

On Lummi Island, Washington with Cynthia Poppe

The Otter Invasion

On Solstice the snows began. I parked my little GEO up the hill and around the bend, at my good neighbors. They call me their living barometer. Whenever they come home to find my car in their generous parking area they know there is to be weather. My little car would hardly negotiate the long steep driveway up and out of my place with even a dusting of snow. I usually don't appreciate getting stuck.

The day before Christmas we were already under a nice blanket of snow - most exciting and equally unusual for the San Juan Islands of the Pacific Northwest. If we get three inches of snow in any given year that's a lot of snow. The good neighbors were able provide a trusty, albeit rusty, old wooden sled, removed from a hook in their old shed out back, covered with cobwebs and good memories. The makings of one fine Christmas dinner were strapped upon this once cherished toy. Soon I was off in the silence of nature careening a way down that steep, snow covered drive to my cozy little cabin on the beach.

This sled proved quite a pal as the snow continued to accumulate day by day. It provided transport of a few necessities, and lent more than a few slick moves down the steepest part of the driveway. That is until I brilliantly tried to sled downhill headfirst, and promptly ended up in a snow bank, stuffed like last weeks turkey; the white stuff cooling off my neck, and quickly dripping down my back. It was a mad dash to the solace of the wood stove and soon out of the long johns.

The biggest dilemma of the unlikely snow storms arrived at about three in the morning. A family of river otters didn't waste time taking delight in a little holiday cheer once they'd moved into the crawl space below my humble beachside abode. And so it was. What in ever were they up to? What's next I wondered ? Oh Otters may be awful cute, playful, furry critters, but as a neighbor they can raise a big stink. Literally. If they decided to nest below, I'd be the one moving out.

First thing the next morning the Department of Fish and Wildlife was consulted for clever ideas to convince these Otters to move on. Well, these guys got all philosophical on me, pondering things like who was there first - the Otters, the beach front, or that little cabin? They did suggest that noise might chase them off and said I could try stomping around on the floor, and play lots of loud music. However, they

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cautioned me not to play Garth Brooks or Lyle Lovett or - they guaranteed - I'd never get rid of them! Honest. Those guys were about as obnoxious as the Otters!

I gave in to the hope that just maybe this mischievous little family of otters would merely weather the storm below, and be on their way, back in the bay, once the snows melted.

Not surprisingly nature broke a few more records the following night, dumping an unprecedented five feet of snow, sporting six to eight foot drifts. As Whatcom County seldom has snow enough to warrant more than a couple of plows, the entire county was shut down! We Islanders, small community that we are, are the last on the list for assistance. This kind of weather is unheard of in the San Juan Islands. Each time I got up to stoke the wood stove through the night, I had to open the front door to push back the quickly accumulating snow or, by morning, I'd have been literally snowed inside.

On "The Day of the Drifts" the Otters demonstrated the finer techniques of sliding in the snow. A few feet from the house, near the entrance to our "Winter Chalet" a drift nearly six feet high provided hours of fun as this Otter family of three slid down nearly into the bay - depending on the tides - only to climb out to do it again, and again, and again. I took notes. Somehow they never ended up headfirst in a snowbank. What were a playful delight to observe.

Warm and cozy inside I sat sipping hot chocolate, listening to Garth and Lyle. I even cracked the front window open just a little to share the tunes. Smiling, I thoroughly enjoyed some true entertainment.

On one struggle through the thigh high snow and drifts to dig out the tarp covered wood pile, I discovered some rather odd tracks in the snow. Otter tracks. It looked as though someone on a heavy, wide, square ski had glided through the snow leaving the consistent swirl mark of a tail behind. Here and there a perfectly round hole appeared in a drift. The otters apparently looking for direction, would pop their heads up through a leaving a perfectly round hole in the snow behind drift, for a good look around.

Just as they pop their heads up out of the water, just off shore, when they are playfully taking a good look at you. Later that night I discovered that otters are prone to domestic disputes, or perhaps they just had a little cabin fever. Once again I was startled awake by what sounded to be a terrific, distant cat fight. My kitties were with me. With some sound eavesdropping, it quickly became apparent - the otters were

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having a pugnacious dispute. I was tempted to stomp around on the floor, and play Frank Zappa real loud to hush them up. But in order to handle Frank Zappa at even one decibel, I'd be forced to open the front door and swap wood stove warmed air for the chill of the night.

Suddenly it occurred to me - Pavarotti would be perfect. Undoubtedly Pavarotti would even melt some snow! Okay so maybe I was getting a little cabin fevered too. Nonetheless I was off to the stereo; thankful the electricity hadn't gone out as is wont on this island during weather. A quick search through my tiny collection of CD's produced a favorite. Surely Puccini's greatest love songs, presented by the gifts of Pavarotti, would appease these cantankerous neighbors below.

A rich multicultural/critter experience it was. Soon we all melted into the power and poignancy of Pavarotti. Who wouldn't be altered by the marvelous tenor purity? The otters settled down. Peace returned. You can bet I didn't wait to report that to those guys down at the Department of Fish and Wildlife.

As quickly as the snows had quickly appeared; they as quickly disappeared. We Islanders and the Lummi Nation became a new kind of stranded in the melted snows and rain, the minor, albeit effective, flooding that followed the snow.

But that is another story. Although I do miss the wonder of them - the Otters continue to carry on - - somewhere else! Yes! Life goes on. What I will remember best of that holiday storm is the majestic power of nature. My most treasured gift of the season was had standing mid-thigh in the brilliance of the glistening snow. In the silence of nature, I watched, mesmerized, feeling blessed and awe-struck as a pod of Orca Whales leisurely swam by.

My. Oh my.

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