

River, salmon and whales

a man alone in his kayak



ere on Baker Bay, just inside the Mouth of the Columbia, we are guided by basic currents: past and present, hope and prayers. Here alone: a man, one kayak, silver coursing water. Paddling here alone, ask me what difference peace makes in our lives?

My heart is soaring. A mission proclaimed: to catch a salmon from my kayak, hopefully a mighty Chinook. Certainly, I would settle on a sleek silver salmon, a Coho by another definition. I will paddle several miles to the Hole in the Island, West Sand Island, avoid conflicting currents, boat wakes, and any surging wave over 3 feet in height. Even if a fisherman is lucky enough to hook a salmon, he or she must land the fish into a tipsy craft where freeboard is just inches above the water line. Generally, that

means dropping the flopping desperate salmon between one's legs. There isn't any other place in the kayak. That tail slaps like a strong backhand.

The sun rises, lifting above the dark blue horizon like an effervescent bubble from the deep blue. First rays from the distant fire ball (our mother-father sun) creep, step by step, higher and wider. One can't fully define the colors. Here are a multitude of hues: gold, red, tangerine, pink and lavender. The edges scribe something like the many-hued colors of a great blue heron.

It takes muscle to power a kayak over several miles, particularly if the tide is propelling you backwards. You can do it! It also takes a modicum of coordination. This vessel is tipsy. The thinner and longer a vessel, the more unstable it remains.

Here is a confession: If I can do it, so can you. I have a potter's hands, steady and sure. Beyond the wrist, the rest of the body is more questionable. I was never a com-



A man and his boat with Cape Disappointment in the background.

Photo by David Campiche

petent athlete. I had willpower but dubious coordination. Therefore, if I can steer a kayak across rough water, against flooding water, so can you.

At six in the morning the sea is lying still and flat. There is a 6-knot current, but you can't see it. Certainly you feel it. The surface of the Columbia River has transformed from turbulent water into a mirrored surface. Ricocheting off that glass-like surface, those colors, so hard to define, gloss body and mind like a massage by an angel. Landscape is *raison d'être*. That blitzkrieg of color usurps the mission. Fish or no fish, beauty is enough.

Today, I troll a bright fluorescent spinner. Other times an anchovy. Salmon like anchovy and herring. So do whales. Rumor has it that humpbacks

are plying the river between the Mouth and the "Bridge to Nowhere" (a 1950s aphorism for the second-growth forest at the north end of the Columbia-Pacific Bridge). Perhaps, I will spot one, or, better yet, a pod.

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Whales troll in groups or pods or community. They communicate with pips and squeaks. They even have radar. They're bright, fueled by a large two-compartment brain. One side must stay awake at all times or they drown. They are mammals and require air. Each side of their brain is larger than ours, meaning *Homo sapien's*. Meaning, perhaps, that they are as intelligent, or more so, than we. They don't start wars. They appear not to hate us, us humans, even after all we have done to endanger

them. They always care for their young. And they make beautiful music.

I paddle and troll, the large spinner hopefully seducing an unwary salmon into the bite. But the whales must be communicating with the salmon. Brain power is flooding the mouth of the river. The salmon aren't biting artificial lures, at least not mime.

I paddle on; paddle on and on and on. Meanwhile, the sun is rising. What colors now, you Picasso? Let's call this flood of blues and silvers a kaleidoscope of color, a hundred hues of ultramarine and quicksilver and chrome. Mostly, the reds have deserted us.

On and on and on! No fish. A soft wind is pulled in with the flood tide. The mirror of water turns choppy. I paddle

on, out of the Hole in the Island, out into the channel of the Columbia, out along the south side of Sand Island and finally, into a throat of water that leads to the Port of Ilwaco, or, in this case, just short, into a slough that will land me and my boat at China Beach, a jewel in the crown. The tide begins to ebb.

The Chinook camped here. It was easy access to the ocean. Otters frolicked. Salmon were as thick as syrup. It is easy to imagine their contentment. What tribe of people ever choose an existence so interlocked with the sea? Were they more content than I am today? Answer me those questions, please.

No fish. So what? Along the shoreline an eagle rises into an updraft. Hardly moving a wing, it lifts skyward. Oh, so soft, so magnificent. Geese scatter. I like that word: scatter.

I dip my hand into silky ebbing water. Feel the tug of the current. It is shallow below me. Just under the water surface, long tendril-like grasses sway with the ebb, being pulled oceanward. I think of Ophelia in "Hamlet," drowned, her hair unleashed and dancing with the flow of water.

Wind scatters clouds. Ripples waves and tide. Tousles my hair. And there, a mile away (over my shoulder), the spout of many whales. Anchovy are scattering frantically. So are the sea birds. Scattering. Out the blowhole, water lifts and drifts like steam. Let the autumn wind scatter our dreams like that, just like that! Today, I feel so free.

Coastal Life

Story by DAVID CAMPICHE