant nothing. Believe me...I did it for science.”

My voice would falter. “Sometimes I...”, then my head bowed— “I...ugh, kidnapped some of nature’s residents as a kid, like fireflies and hellgrammites.” My inner pain would force me to face myself— “And I would...would...”, searching for the right words, hardly able to go on, tears glistening in my eyes. “I held them hostage in glass jars,” I might croak, “...until they died. Or I put pins through their bodies and mounted them on cardboard panels. I made them my personal possessions,” I would wail, acknowledging my guilt as a serial collector.

By now uncomfortable rustlings might spread among the folding chairs. I’d hear shoes scuffle on the hard wooden floor; someone may bend down as though heaving, and another from the back might call out hoarsely, “Me too.”

My head nodded in their direction. “But, as I grew older, I’ve just never been able to stop myself—or hide my

enthusiasm for stalking natural habitats beyond my front door.”

I could picture the empathy in their eyes. They knew what it was like to get a big score—connecting with some rare ecosystem experience. The sympathizers in the audience would know what I meant about the rush that could come from immersing yourself in one of nature’s unique corners, or somewhere down rabbit holes filled with unexpected awe.

Those peers would recognize that enlightenment as attainable from occasionally enveloping themselves in a natural setting. Like me, many could appreciate the flow of energy that pulsed through an ecosystem while we stood at its edge or waded into its heart.

From where did this craving for eco-highs come? I sometimes wondered. I wasn’t sure, but I knew a cure wouldn’t come for a long while—I hadn’t hit rock bottom yet, nor did I even really want to change myself.

...Such feelings kept bringing me back to wild places where I could never remain just a nature-looker. I needed more than merely standing at the perimeter of inspiring places. I felt compelled to enter them and engage all my senses, listening to their sounds, watching and smelling the processes of life there, touching the soil and rocks, and tasting the air and water. More than that, though, I wanted to know why ecosystems thrived where they did, and what makes them persist...

...Such marvelous natural wonders made me want to enter landscapes as an explorer rather than a tourist...but I ran both ways as often as possible. In either case, I hungered for a more intense natural high. And I liked to season my outdoor excursions with some practical knowledge to experience the most emotional nourishment from nature.

Add in a smidgin of reflective thought, a dose of curiosity, and a pinch of spicy adventure, and tasty facets of nature

usually appeared that I never knew existed. I learned early on that nature is abundant with hidden layers of meaning. But uncovering landscape layers requires a good deal of digging and understanding them comes from keen observation.

Plumb nature's layers and you can find clues to the eternal existential questions of who, what, where, when, why and how. When we make our own footprints toward the truth of things and find it, we earn the epiphanies that follow about the world, and ourselves. If we are not willing to accept the truths about our inner self, how can we expect others to take our thoughts about anything seriously?

Not everyone has easy access to nature. But satisfying experiences do not always require going very far from home or taking extraordinary steps to find a suitable level of eco-immersion. Ecosystems come in all sizes, including puddles, springs, and tiny lazy creeks. Dallying among even simple ones can produce a sense of peace and gratitude for those willing to pause awhile outdoors.

Those who cannot access outdoor ecosystems can still find blissful nature. Thousands around the world gain eco-highs with daily nature documentaries, books, movies, and videos from wild places all over the planet. These days we can watch hours of live safaris on websites in real-time, observing wild animals and habitats in the wild. The internet is full of drone excursions that allow viewers to fly through natural landscapes. Live webcams for virtually every type of landscape and habitat are available for observing nature.

Or, you could watch life unfold within a small terrarium, an aquarium, geraniums in a window pot, pet behavior, or a patch of backyard flowers. Some people insist on keeping their homes spotless as a chemistry lab, purged of all life except theirs and a few mammal pets. But if you are not among them, you can enjoy a bit of nature inside by watching a benign little jumping spider stalk an ant on a window jamb, as I am doing right now.

No need to rush to the phone and call “Pest-Control 911,” unless you see an invasion developing. If you feel sweaty about it or have heart palpitations seeing insects, then chances are you are not really a nature lover.

Whether engaging nature in the wild or at home, I prefer to include an encounter in my eco-collection if I have actively gained something meaningful from it. This requires interacting through observations and reflection on how the experience relates to other aspects of life and living.

Meaning might include increased knowledge, new insights, inspiration, gratitude, an uplifted mood providing a sense of wellbeing or adventure. This deeper involvement makes our nature visits worth collecting and turns them into meaningful memories.

With each visit to special places, our subconscious gauges the similarities and differences between them. It finds patterns and makes judgments about the significance of the natural settings investigated. Those of greater significance to us get stored in our long-term memories. We can retrieve them to boost flagging spirits and help us through rough patches in our lives. Additional connections of meaning form with newer nature experiences. If we continue to pay attention, we may find kernels of wisdom about nature, ourselves, and humankind.

More than that, a sense of connection and comprehension may emerge. Epiphanies can clear away confusions the way sunshine evaporates foggy mornings. Such clarity can remind a person how they, too, are an integral part of it all. It can enlighten a troubled mind on how we belong to something much grander, more complex, and wondrous than ourselves, our neighborhood, our worries.

In order to appreciate nature deeply, I found a humble spirit works best, along with a sense of reality as well as compassion. Objectivity can free a mind that is too narrowly focused or emotionally driven. Reason and rational thinking can offer a larger perspective on matters as we search for

pathways to wisdom. But when we arrive at a fork in our path to wisdom, both trails need exploring, for wisdom requires a comparison to gain perspective. And perspective can change minds and the world for the better.

Such cognitive expansion regarding nature goes beyond feelings of nature as cute or superficially entertaining. If watching a shooting star does not make you think about your place in the cosmos, then you are not trying hard enough.

Deeper, richer engagements with the outdoors using knowledge and understanding can temper raw passions. Emotionalism without the braking system afforded by a proper dose of reason neglects a million years of advanced human cognition. This ability involves symbolic thinking, language skills, and memory. Keen short-term memory seems to have been the final critical step toward modern cognition in humans. It is only when it fades that we realize its value.

Cognitive thinking allows the brain to retrieve, process, and hold in mind several chunks of information all at one time to complete a task. This sophisticated type of short-term memory involves the ability to hold something in the mind while one is being distracted by something else. It allows us to invent things, develop sequential steps in a process, find the best solutions, see critical patterns, and change our direction.

We now call it multitasking. And it is crucial for problem solving, strategizing, innovating, and planning. This kind of cognition is challenging for many people today because it requires intentional thinking effort. Lazy thinkers miss out on the more intricate splendors of nature. Most humans embrace routines because they are reliable for delivering familiar results quickly.

It is easier to stick to routine tasks, putting the brain on autopilot, like when you drive your car to work, eat the same food, or take the same walk every day. You think little about the mechanics of the task, letting your subconscious take over.

This is frequently a useful strategy for routines, but wringing higher benefits from wild landscapes and immersive nature experiences requires more. It involves a conscious and deliberative approach involving close observation and contemplation. Richer experiences can come when our cognitive minds become part of the experience...

...Nature can awaken our spirituality so we can find wonder, eureka moments, whimsy, and coincidence on the landscapes we visit. The unexpected is most always our trail-mate. As it turned out, I never joined a support group for nature addicts. I preferred getting hooked on chlorophyll-packed meadows, fresh breezes, mossy slopes, canopied forests, and mysterious watery realms. I never became tired of seeking rocky mountain highs and mind-bending experiences in low-lying meadows....

...Sometimes when one goes afield, it is enough just to pay attention to what is going on around you. Concentrate and engage your senses—sniff the air, listen for natural sounds, move your eyes over the scene, stopping to focus on anything interesting.

Even things that do not appear important may hold surprising secrets if you watch and wait. Feel benign textures—bark, stalks of grass, dew on leaves, a handful of stream water. Follow the contours of buds and twigs, which are as unique for every species as fingerprints are for people. Field guides can help with identifying types of plants and where they live—even in winter. Learn to walk, focus, and think about the living realm you are traversing. ...

...Ecosystem collecting can be habit-forming. Once I started tripping through natural landscapes, nature continued to supply me with regular eco-highs. It was exhilarating to stand ankle-deep before a crowd of spring peepers in a wet meadow on a warm April night. Perhaps

someday you will find yourself in some place similar, and you may feel sufficiently confident to make your confession. Address it to the audience of frogs, toads, and salamanders attentively listening from the water's edge. You might start off with, "Hello, I'm [*your name*], and I'm an ecosystem collector."

Jeepers Creepers—Peepers

Hundreds of them sat in the darkness of a moonless night. Each one tried its best to out-screech all the others. It wasn't me they clamored for, since they all but ignored my presence as I stepped into the soggy depression of an old field. Right away, I could sense lust filled their hearts and possibly rape, though they wouldn't have thought of it that way.

Earlier, the weather radio predicted conditions perfect for a mass gathering after sunset in the wet fields and swales of central Michigan. The area lies within the *Southern Michigan/Northern Indiana Drift Plains (56)* and *Lansing Loamy Plain Ecoregion (56g)*. It consists mostly of gently rolling ground moraines—a blanket of till deposited by a glacier. The terrain comprises hills with well-drained soils alternating with poorly drained depressions.

As I drove into the countryside later, I began hearing the crowd noises a quarter mile away—a cricket-like, soothing backdrop to the otherwise quiet evening. But the intensity and volume increased the closer I drove. A few miles from East Lansing, the landscape seemed filled with alarm clocks going off at once. No longer soothing, the crowd ranted at a high pitch, urgent with its demands.

When I stepped into the shallow patch of water, my ears begged for silence. I stood directly over a bunch of the celebrants in the chill water, my knees bent in the ready

position with my unholstered flashlight clasped in both hands, ready for action.

One perp suddenly screamed from below, and I flicked my flashlight on and fired the beam at my left boot. There he sat, half submerged in the shallow water...a tiny frog. His throat was all bulgy and pulsating, pushing out his signature chant in a strong falsetto. The brown throat with dark wrinkles announced him as a male.

Females had white throats without wrinkles and remained silent. The gals just swished their way past a gauntlet of males—window shopping for love. Males tossed out froggy seduction calls, but for the gals, only the most virtuoso tenor among them would do.

The male at my boot sat perfectly still as he belted out his message with an intensity that seemed impossible for his size, since he was no bigger than the upper half of my thumb.

I reached down, picked him up and examined him. His singing had immediately stopped when I touched him, and he now looked poker-faced at me. His body appeared as though he hadn't worked out in a gym or taken a hike his whole life...kind of flabby in the middle with undeveloped abs.

"So, what's going on here?" I addressed him. "What gives you the right to show up in this swale naked in a Woodstock-like mass gathering? Fess up, are you here intending to perpetrate random sexual activities in public?"

The little fellow just blinked at me, no doubt searching his amphibian mind for a suitable answer. I noticed an inhuman grin smeared across his tight snout and knew he didn't feel like talking. What happens in wet springtime depressions stays in springtime depressions...until the new tadpoles grow up and head out onto the surrounding landscape a few weeks later.

The big black "X" tattooed on his back confirmed him as an eastern chorus frog, *Pseudacris crucifer*. Most everyone who has heard these tiny frogs call on warm April nights knows them as "spring peepers."

I had heard about these characters before but had never been this close to a whole gang of them. For years, every spring, I heard distant puddles full of them singing, their seemingly happy peeping bringing me nostalgic memories of growing up in the countryside. But when amid a clamoring gang of them, curiosity rather than nostalgia held my interest.

This night, a mass of adult males and females, each one spaced a few feet apart, communicated in a language I only partially understood. They had chosen a vernal pool for the party, where males seemed to badger females verbally with incessant come-hither trills for attention.

Gatherings like this commonly occurred across the eastern United States in early spring when the temperatures stayed mild, the wind blew gently and an inch of water lay in small wetlands, pond edges and gravel borrow pits along roadways. Such signals prompted me to grab my field gear and head out into the darkness to surveil the situation.

Once I arrived on the scene, I saw that this gathering involved more than group sex for mere fun but took place for intentional breeding...perfectly legal by the laws of nature. Sometimes I noticed a male bumping another male, pushing a competitor out of his square-foot territory, like a sumo wrestler.

This way a peeper-gal could see his big and beautiful body and judge his strength, the way men flexed their muscles and sucked their bellies in. He had an amazing voice and owned real estate, at least for the next week. He hoped a few fertile females might decide "What a catch." Even better if they sidled over signaling, "I can't wait to have your babies...along with that guy's over there, his by the piece of bark, and the other one next to the skunk cabbage." These gals, you see, were very particular about whom they selected for group sex, accepting only the alpha males.

Some other males called a few feet away from me, but their trills sounded tepid and tentative. I set the frog in my hand where I found him and stepped over to investigate the others.

Not a single flirty female flashed her slim legs at those squeaky low-testosterone dudes.

It seemed almost pitiful to see a gorgeous one-inch lady peeper with silky-smooth skin ignore an off-key crooner. With a bold leg kick, the gals sailed right past these limp-wristed, wet-behind-the ears, weak-voiced, puddle-plopping males.

The breeding females instinctively knew that these wannabe poppa-peepers just did not have the moxie to fertilize more than a few dozen fertilized eggs—hardly qualifying as a legit peeper family. She had plenty of other prospects nearby that could service over three- thousand of the eggs she carried. You go, girl.

“Sorry, guys,” I said to the crooners-without- partners. “Maybe next year. Eat more beetles, ants, flies, and spiders, and stay off the vegetarian diet—it’s not for you.” I smiled, feeling at home dispensing advice to sex-crazed hoppers at this froggy concert who didn’t care a whit that I stood among them.

Though I felt more at peace standing among the frogs, they clamored and screamed out of compulsion. My senses approached overload from the cacophony, the wetness, damp earthy smells, tiny throbbing throats, hordes of little black Xs slipping about the still water, males begging for a hook-up with any female that sauntered by. I felt their urgency; biological imperatives were at stake...no less than the survival of their species.

In a few weeks, the wet patch would dry up, most likely after the tadpoles’ metamorphosis into proper froggies and left the swale. New generations depended on the few weeks of the year when spring rains created similar temporary wet spots on the landscape. Adults had been making hundred-foot journeys to such sex- party venues for millions of years.

I swerved my flashlight around and could see that the vernal pool comprised a half-acre. A field of tall, dry grasses and weeds surrounded it and stretched over a mile in any direction. Bunch grasses and sedges poked up as markers that

helped the male frogs stake out their crooning turf. They would guard them for breeding well into June all over the natural landscapes of eastern America. Though they go dry by summer, until then such pools offer habitat for many forms of life after they accumulate water from spring rains and a high water table.

I had often come across pond edges in the past where female peepers had lain their fertilized eggs. These floated in masses of gelatinous clumps, each surrounding hundreds of dark specks— amphibian eggs basting in the warm waters. Each egg had its own jelly-like wall for added protection within the larger wobbly glob. This told me frogs rather than salamanders had deposited them.

In similar locations, I had seen salamanders deposit eggs without individual gelatinous walls, encasing them all within a common jelly clump. Toads, unlike frogs or salamanders, laid their eggs in long lumpy ropes, translucent and reminiscent of piles of strange intestines lying in the shallows.

All amphibians need a wet environment for breeding. But terrestrial male salamanders and toads usually spend little time in water after mating—they flee the scene as soon as the females lose interest in them. Typical.

Then the females lay their eggs and adult salamanders lope off individually to a local hideout or crack-house—usually the crack is under a rock, root, pile of leaf litter or a muddy bank where they bushwhack prey. Toads are nomads—roaming the landscape with hunting on their minds, mostly for unsuspecting bug and grub victims just out for a pleasant wiggle.

Male spring peepers hang around the wet spots until the gals ignore them and the testosterone juice runs out. Once the big mating party is over for the season, the males typically stagger off to their favorite heap of leaf litter in the uplands. There they sit around sucking bug juice all day and snacking on crispy crickets.

Life isn't always easy for peepers, though. Many predators stalk the pools, looking to land a dinner of frog tartare. Another major hazard, drought, could leave vernal pools baking and drying in the sun.

After the male peepers hop away to commune with nature and sunbathe during their off-season, the females stay around the breeding ponds for up to two weeks. They keep an eye on things, inspecting the nurseries, then laying their jelly-filled packages all over the bed of the shallow pool.

Then, their mission completed, lady-frogs leave the water too, retreating to woods and grasslands for the summer. There they fatten up at their favorite spa retreats near groundwater springs and pond edges.

The gelatinous globs that hold the peeper eggs act like individual trojan horses. When tadpoles hatch, they don't move very much at all for the first two weeks after emerging, spending their time absorbing the remaining yolk from their egg for nutrients. Then they burst out to exploit their puddle's food resources. All the adults had slipped out of town, leaving their squiggly progeny to survive completely on their own in a harsh place. It is the natural way for them—let the little ones raise themselves, like many human parents do these days.

Once the tadpoles chew through their jellied cloaks, they swarm by the hundreds of thousands throughout the pond, gobbling up algae at a furious rate. Gradually they switch to raw meat, munching on tiny crustaceans, protozoa, and other zooplankton.

By July, the tadpoles grow into genuine cartilage-carrying adult peepers and get a hankering to leave their confined pools to seek their fortunes in the greater outdoors like their parents. Puddles soon evaporate, exposing great numbers of late-maturing tadpoles to the harsh sunlight, dehydrating them into crusty lumps of frog jerky.

When the cold days and rains of fall blow in, the vernal pools fill with water again. But the frog's clocks have ticked, and no well-adjusted peeper will venture there with breeding

in mind. Energy reserves now need conserving to survive the coming winter.

Unlike birds and mammals, amphibians cannot regulate their internal temperatures, but rely on basking in the sun to gain enough body heat to drive their metabolism. The peepers grow torpid when the weather turns colder than sunny days can recharge the frogs' daily temperatures. Barely able to move anymore, the frogs cannot even eat as their metabolism ebbs.

Instinctively, they find a safe place to enter a dormant state and pass the cold season. Most peepers and other frogs sit patiently for months under logs, rocks and in loose bark and holes in trees. They cannot dig a burrow, so depend on the hospitality of nature's crevices and hidden places for protection.

Freezing conditions often reach into these cracks and crannies and produce freezing within the bodies of the peepers inside. The skin, muscles, and tissues become stiff with ice crystals, but the frogs rarely die in normal winters—their species has adapted...and therefore will persist.

This is because nature's remedy is to store high concentrations of glucose in the frog's vital organs. When a peeper freezes solid, it will stop breathing, memory cells get erased, and its heart stops beating. It becomes functionally dead, like a Star Wars character frozen in a block of "Carbonite." There, the little frogs spend the long winters, oblivious to the howling winds and frozen landscape above them.

And yet it returns to life when the vernal pools fill again with the arrival of spring. Each April is like a separate lifetime that gets recycled—new scenes, fresh memories, prepping for the next mating convention.

I have often imagined what it is like for a frog when the snow and ice melt away, the weather first warms enough, and its internal clock goes off. Might it sense one day a new drowsy warmth in its chest, where its heart begins to beat, very slowly

at first, then stronger with a new rhythm. Blood flows to its lungs again, allowing the peeper to breathe freely once more after months of holding its breath.

The eyes focus, though at first It sees only a dimly lit blur. Soon, a spark of consciousness descends as the sun's warmth seeps through the skin and penetrates its other organs. Leg muscles twitch slightly, then more urgently as the ice-crystals inside melt.

Finally, dormancy breaks, another spring has arrived, and the great emergence begins. If this is its third or fourth year, it will be the last opportunity for the peeper to breed. The peeper kicks its way out of the winter cleft and begins the trek to the local puddle.

When a male gets there, he searches for a log, stone, or clump of soil to gain height. It will climb on top and sit, winking in the sunlight. He has fully warmed up and can feel the energy flow through his miniature body. Hormones surge, and an urgency builds in his mind, which soon becomes nearly overpowering.

He looks to the left, then the right. Finally, he shifts to face the open water. The urgency is overwhelming now, and he instinctively knows one thing. He knows that now is the time. He takes a great breath, the biggest he ever has for nearly a year. His throat bulges to a third the size of his body. Then suddenly he lets go.

All the waiting, all the suffering through a long frigid winter, and the previous spring when he pushed other tadpoles aside to grab his share of algae and bugs, dodging water birds, wandering turtles and later, a man with a flashlight in the dark. He doesn't care anymore about any of it.

All he feels now is to let loose. He just wants to sing. He must sing, his mind tells him. His song bursts forth then, and he holds it for half a minute. He swallows, then takes another mighty inhale— and sings again his beautiful song.

He directs it to the group of females sitting nearby. Every ounce of energy he has is focused on his song. He sings with a

glorious sense of release. Ahh, he sings. And performs for hours because he must. He is a spring peeper, and he was born to sing.

Riding the Dragon

Laura hovered above the sleeper log with the canoe's bow in the air like a breaching whale. She used her paddle to push us backward off the top. My paddle was too far from the log, so I backstroked rapidly, then side-stroked to keep the current from forcing the stern further sideways.

Our efforts finally moved the canoe upstream until we were off the log, free of its clutches. Then we both stroked hard to maneuver toward the end of the log, slip around it and zoom ahead. The great flow surged ahead, clenching us in its hydraulic grasp. I watched mounds of water flexing and rolling like the massive shoulder muscles of a giant cat from the Pleistocene, come for a visit through a cosmic wormhole.

In the sounds of rushing water, the river seemed to rebuke and snarl at us. I snarled back, letting the adrenaline gallop free while I focused on the next hazard in our path. Laura and our kids remained stoic. I wondered if their calmness prevailed because they trusted me for safe deliverance, or it was due to shock from our peril. I couldn't see their faces to tell.

I had brought my family into many wild places before to teach them about the real world—the good, the bad and the indifferent. Whether it involves other humans or risky environments, you can't take on a devil if you don't know firsthand how it operates.

Bea, however, was not so restrained. She had been vocal about our dismal chances since the moment we launched. At first, every few minutes she demanded I pull the boat over like a taxicab to the curb and let her out. "We can't Mom, there's

no place to land; current's too fast and the banks are too thick with brush."

She was silent for a few minutes, but then she blurted, "I want to go home right now!"

"As soon as we find a spot, we'll try to stop for a breather."

"Joel, drop me off right now, or else."

"It'll be okay." I was emphatic, but a limb scraped the metal boat with a loud screech—it sounded like the river was laughing hysterically.

I hollered at Laura to swerve as a sharp branch loomed toward my mother. The family had enough to worry about, so I kept the thought to myself that if the boat capsized in the middle, no one could simply walk over to the bank and climb out. The current was far too strong for that. It would rush them downstream the way it would any log.

The Batsto had been carrying water and debris through the Pine Barrens for a very long time. I later learned both the river and the withered landscape were places where myths could always find fertile ground. Myths had long thrived there, and their roots went deep. Beyond the handful of all communities, few people found hospitable homes among the odd shaped pines and stunted shrubs of the Pine Barrens. And those that did, who swore by the legends, felt there was something malevolent and unnatural there. This usually involved supernatural entities they believed lurked among the scrub oaks and pines. Most often it was the Jersey Devil they had in mind. When we launched the canoe that morning, I didn't see such a creature sitting on Quaker Bridge. But I saw a raven, I think. And we all know what Poe told us about them.

Most accounts ascribe the origins of the Jersey Devil to 1735, when a Quaker woman from England lived in "The Barrens." After producing twelve children, she made a pact with the Devil to surrender her next one to the demon if he would make it her last birth. It seemed to me a particularly desperate approach to birth control.

As the story goes, she delivered a bouncing infant demon sporting a horse-goat head with horns, bird legs with hooves for feet, claw hands, forked tail and bat-like wings. It was apparently so bouncy that it immediately sprung right out an open window and escaped.

The little devil supposedly thrived among the swamps and contorted vegetation of the barrens. It grew up into a right proper demon, harassing and haunting innocent folk that dared trespass on its turf. People reported many confrontations periodically during the next two centuries. Stories of the Jersey Devil describe red glowing eyes, scales, and fire coming out of its mouth.

Whatever it was, it seemed this malevolent presence had been haunting the region long before settlers arrived. The native American Lenape tribe had another name for the Pine Barrens...“Place of the Dragon.”

They weren't the only ones who used that term. Early Dutch explorers bushwhacked their way through the bleak landscape, noting features and rivers. They called the area “Drake Kill.” In the Dutch language, “Drake” means dragon, and “Kill” is their word for stream and river. Hence, they called the Batsto “Dragon River.”

How curious that English settlers, native Americans, and Dutch explorers during different time periods invoked the name of the same mythical monster—something dragon-like, very similar to...the “Jersey Devil.”

Over the years, people reported the demon getting into chicken coops and farms, destroying crops, and killing animals. Sightings came from at least fifty different towns in the region, where it terrorized residents. Sheriff posses periodically formed to apprehend the creature, and for a time, a \$100,000 bounty was offered for its capture, dead or alive.

Chaos reigned for a week in mid-January 1909, when a veritable plague of Devil sightings occurred throughout southern New Jersey. According to reports, it wreaked havoc upon town folk—attacking trolley cars and people at social

gatherings. Newspapers reported police firing upon it, along with announcements of many school closings, and businesses that shut, their owners too afraid to open their shops.

Mass hysteria and mindless fears were as common back then as they are even today. Irrational beliefs undermine problem-solving and determining root- causes of events. History shows us that once mass hysteria rages, it can quickly damage a promising society— Salem witches, Jonestown in Guyana, “War of the Worlds” radio broadcast, climate change obsession, Covid-19 panic.

At times, however, events may sweep a person helplessly to a conclusion they might never have desired or understood. It is then one might feel victimized by uncontrollable forces. But that never gets one to safety; better to count on skills, wits and perseverance.

We rode the Batsto dragon to an uncertain future, straining to keep the canoe upright. Countless times, I jammed my paddle into the swirling flow and wrenched the shaft toward me, pushing the bow away from a protruding branch that threatened the family. But this allowed the current to snatch the stern instead and swoosh my end sideways.

There were places, though, where the dragon rested, and it was those I sought when my own muscles ached more than I could bear. These were the eddies, where the current swirled back upon itself, producing quiet water. I looked for them on the downstream sides of logs and the inside bends of meanders. I’d angle our way into them for a few moments before shooting out into the rushing current again.

The river was having its way, threatening each moment to sweep one of us out into the current with a protruding branch, or gouge the hull and flip the boat.

We pushed on, constantly shifting strokes and our course in the hyper-flow; it was all we could do. My watch said we had spent two hours dodging obstacles and fighting to stay in the thalweg, but it felt twice as long. Nothing happened in slow-motion the way they show in movies. Time seemed to

move increasingly faster, accelerating with the surging current. Changing scenes flicked past my vision as though we were on a wild rollercoaster to oblivion. Too much was happening in the same moment for my mind to keep up with new corrective actions. At any moment our situation could change dramatically if I faltered or made the wrong move.

The dreary sky cleared, and I began overheating in the hot sun, so I took my tee shirt off. We came around another tight turn where the current pushed the canoe immediately toward the outside bank.

White cedar trees formed a dense phalanx with sharp bayonets of broken, jagged branch stubs thrust toward us. The current, stronger than my strokes, swung the stern against the cedar branches. Immediately I felt a biting pain in my left side and knew one of the ragged spikes just gouged me. I yelled and saw blood gush from the wound; no time to examine the puncture. I furiously draw-stroked to pull the boat away so the others would avoid a similar stabbing.

Laura and I inched the canoe back toward center-channel into the thalweg, where we cannon-balled through a straight section before hurtling into another turn. Ahead, a large log had toppled from the bank and lay across most of the channel, blocking our passage. It wasn't submerged like a sweeper but lay horizontally with a foot of space between the log and the water surface, its trunk thick as a barrel.

"Log!" I yelled to Laura. We started our back-paddling routine, but the current fought us and won. The canoe hit the log sideways with a metallic thump, trapping us lengthwise against it by the thalweg flow. Tons of water pushed against the submerged part of the boat, causing the topside edge to tip dangerously upstream. The enormous force of flowing water tried to pull us under the log in a white froth. In seconds the canoe would swamp like the edge of an empty pot dipped under the surface.

The relentless side pressure on the hull prevented Laura and me from pushing the boat away from the log with our

paddle blades. The top rail of the canoe dipped further toward the flow. I leaned over the upstream side, thrust my blade deep into the current and jammed the end into the sandy channel bottom with the shaft braced tight against the hull.

It held, and the canoe stopped tipping...but only for a handful of seconds. I had just enough time to relax my arm muscles briefly and relieve the burn for a moment. My head filled with the sound of rushing water. It gushed around the paddle shaft, canoe edges, and the mass of limbs and leaves that bobbed in the flow at the end of the log.

Then the force of the current undercut my blade tip and ripped it out of the streambed. Without my tight grip on the shaft, the current would have swept the paddle away and under the boat. Instantly I re-braced the paddle against the gunwale and thrust it deeper into the sandy bottom. It provided leverage to counter the hydraulic pressure, but it succeeded only as long as my strength lasted. I could not overpower the current and hold thousands of gallons of angry water back for long with a wooden stick.

My only option was to relax every few seconds, then jam and pry again, fighting the river and losing each time the current scoured out my blade tip. I glanced sideways at the others. They leaned hard against the side of the boat that chaffed the log and stared with ashen faces at the rushing water creep closer to the canoe's top edge.

I held on and stared at the rising flow relentlessly pounding against the hull. Water churned white with oxygen as though the river was salivating, anticipating its chance to devour us finally. The river no longer gurgled; it roared in our faces.

Fatigue sapped my strength; thoughts became jumbled, insisting I relax my arms for good while my muscles screamed for mercy.

A calmness descended. It tantalized and wooed me to give in— to let go and allow the river to take us where it wanted. I felt a voice— let go...let go now.

The voice was irresistible, but my arms continued to hold the paddle against the gunwale. Now I was fighting not only against the river but also myself. The wound in my side oozed red streaks down my ribs and needed plugging. I felt the paddle loosen in the sandy bottom again...desperate chaos was only a few breaths away.

I peered at my family again. Fear had spread over their faces while they watched rivulets of water leaking into the boat. The top edge of the log lay just above their heads and ranks of branches protruded into the air. Branches, thick with leaves and tangled twigs—almost a wall; but perhaps not an impenetrable wall.

“Laura, Trey, grab hold of those branches sticking from the log above your head and try to hold the boat really tight against the log.” They did, and I resumed prying against the flow. The combined effort was just enough—the top portion of the canoe stayed above the water a little longer. The load on my arm muscles lightened a smidge. The rivulets of water coming over the top slowed to a trickle.

“Now try to pull yourselves and the canoe along the log to the left, toward the bank.”

Seconds passed; I felt the boat slip along the log toward the bank nearly a foot, then it stopped, and I heard both of them grunt.

Trey gasped. “It won’t move—can’t budge it any further.”

I winced and pried harder...no use. What was preventing the canoe from slipping through the water along the log face? I leaned back to look at the tapered stern and saw the end wedged in a crook of a branch stub on the log at the waterline. It seemed the dragon had snagged us with a claw, preventing our escape.

Sweat made my hands slip on the paddle shaft. More water quickly slopped into the boat and soaked my lap. I heard bodies behind me shuffle to avoid getting wet, causing the canoe to wobble, and allowing another bucketful to splash inside.

I held the roiling water at bay for a few more moments. “Trey, see if you can climb up on the log.” He was behind Laura near the front of the canoe and hoisted himself up onto the log.

“Now Laura, throw him the bow line so he can tie off the boat on a limb. Trey, leave some slack in the line and work your way along the top of the log toward me.”

While atop the log, he fastened the line, then gingerly stepped between a network of sharp branches for nearly twenty feet until he reached the point above me at the stern. “Dad, you’re bleeding from your side.”

“I’ll be okay; I need you to take Mom’s paddle and see if you can help me pry the tip of the stern back out of the crook. Maybe then we can move along the log toward the bank. Laura, hand Trey your paddle.”

Trey took it; a moment later he nudged the boat a few inches—not enough to get past the crook in the limb. The current shoved the canoe back against the log. He tried again, “It’s not working Dad.” He was right.

My grip on the slick paddle weakened further, sweat burned my eyes, and the boat started tipping ominously again. More water sloshed inside until a thin curtain of it washed over the rail. In thirty seconds, the added weight of water in the boat would pull us lower, putting the gunwale under water. My mental clock began ticking down, counting the seconds.

“You can do it Son, give it another mighty try, but this time pull the stern back toward where the bow sits.” He did, and I yanked the paddle from the bottom and used the last of my reserves to power stroke the bow forward. With the bracing removed, more water splashed over the side, and I quickly pulled out of the paddle stroke and thrust the blade down again to stop it. The flow was too powerful; I couldn’t hold on for long, just a few seconds more and it would be over—*ten...nine...eight...*

My strength gave out, sucked away by the river. Out of options, I needed to let go, switch attention now to a rescue plan before my family got swept downstream out of sight. An

image flashed in my head of my children floating face-down against the log, while another of us couldn't reach the surface. It felt as though my whole life had coalesced into its final moment of being.

My mind went numb, filled with the incessant river roaring in my ear, surging relentlessly as though bursting from a dam breach. I heard a voice again—"It's done; let go...let go of the paddle.

A great sadness enveloped me that I had failed to save my family. My hands relaxed, but my cramped fingers would not open. Rescuing the others would be impossible if my fingers wouldn't work, and I only had seconds to assess who was in worse jeopardy. I was about to triage my family on the fly while we were still in peril...would we all make it?

"Let G o," the voice called again. Then more urgently..."Let Go, Dad—we're out of the crotch," and it was my son speaking to me.

I blinked and glanced at the stern, saw it was true, and immediately backpaddled. It was a feeble attempt, but the boat inched backward along the log toward the bank, ever so slowly. "Laura, stand up and untie the bow line from the branch above your head where Trey attached it."

She did, and I handed Trey the stern line. "Take this and work your way to the bank while pulling the boat." He crouched and slowly stepped along the log between the branches while I backstroked to move the stern away from the log and toward the bank. My arms responded, feeling like stretched taffy, nearly useless and disconnected from my body. Out of the crotch and thalweg, the stern slid toward the bank as less force pushed against the hull.

When the stern touched the bank, the fast current evaporated, and we sat in a quiet eddy. Trey got back in with the rest of us and everyone took a breath.

We sat quietly in the shade, inches from the brushy growth lining the channel edge. It was so tangled and thick, however, we could not exit the canoe or even see the actual bank. It

didn't matter, because now only slack water lapped against the hull, and we could rest.

I breathed deeply, feeling the tension dissipate. "Is everyone okay?" All but Bea turned and nodded. I saw relief blossom on their faces, but Bea seemed lost in her thousand-yard stare. We drank from our canteens and sat in silence. I closed my eyes and let the burn in my arms slowly ebb away.

But then I became conscious of the pain in my side. I looked at where the dead tree stub had speared me and saw a ragged gash the diameter of a quarter. Blood oozed from it and formed a red trail that ran down and stained my shorts. How deep the wound went, I couldn't tell, nor if a rib had cracked or broken.

Laura looked back at me. "Let me see it."

I twisted my side toward her, and it caused me to wince now that the adrenaline rush no longer masked the pain.

She could see it from the bow. "Ooh, you need to stop the bleeding."

I unzipped my pack and took out a clean red and white bandana—the kind farmers kept in their coveralls. I poured canteen water on it and dabbed the wound. I pressed the wadded cloth tight against the wound for a few minutes. Then I tied my shirt around the bandanna and my chest. We grabbed our paddles and backstroked several canoe lengths upstream and away from the bank. We now had enough room to stroke our way around the log's leaf mass at its far end. Instantly, we entered the thalweg current once again.

The channel remained hemmed-in by dense forest on both sides right up to the water's edge. We sluiced our way downstream as though riding a water slide, then rounded another bend where the river had narrowed and the flow ran faster. Laura and I struggled to keep the correct alignment as the flow swept us toward the outside of the bend, only to find a most unexpected sight.

Standing waist-deep in the channel on the inside bend across from us were two nearly naked people. A young man

and woman of college age were shivering—bare-skinned except for their skimpy swimsuits. The man stood with his arms crossed, hands clasping opposite shoulders, hugging himself. The woman’s black scraggly hair hung straight, as though she had just stepped out of a shower. Both looked more forlorn than lost kittens in a rainstorm. No boat, no life preservers, no equipment, and obviously no idea what to do. Thick brush and trees formed a barrier ten feet behind them and cast shade where they stood in the cold water.

“Oh my gosh,” Laura exclaimed.

“What are they doing here?” Trey asked.

“Looks like they’re in trouble,” I said. The current whisked us faster than a bobsled into the meander.

“Can you help us?” the man pleaded. “We flipped and lost our canoe and all our gear.”

“Please, please,” the woman mewed.

The fast current only afforded a few seconds of view from the moment we saw the couple until we came abreast of them across the channel. I had taken my eyes off the river when I saw them, and now it was all we could do to keep from foundering in the flow. I shouted over to them. “Really sorry; wish we could help—but we have no room and there’s no place we can pull over. We’ll notify someone when we make it out ourselves.

The man nodded. “Okay, thanks.”

“But you gotta’ get out of that cold water quickly—hypothermia comes fast.”

The woman made a bleating sound and seemed about to cry. And that quickly, they were out of sight as the boat swerved into the next turn. I hoped the Jersey Devil hadn’t heard her bleat.

“Poor people,” Laura sighed, shaking her head. “Geez, that’s really awful,” Trey agreed.

Jordon jerked her head and looked at me with eyes wide and brows raised.

I forced a grin, “Everything will be fine, sweetheart.” Bea did not speak but stared off the starboard side with the resigned look of a condemned prisoner about to be executed.

I knew the couple had few options there in the depths of an untamed place, miles from help. They had lost their only transportation. With no warmth, gear, clothing, food, or water, things would worsen for them. Making the most of it, I knew, was in their own hands.

I couldn’t figure out why the pair stood in the water and shade as though waiting for a bus. With April’s chilly water temperatures, they would become hypothermic within less than an hour, unless they exited the water and warmed themselves in the sun. They needed to get out quickly by beating back enough brush to find the bank, then pick their way downstream for miles to Batsto Village.

We continued dealing with our own dilemma. Twenty minutes later, I spotted something else unusual around a broad curve in the river. A sandbar appeared, the only one we’d seen that day. It had formed along the inside edge of the curve where sand had settled out in the slower current next to a high bank. It formed a small beach, plenty wide enough for us and the boat. Even better, the sand extended up and over the bank, providing a view of the distant landscape.

“Head for that bar,” I quickly called to Laura. “Use draw strokes as fast as you can, so we don’t get carried past it.”

We swung the canoe toward the sand, and the current brought us closer in a smooth glide. Seconds later, I heard the pleasing crunch of soft sand under the bow.

We all stepped out, stretching our legs. Exclamations of relief came from Laura and the kids. My mother said nothing and seemed a bit dazed as she scooped out a spot halfway up the sandy bank and plopped herself down.

I noticed her sallow face. “You okay, Mom?” But she didn’t answer, other than a slight nod. I wanted to reassure her again and opened my mouth. But it seemed she wanted to be left alone, so I stepped away.

One by one, the rest of us sat on the sandy bar with our legs stretched out, faces to the sun. Jordon picked up handfuls of sand and let the grains fall through her fingers, as though thrilled it was dry. After a few minutes, Trey soon got up and started exploring, and Jordon followed.

By now it was mid-afternoon, and I felt hungry. “Let’s eat our lunch. It’s probably the only place we’ll find.”

Laura nodded. “Dig out the first-aid kit so we can dress that wound.”

I grunted, now conscious of the pain again, but stood and went over to the boat where I retrieved the daypack and canteens. Laura taped the gouge with gauze and a sterile pad. We all sat in the sand near the water’s edge and had a picnic.

After lunch, I climbed the bank for a look around. It rose a dozen feet in a gentle slope. In every direction, the dense woods had given way to small open stands of pinewoods that dotted the landscape amid head-high scrubby bushes. No trace of human presence—we were alone in a lonely place where the river flowed incessantly below me.

I returned to the beach and sat down, letting my mind drift. The sounds of flowing water began speaking to me as I studied the current. And in its murmurings, I understood why the flow was so fast and full of fury this day.

The weather reports I’d heard before we left home covered the whole Pine Barrens and southern New Jersey regions. But more rain than predicted must have fallen over the Batsto watershed portion. During the night, the river level kept rising from the excess rain in its upstream watershed and feeder creeks. The main channel must have overflowed its banks in the darkness long before we arrived.

The canoe rental owner should have known what was happening in his own watershed. He was in the business of outfitting people where safety is always a concern...running rivers. Only fools take rivers for granted, for they are dynamic, high-energy systems full of huge hydraulic forces—even when not in flood condition.

What mattered now was navigating my family to safety, regardless of what the river threw at us. “Ok, everybody, time to go. Grab your stuff and let’s get back in the boat.”

We pushed off and merged with the current once again. Soon the channel widened and fewer logs and brush-traps blocked our way. With renewed strength, my senses seemed keener to the channel sounds—I could hear nuances now in its gurglings, and patterns to its babblings. They betrayed the river’s hazards like a poker player’s “tells” give away another gambler’s hand.

I knew what to expect now from this river and it hadn’t yet beaten us. Let the dragon’s fury whip at us and the Jersey Devil wreak havoc around our feeble boat—we would handle it.

Laura seemed more relaxed, and our paddling became better synchronized. After a while we entered Batsto Lake, where the current dropped to drifting speed. The tops of the stumps we’d seen on earlier trips had disappeared, submerged in the high water. We had found none of the couple’s gear or their boat. After another half hour of paddling, we reached the boat landing. A handful of people milled about the little beach and picnic area.

With the crunch of sand under the canoe, I heard sighs and exclamations of relief from my family. They made me smile for the first time that day. After they piled out of the boat, they stood in a cluster with their stuff while I pulled the boat up the sandy slope. I retrieved my backpack, flipped the boat over, and walked toward the group.

A young red-haired man about my age came over to us. “I saw you come in; you all didn’t just canoe down the river, did you?” He sounded doubtful.

I nodded. “Yes, that was a nasty trip; river’s at flood stage, and dangerous.”

His eyebrows raised. “Any problems?”

“We passed a couple far upstream who lost their boat and gear. I told them I’d notify someone who could help them.”

“No kidding; how far upriver were they?”

“I’d say at least an hour and a half as the crow flies; they were in pretty poor shape, standing in the water with just their swimsuits. Didn’t see another soul on the river, though.”

The man shook his head. “You sure were lucky. They closed the river and the lake this afternoon, because the water level is way too high.”

“Wish they’d done it before we launched.”

“Guess you aren’t aware that someone drowned up there today because of the dangerous conditions.

My head jerked up then. “That’s terrible, could have been us.” I felt a need to kick something, like the boat rental owner who failed to know the conditions.

The red-headed man said he didn’t know details of the drowning, but he mentioned additional incidents he’d heard about that afternoon. Several canoe parties out on the lake had capsized, swamped their boats, and lost their gear. After he heard about the drowning on the local news, he drove over to check things out himself.

The sun slipped low on the horizon, dark soon. “Well, we’ve got a long drive ahead of us, so we need to get going. But we’d really appreciate it if you know who we might contact around here about the couple we found on the river.”

“Don’t worry about it. I live around here, and I’ll contact our local police. They’ll handle it.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, no problem. I’m going home now, and I’ll call the precinct from there.”

I thanked him, and he turned and began wandering off. The family followed the path to our car. Before following them, I looked toward the upper reach of the lake. My gaze then shifted into the distance far beyond, where the river still flowed...and perhaps a young couple still shivered in cold water, terrified with darkness on the way.

I knew the river would run fast up there for days yet. Then things would return to normal...except for those

whom the river damaged, and those left behind. We were all exhausted, and I needed to get my family home to a familiar and peaceful place. And that remained far away.

I was about to turn and head to the car when I noticed large wings flapping over the water in the distance. It was a raven again, this time flying across the lake, heading upstream. Perhaps it was going to Quaker Bridge. I heard the raven call. Its raucous, throaty hail seemed not so much an admonition this time, but a salute of sorts.

The river, I knew, didn't care about folks or their fears; its power came from impassive natural forces acting upon the landscape. No need for human inventions like demons and dragons to explain its business. Myths and monsters are nature's way of helping humans cope with dangerous and unsettling places when the mind has no rational answers. For some, however, they are the only explanations that seem to make sense when the inexplicable prevails.

When I was young, my father Dick seemed like a monster at times, instilling fear and punishment, then abandonment as though my siblings, mother, and I were trash to be discarded. Dick's tormenting eventually made me stronger, and so did my experiences with nature.

I had seen the best and worst of the Batsto and became bewitched each time for different reasons. I dug the car keys out of my pocket, turned and walked toward the Goose. It was right where we left it, sitting peacefully among some pines, unruffled. The whole family leaned against the doors, their faces drawn, sweat-stained, hair limp, eyes drooping. They looked like weary disaster survivors waiting for extraction from some desperate place. I unlocked the doors, and they all crawled in as though a big featherbed lay inside.

My arms ached on the steering wheel, my back throbbed, and it felt like something was chewing on the wound in my side. I still had hours to drive and bring my family home.