



• SOURDOUGH CHRONICLES •

LIFE IN THE WOODS

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It is early spring in the Yukon. Not too far from Whitehorse, on the sloped south side of what we call McClintock Mountain (not the peak's real name, but the one of my youth), my younger brother, John, my boyfriend, Rob, and I are receiving a detailed explanation on how to fall a larger-than-usual spruce tree.

"It should fall exactly where you determine it should go," my father explains with little patience. From where I stand, the direction of the tree in relation to our Ford Bronco looks like a definite route of connection.

"Dad, would you like me to move the Bronco?"

I ask in a very quiet voice. I get *the* look.

"Listen to me. You undercut here and you slip it back this way. It will go where I have told you it will go!" he replies hastily.

Okey-dokey. Not another word is spoken as the chainsaw rips into the old spruce's heart. Spruce pitch scents the hot, dusty air. I glance up and see the blue sky defining the dark green spruce tops. Like us, the birds are quiet. I imagine they are holding their breath, as well. A loud crack rings out from the big spruce, causing even the squirrels to hush with anticipation. The tree falls slowly sideways, *exactly* the way my father said it would go. I let out my breath and glance over at my dad. He is standing with a smile on his face. The tree picks up speed and falls directly toward the road that takes us off the mountain.

Suddenly, the tree twists and with a vicious slam of defiance lands directly across the top of my dad's Bronco. The sky has taken on another hue of blue. We scatter through the trees to wait out the storm.

There is no fixing this vehicle. The heavy green log crashed through the roof and now sits atop the doorframe. We chain the destructive log behind Rob's truck and head down the mountain to Marsh Lake. Removal of the Bronco will come later.

It is the late 1970s and my parents secured a recreational property lease from the Yukon Government. The land sits at the mouth of McClintock River and Marsh Lake. In order to secure title, improvements had to be made to the lot. Previous owners determined it was too much effort, and we took up the challenge. It is a crazy amount of work. With no extra money, we log trees from the mountain and drag them one by one to the property.

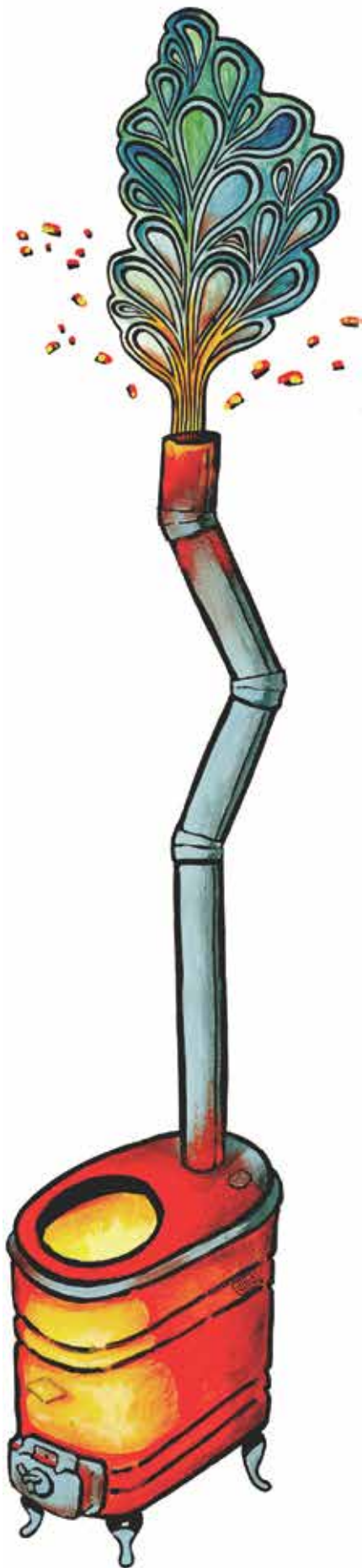
WE FEEL SECURE THAT OUR STOVE AND CANVAS WALLS WILL KEEP OLD MAN WINTER'S ICY FINGERS AND -40°C BREATH AT BAY.

An outhouse is the first and most necessary building. It is beautifully built with hand-scribed logs and a hardwood floor. The hardwood floors are recycled from a Whitehorse gymnasium. A second log building, constructed on the banks of the McClintock River, later becomes the summer social hub at Marsh Lake. That fall and early winter, it will be repurposed as our bathhouse and sauna.

Rob and I originally planned to build a small log cabin to live in. That is now a distant dream. It has taken most of the spring to erect the outhouse and the sauna. Plus, we both work in the city, and at the time the Alaska Highway is only paved from the Carcross cutoff to Whitehorse. It is at least an hour to work each day and the same time back. And even the days in the land of the Midnight Sun are simply not long enough.

The quality of a McPherson tent is well-known throughout the North. Rob and I go all out and buy a 12 x 14 tent for our new home. Heavy canvas is secured with a spruce ridgepole, while smaller poles are used to hold down the sides and maintain shape. Set on a wooden platform, the cream-coloured tent forms the contour of a small cabin. A hole is cut in the top to vent our tin stove—the infamous "hippy killer stove," which is known to plug up quickly with creosote and start fires. We feel secure that our stove and canvas walls will keep Old Man Winter's icy fingers and -40°C breath at bay.

We find an old bedframe with springs to hold our foam mattress. Keeping off the floor helps fight the cold and rodents aren't as likely to run through your hair looking for a warm nest. Sturdy shelves hold our food supplies. (We have a cache in the trees for keeping meat out of the tent because I don't want to be bear bait.) A kerosene lantern will light the long winter nights. With our camp set up, we continue hand logging at the mountain for the rest of that summer.



EVERYTHING TWO FEET AWAY FROM THE STOVE IS FROZEN, YET EVERYTHING WITHIN THE TWO-FOOT RANGE IS COOKED. WE CAN'T WIN AND ARE WORN OUT BY THE NEED TO FEED THE MONSTROUS APPETITE OF THIS LITTLE TIN CAN.

In the 1970s, it isn't legal to live at Marsh Lake for more than six consecutive months. The area is zoned recreational to avoid long-term residents squatting along the banks of the river or lake. There is no electricity, the water source is the lake or river, and sewage treatment is an outhouse.

After Labour Day, we've been deserted and all that's left for company is a few critters. Squirrels have gone from being entertaining to a nuisance. We feed them peanut butter and they in turn rip apart supplies and pull insulation from between the logs. They are essentially cute tree rats.

I love the sauna on the bank of the McClintock River. We stoke the fire to the point of unbearable, work up a sweat, and jump through thin ice into the freezing water. A few duck hunters in parkas surprise us, coming around the point from the mouth of the river. They in turn are surprised to find two naked swimmers in the icy McClintock. We need them to move on quickly—the heat from the sauna doesn't last forever—or we'll have to streak for the warmth of the tent. We were strong and free.

Then comes the dark and miserable Yukon winter. Cold-temperature records are broken daily: -38°C , -40°C , -42°C . CBC Radio faithfully announces another dangerously cold day. Rob can no longer work as a carpenter, so we talk of heading to Alberta for work.

The tin cap on top of our little stove begins to burp, rattle, and pop with heat. The length of chimney near the top of the stove glows red, signaling it's time to slow the stove down. We've resorted to burning green wood with the dry to slow the heat down in the thin, tin stove, but now we're concerned about creosote build up and fire. Everything two feet away from the stove is frozen, yet everything within the two-foot

range is cooked. We can't win and are worn out by the need to feed the monstrous appetite of this little tin can. Freezing to death will be the result should we not fill the maw of the monster every two hours.

Eventually, we decide it is time to move on. We can do nothing more to maintain a livable heat in this canvas cabin, other than buy a better stove, which we are not inclined to do.

The banging of the stovetop lid is driving us nuts. We both turn to the stove, and to our horror the entire chimney is brilliant red. The chimney shoots red sparks high into the sky that fall back on our precious canvas tent. With the kerosene lantern in hand, Rob grabs two pails and runs for the river. I throw snow with a shovel onto the chimney and canvas exterior. In record time Rob busts through the ice from our swimming hole, fills the buckets, and races back. The water sizzles on the embers.

It's -48°C as we stand back and survey our blackened and ice-covered home. The North and Old Man Winter have won. We load our few belongings into the truck and head for the safety and warmth of Whitehorse. We will head south down the highway in a few days. But in the spring we'll return. Spring brings new life and energy. We'll do it better next time. **Y**