



# In the PINES

By T. Lee Brown

## Podding about

Growing up, summer days are hot in the garden. Mom sends us out to pick pods. Early on come the peas, many of which never make it to the kitchen. My brother and I shell them on the spot and wolf them down raw. Later come the beans in their long, tough cocoons.

In grade school, we learn that whales and dolphins are social mammals who live in hierarchical groups called pods. In middle school, “pod people” becomes a term for the super-popular kids—hierarchical mammals, sure, but it refers to the horror movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (which my parents would never let me watch).

I head south to California for college. Two friends of Mexican descent speak in an exaggerated, fake Spanglish; they make a hilarious comedy duo. From this arises our word for parents, *nos padres*: “the pods.”

Moving back north I make a new friend who is, like me, small and nerdy. We both loved “The Dark

Crystal” when we were kids. Now we call ourselves poddlings, after the movie’s heroic Gelfling puppets.

Eventually I meet a smart, handsome, creative, passionate guy. Apple begets the iPod. My boyfriend buys me a sleek silver one with a whole bunch of memory. I marry him.

What are called food trucks in other cities are called food carts in Portland. Groups of them are called pods. I invite people to Black Tie Food Cart Night at a pod on Hawthorne. We spread lavish tablecloths, silverware, candlesticks. We wear tuxedos and peacock feathers, pop open champagne to go with our fried pies.

Officially, what drives me out of Portland are health problems. (Just between you and me, the city’s evolution into a densely populated hipsterville might’ve been a factor). Among other problems, I have developed a severe mold allergy.

A friend passes, too young. His wife kindly gives us his little R-Pod travel trailer — an escape pod. We live in it, exploring and camping. Eventually we find our dream home in the pines.

Fast-forward four years. A virus spreads throughout the land. An acquaintance asks if we’re looking for “pod partners.” I’m not sure what that means, but my son has a respiratory condition and I’ve got neuroimmune issues, so I say no.

Grandparent-friends use new verbs: podding and bubbling (not to be confused with bubbe-ing). “To pod” means “to get to hug your

grandkids.” It may require becoming a full-time baby-sitter or having your children move in with you.

We visit a podded cousin. She and her pod-pal pile over each other in a frenzy to catch water skippers. I want that for our son: normal, kid-to-kid contact.

I bring it up with a friend in Sisters. It’s like asking someone to the prom (not that I’ve ever asked anyone to the prom). No, they’re not up for podding. My husband’s not keen on it either. I feel deflated but relieved. Managing more vectors sounds stressful.

School ramps up. Now “pod” implies a group of well-off families who’ve hired teachers to educate their children during what used to be the normal school day. Some admire pod-parents for their ingenuity and dedication. Others judge them for adding to the load of inequity that COVID heaps upon lower-income people. I can see both sides.

News comes down the pike: My son’s respiratory condition is no longer

considered high-risk. Kids with similar diagnoses who got COVID didn’t develop severe complications and die. Hallelujah!

I’m pleased but confused. Now can he go to school when it opens up? No; apparently we missed our chance.

For months we’ve been talking about doing DIY nature classes and study groups with a few people. Suddenly one family opts for private-school podding instead. The same day, another announces their move across the country — our oldest friends here, from the days when both our families were “full-timing” in campgrounds and cave grottos. We will miss them greatly.

Before I can process all that, the forest fills with dense smoke. When it lifts, my grown stepdaughter takes a COVID test and comes to visit. Maskless, we gloriously pod with her and her dog. We hug goodbye. Real hugs. Real tears. Then she moves across the country.

Our tiny pod of mother,

father, child has done pretty well this year, considering. Blessed with a home, each other, extended family, friends, community, the deep beauty of nature, we have the sense to be grateful. But it’s been hard.

I wonder if our pod could safely expand to include my pods. They haven’t hugged their grandchild since the third-grade musical at Sisters Elementary School last February. How long ago that feels, back when the whole auditorium, teeming with kids and families, felt like one big pod.

Despite social distancing and political divides, I realize, we still share planet, habitat, DNA, and spirit. We help each other through fire and plague. Podding together in the larger sense brings joy and conflict, along with a sense of gratitude and responsibility.

We all belong to the great pod of humanity. My friends, it is an honor to pod with you here in Sisters Country. May all our pods be healthy, strong, and filled with love.

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**OCT 27 TUES**  
Paulina Springs Books Virtual Event **Books In Common Regional Literary Event Series with John Grisham** Noon. For more information call 541-549-0866 or go to BooksInCommonNW.com.  
Edward Jones Virtual Event **2020 Election: 10 Truths No Matter Who Wins** 5:30 p.m. 25-minute free Zoom class to discuss how the markets have been affected by elections. Pre-register by calling Karen Kassy at 541-549-1866.

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Paulina Springs Books Virtual Event **Books In Common Regional Literary Event Series with Beth Piatote and Sameer Pandya** 6:30 p.m. For more information call 541-549-0866 or go to BooksInCommonNW.com.

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