



Gorden Schweers

**LOVING
FRIENDS**

A true story

Even though the incident could have cost us our lives, my friend maintained it was the one event that precipitated his conversion to Islam. For a start, I was careless in preparing for the journey we would share. My old canoe was strapped to the roof of my brother's Land Rover. The two paddles that would help propel us up the inlet on Easter weekend were stored in the back of the jeep. And that was it. I deemed no other provisions necessary for our short excursion starting off from the wharf at Belcarra Park. Finally, in the early morning, my friend arrived out of breath, having ridden his ten speed down the Barnet Highway to our rendezvous point in Port Moody.

As students, we were enrolled in Simon Fraser, a university perched like a modern citadel atop a mountain on the outskirts of the city. While devoting hours preparing

for exams I barely managed to pass, my concentration was distracted by the expanse of scenery. The view to the north was Indian Arm, a sliver of salt water confined by the colossal flanks of forested mountains. At one point while we sat on benches outside to eat our lunch between classes, I convinced my friend we should canoe up the inlet together, for one last trip, before the semester was over and our lives went their separate directions. He had lifted his gaze in the direction of the inlet and said noncommittally, "Yes, it's beautiful, isn't it."

However he kept our appointment, arriving at the end of the driveway with his pants banded tightly at the ankle to prevent the bike chain from attaching itself to his cuffs. To reach us, he had to cycle past the refinery and with that in mind the first thing he said was, "That place reeks, doesn't it!"

Yes, he had a point. When passing the huge complex of pipes and storage tanks, at any time of day or night, a toxic vapor drifted through the chain link fences and filled the air with its poison. Yet the product was that rare and precious commodity - *Gasoline*- which was vital to the present World Order. We were reminded in so many ways - from the supermarkets stocked with every food imaginable; to the military transports which seemed to hang motionless in the sky far above us on clear days - that the very product making the world possible as we knew it was also taking our planet on a death march towards extinction. But in less than an hour, we had unloaded the canoe and were paddling away from the old wharf.

My brother shouted after us that he would be back to pick us up before it got dark. That left us with about six hours: *three hours*

up the inlet and three for the return trip. My friend was heavier than myself so he took the stern position and looked quite noble kneeling down with the paddle slicing the crystal clear water in a steady rhythm. I of course paddled on the opposite side to counter balance our weight distribution. Below the bow where I knelt, a depthless azure enabled us to glide across an ethereal mirage. We both fell silent and listened in reverence to the sound of our own paddling and the cries of a few birds in the inlet. Then my friend conceded, "This really is wonderful." And I spoke too, almost in a whisper, over my shoulder, "It's incredible."

On all sides mountains jostled upwards in majesty as we rowed deeper in to our wilderness. As far as we could focus, the glittering surface of the waves enticed our bow towards the glacial river at the narrow

impasse at the end of the inlet. Periodically we exchanged a few words, about our futures and the indecisive goals we shared as young graduates. More than we cared to discuss, the diplomas stamped with a wax seal meant the bond we had forged for four years in college would soon be severed. Our friendship might end forever. Yet the deeper we glided in to the inlet, the less those apprehensions were of any consequence. The mountains surrounding our excursion stretched as a solid chain for hundreds of miles as far north as Mount St. Elias, straddling the borders between Alaska and British Columbia. Deep now in the fiord, we stared in awe at the peaks that spiraled above our inconsequential lives. At one point we stopped paddling and sat with our eyes turned upwards as an eagle gyrated high above us on the warm updrafts. I heard my friend take a long and

lasting breath. Both of us needed this journey to revitalize our spirits. But I had a surprise waiting for him around the next spit of land. I dug my paddle in forcefully as we circled around a bluff where a cliff opened on a vertical schist. Cascading down the bare face of a rock wall, a waterfall was hurtling in to the ocean with a steady roar. My friend let out a war whoop when he saw the falls for the first time, raising the paddle over his head. "We can go in," I cried back, "it's safe."

As we approached, the thunder of the falls inundated us with the joy of the earth itself. We made landfall on a flat rock face and stood shoulder to shoulder, looking up at the waterfall and the rainbow that crowned the summit. My friend tapped me on the shoulder. "Time to toke up," he said. We scrambled back in to the canoe and sat facing each other, passing the intoxicating

cannabis back and forth, each of us holding our breath until our lungs and blood streams were saturated. “This is great stuff,” I gasped. “Outstanding,” my friend replied. Then we began to paddle again, heading deeper in to the inlet. Though our *three hours* were over, we had become *Coeur de bois*, those courageous men who had conquered the vast regions of our country for a new nation, a new Canada. Our little wood ribbed canoe was our magic carpet. Every incision of our paddles pulled us deeper in to the realm of a profound absolute. Though distracted, we slowly became aware that the sun was retiring, poised like some Hercules holding two peaks apart. “We should turn back”, I concluded reluctantly.

Night overcame our journey in the hour that followed. The waves around us pitched and became as volatile as molten

cobalt. With the darkness, an inversion of cold air wailed down from the pinnacles with the determination of an avalanche. Trapped, our frail canoe was in immanent peril. The sirens of the wind in the cedars and the noise of the sea thrashing at ramparts of granite drove away the silence of nature. Our plight increased as the moon asserted her control over the earth's tides, commanding the deep undercurrents to return in a frenzy towards the open depths. Overhead, clouds unraveled across the sky like skeins of grey tissue. "What the hell is happening," my friend shouted above the wind. "I don't know," I called over my shoulder, paddling frantically as we slide between the tops of white crests and the bottom of an abyss. Behind my back, I heard my friend curse the stupidity that had encouraged him to partake in such a bogus pilgrimage. But there was little time

for regrets. At any moment our canoe could broach, tossing us down to the bottom of a cold unmarked grave. Instead it reared, shuddered, and rolled as if we were clinging to the back of a mythic beast.

Just when the situation seemed hopeless, we managed to sweep around a headland, yelling instructions between ourselves to keep from losing control. Inexplicably we were in an enclosed bay and the wind had calmed. This is where the temple appeared. Both of us sat back in the canoe in disbelief. Above us, upon a carapace of rock on a natural plateau, a pantheon of light stood alone in the darkness. "What is it?" I finally whispered in the darkness. Silence. Then my friend replied, "We should keep going."

In another two hours, we gained the refuge of Deep Cove. For a minute or two, we stood off from the marina floats as they

rebounded on the waves and then we leapt to safety at the same moment. Impossible as it seemed, we had survived the storm. A few weeks later we parted at graduation but our friendship continued. Without fail, my friend's letters written in flawless calligraphy flew across the continents like a warm embrace. He wrote as such:-

My Dearest Friend Gorden -

I am grateful to hear from you once again. The forests of your province are unique, as were the times we shared together when we were young. Like you, I have asked myself many many times what that temple was, and why it was there on that terrible night. After years of diligent study I have

discovered the answer. Here for you, my friend, is the truth:

The temple is the gift Allah gives as hope and salvation to those who are lost.

I remain your loving friend-

Mustafa Umar Ali

Before I had the chance to respond, I received news of his death in Mecca. Seeing my tears, my wife said, "Don't worry, you'll have another friend."

No.