



*Rebirth beside the Baltic Sea*

ROB ROGERS

AFTER MANY RECENT agonizing, endless nights, there is something truly breathtaking about remaining awake until shortly before midnight, lying on a cracked wooden bench, and staring past a campfire at a not-yet-set sun beside a fjord in the Stockholm Archipelago, wearing little other than my hiking boots and a content smile. The summer solstice is hours away, and this is how I've chosen to celebrate. My tent lies mere feet behind me in the lone patch of grass on a small rocky outcropping at my campsite on Bogesund Island, beside a majestic pine that must be centuries old. Below me the ducks are still bickering, jockeying for position on the stony slope below my fire, occasionally taking turns diving into the bladder kelp to hunt for snacks. Pairs of swans occasionally pass, barely visible in the distance past the crackling flames consuming my firewood. Otherwise, all is still and silent. My heart taps a rhythm as a breeze gently strokes my hair and bare skin. If I had to travel this far to begin the next chapter of my life, it was well worth the effort.

Several miles away, my wife and daughter slumber in a rented flat near the harbor in Vaxholm, where I stayed the past two nights. I'm here with their blessing. I recently rediscovered backpacking, at least for a night or two at a time, and as much as they enjoy

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hiking, they prefer to enjoy sunsets within a comfortable distance of flushing toilets, wireless internet, and box spring mattresses. They leave backcountry camping to me, and they don't exactly feel cheated. After all, as I would learn the next morning, they gazed from their patio upon the same rainbow diving into the same brackish sea that I enjoyed from my campsite, and they didn't have to lug twenty-five pounds on their back through rain to see it. But they were not able to take cellphone snapshots of swans swimming at the toes of the rainbow dipping into the Baltic, and they couldn't hear the horses on the field across the bay whinny while grazing beneath its colors.

Sadly, they can't appreciate the most fulfilling lesson I've learned since strapping on my backpack six months ago for the first time since adolescence. The purest joy of a summer evening—especially one that barely fades into a moonlit night—can only be found in primitive surroundings, far from plastic, plaster, and electricity, where the only animals to be heard don't have surnames.

Reluctantly, I will eventually retire to my tent. The rain cover has been rolled back, and the sky is visible through the mesh that will shield me from the morning dew. Inside my cloth castle, I'll be able to gaze up at the majestic pine as I surrender to slumber, as I've learned to stare through the embracing arms of live oaks in the forests near my central Florida home. But here in the far north,

where endless days barely yield to stars and darkness, the summer is different. The relentlessness of the light is inspiring, even if it makes it a bit harder to fall asleep.



Although the sun will rise in fewer than five hours, I doubt I'll sleep less than I have lately, even if I leave my tent before dawn. It's been more than six months since I've slept more than five hours in any given evening. It's just one of many challenges that my family and I have adapted to recently.

Long ago, growing pains and, shall we say, less than ideal personal eccentricities had culminated during law school with crises and questions about my will to live, most acutely on one particular sleepless night. Residential mental health treatment followed, and, although it delayed my return to law school and complicated the beginning of my legal career because of bureaucratic nuisances imposed by a presumably well-meaning state bar association, treatment led to a rebirth of sorts. I was introduced to previously foreign concepts like contentment and self-soothing, and I began feeling self-esteem for the first time. An insatiable appetite to learn eventually pulled me back to law school, and the greater focus afforded by the removal of mental health distractions led to academic achievement and the foundation for a successful legal career. Meeting the right woman who

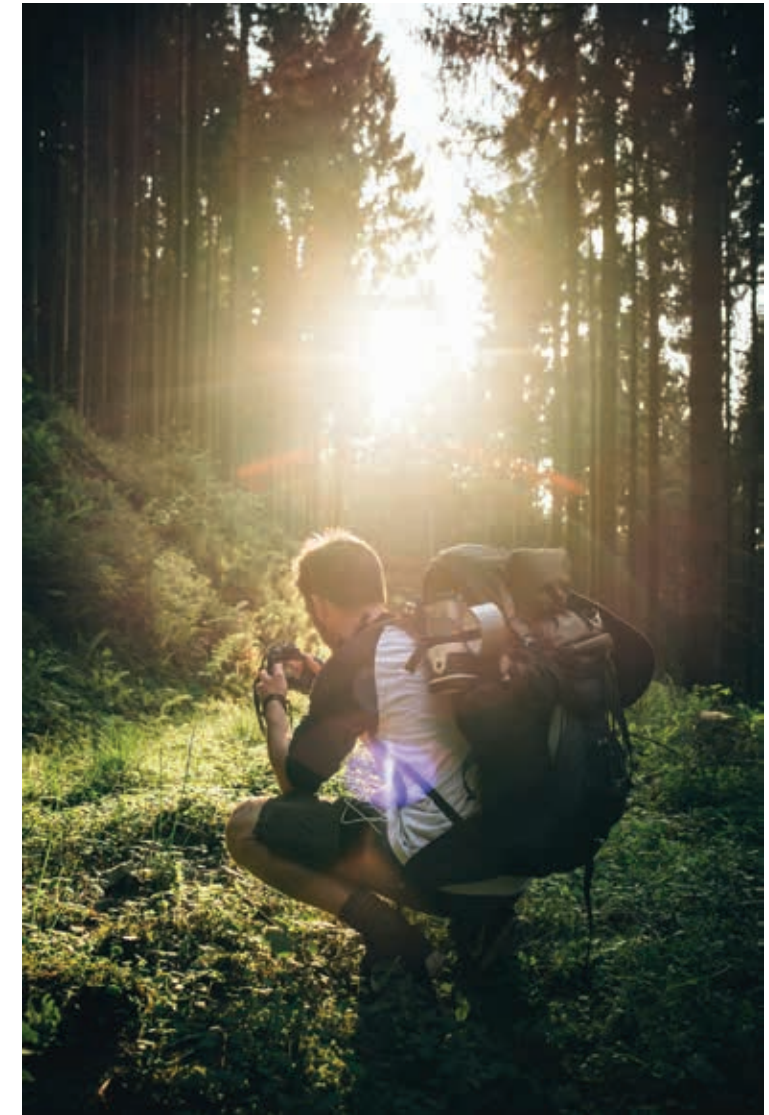
lacked emotional impairments certainly didn't hurt, and neither did the eventual birth of our daughter and eighteen years of a happy marriage and a reasonably enjoyable career.

But depression and anxiety are never cured, they only go into remission, then evolve and metastasize, particularly when root causes are missed or unidentified when the disease is initially treated. Years of professional stress and misunderstood cognitive distortions took their toll, and eventually, the cancer erupted again.

Diabolically, the infection began with what seemed like a life-altering improvement to my health. After years of approaching an embarrassingly high three-digit number on the scale, I began miraculously losing weight through diet and exercise, eventually losing more than a hundred pounds. I initially reveled in the enhancement to my self-esteem. But strangely, tragically, the enjoyment didn't last.

I failed to appreciate that the two-

day loss of appetite and impulsive exercise that triggered the weight loss were actually harbingers of depression. As I began feeling greater confidence in my appearance, I proportionally



lost faith in my relationships with a growing number of friends. Worse yet, I became more preoccupied during my daily five-mile walks with professional and personal conflicts and irrational anxiety about current events and the

state of the world. Despite rekindling a love of sunsets and sunrises by spending hours on my patio each morning and evening, I lost more of those hours obsessing about trivialities than reading or enjoying the stars beside fires in my Solo Stove.

A new crisis eventually erupted during the long winter and the senseless pressure of the holidays, even though I had, at almost the same moment, rediscovered backpacking and used it to find bearings to navigate through the tempest. The mania worsened, and lifelong friendships were questioned. Tears were shed, and holiday plans were modified. Hours and eventually weeks of faithful nursing by my wife failed to induce remission. Work at times became impossible and was eventually suspended altogether, despite a return to therapy and psychotropic medications. Future hopes and dreams were questioned.

Through it all I continued to retreat to the forest, finding peace in ways never before explored, tending quiet campfires in the dark with hooting owls and spring winds, and exhausting the demons through gear-laden hikes through sands and swamps. A disconcerting loss of the ability to sleep was eventually quelled through the warm embrace of a sleeping bag on a half-inch-thick air mattress in a mesh cocoon beneath the pines and live oaks. As the winter faded, my supportive wife and daughter joined me on the

trail for therapeutic voyages through the woods, and we explored new places filled with cliffs and cacti during trips planned before the return of the crisis. Medications eventually took effect, and as winter turned to spring, hope appeared on the horizon. As days became longer, the sleepless nights became shorter and their nightmares less vivid. Hope slowly returned.



Her blond hair wafts and flutters in the breeze crossing the cockpit as the salty sweat on the back of her neck glistens in the sun. She holds a rope, or rather a sheet, used to trim the now-set sail of the forty-six-foot monohull we've been invited aboard for the day. On deck our precocious preteen is lying atop a beach blanket in a bathing suit that makes her look uncomfortably older, working on her tan like an extra in a Duran Duran video. I sit behind the helm as our vessel coasts through the placid waves, passing rocky, pine-covered islands with tiny cottages and well-worn sailboats beside weather-beaten docks. I feel constant tension on the shiny aluminum wheel. It's a familiar feeling, but it works here. For once the tension is not coming from my arms and chest. And it's gratifying to see the same peace in my wife's eyes.

Just one day before finding my corner of nirvana beside the campfire on the Baltic, my girls and I had intimately visited these waters by



riding atop them in a chartered sailing cruise with a friendly American expatriot, enjoying the most Swedish of summer pastimes. The day before that, after having shaken off the jet lag through walks among Vaxholm's pretty vine-covered cottages, we enjoyed our first sunny summer morning, paddling kayaks on the bay and inlets near our weekend home. That was when I first discovered the fjord I would later camp beside. We eventually broke for lunch on a peninsula at the end of a tiny island where we beached our watercraft and relaxed for a far too short hour. As I reclined on a boulder beside the sea, bathing in the late morning sun, and my daughter squealed about the frigid water rising to her knees, our host cooked pancakes and my wife sipped

coffee. Mere steps away, fairy tale paths led through the fir trees to stony beaches on the other side of the isle. After lunch my daughter and I trod through them like Hansel and Gretel.

Today we are enjoying the water as the Swedes do when the days are long and the clouds are few. Each tiny continent we pass hides private coves with stony beaches, some topped with rustic homes, but most adorned only with boulders, pebbles, and pines. Along the shore, bronzed mothers with golden hair tend to flocks of shirtless toddlers stroking the shoreline with colanders and small nets, depositing minnows and frogs into sand pails. They wave to us from shore, and we return their kindness with a smile before gliding quickly out of sight.

After hours exploring in the golden sun, we find our own cove and anchor for the hour, converting the cockpit to a dining patio. Delicacies and wine are consumed as the boat slowly sways on top of the water among waves from other passing craft. We are tantalizingly close to shore, and my mind wanders to the hike awaiting me the next evening.

"I'm a writer," I answer when asked for my profession. Having begun writing a book about my latest mental health adventures, this is the first time I've publicly acknowledged my ambition for a new side career rather than providing my more domesticated answer of the legal career I've thus far chosen. "Actually, I haven't yet found a publisher for my first book, so I suppose I'm not an author yet," I qualify. But in my heart, I'm hopeful that my story will find a home before summer's end. The exhilaration of writing it has helped me heal. It has allowed me to scratch an itch that apparently long needed scratching.

The captain invites us to enjoy a summer dip, but the chilly sea spray and my daughter's memory of her icy wading the day before persuades us to decline. Sadly, it's then time to return to port. Fantasies of cruising Scandinavia for the rest of the summer dance through my mind—maybe in a few years, if we sell a few books or hit the lottery. We weigh anchor, trim the sails, and begin surging again through the sea,

powered by the breath of the gods. The captain returns to the helm, and I stare into my wife's eyes as I feel the breeze caressing the back of my neck.

As we roll back to the harbor, I glance past the stern of the ship. Far in the distance, the sky is dark and the waves are rough. It's close enough to draw my attention, but far enough to not threaten our journey—at least not anymore. Ahead the skies are bright and calm, the thin mirage of green land lying pressed between a dark-navy sea and an endless powder-blue sky.



Truth be told, we came close to not making it to Sweden. As the spring turned to early summer, my health improved. Sleep increased, lucidity returned, and the time to resume my career seemed to arrive. My mind was certainly ready for the challenge. But the sensitive scabs that had formed were not yet sufficiently hardened to endure the attacks of unappreciative clients and remorseless adversaries. Accommodations were requested but refused. An abrupt and unexpected end to a happy and successful career struck like lightning.

The earth shook beneath our feet again. This was the first real test. And it came only one month before our eagerly anticipated summer trip to the far north.

Again tears were shed, and again

sleep was lost. Residential treatment was reconsidered. I returned frequently to the forest for comfort, and the eternal hope of summer renewal arrived two weeks later.

A friend from law school had apparently long wanted to recruit me, and he happened by chance to

a considerable improvement over the career that just abandoned me. We discussed contingencies if the crisis should return. An agreement was made. Long-term hope was restored, and the clouds receded.

A new career awaits. But not until after we return from Sweden.



discover my name removed from my former employer's website. He called, expressed interest. He already knew about my first crisis long ago, and he was not deterred by vivid descriptions of the latest one. He values me, believes in me, thinks I have more to give to the practice of law. His offer was enticing,

When the sun finally dips below the horizon across the bay from my campsite, an aura similar to darkness settles over my seaside paradise. The glowing orange embers in my fire pit fade but fight valiantly to survive. As much as I would like to stoke the fire all night, I am now

healthier and can no longer forfeit sleep. I have a five-mile hike the next morning back to my sleeping wife and daughter, then a ferry to catch at noon to the metropolis where we'll spend the rest of our vacation. So I coax the embers to oblivion, hang my bear bag, cover my backpack and my wet hiking boots, and reluctantly retire to the tent.

The tent is tiny, so narrow and low that I must crawl in backward. But with the rain canopy rolled back, its surface is a transparent cone, and I am one with the forest floor. I feel every breeze and hear every rustle of leaves, and the mild taste of charred pine left over from inhaling a campfire for four hours mixes with a soft salty scent from the sea. I begin retracing every step of my hike through the forest. I relish every pine and oak I meandered past, and every fern I stepped over. I recall with fondness each glacier-carved boulder I scrambled over after I emerged from the forest beside the fjord that escorted me to my home for the night. As I stare through the outstretched arms of the pine beside my tent, I still hear an occasional debate among the waterfowl, and I begin to yawn. As I lean my head toward the dwindling twilight in the darkening sky, slowly slumber arrives.



I stir to slight dampness on the top of my head, the only part of my body projecting from the top of my sleeping bag, which swaddles me like a newborn. My winter

hat has slipped under my neck pillow, and a slight chill runs down my scalp. A beam of light bends around the side of my cotton eye shade, and a glance at my phone reveals it is 4:38 a.m. Normally, I'd be troubled by the realization that my night of rest is over so soon. But with the sky already bright, these are not normal circumstances. As I surrendered to sleep last night, I watched the remaining light fade below the horizon while rolled on my right side, facing slightly northwest. The sun has now risen to the northeast, again off the coast I face. So I arch my back slightly, and I spend an additional hour watching the sunrise from bed.

Soon birds remind me from their nests that it's time to make breakfast and prepare to return to my family. I step from the tent like an explorer arriving on a distant shore. I resume the routines of a weekend backpacker. Water for instant coffee is boiled in a titanium mug, followed by water for oatmeal that will be accented with melting M&Ms and dried fruit pilfered from trail mix. The latest silver lining of insomnia has afforded me extra time to enjoy breakfast, reclining on my camp stool atop the boulder beside the sea as I wait for the ducks to return. The pine boughs wave gently in the soft breeze, and a cool mist crouches atop the glassy sea. The rising sun warms me beneath my hooded t-shirt. I can already tell my hike out past the island's farms and castle and along its opposite shore will be easy. Though I don't yet know it, I'll return

here again in less than a week after our flight home is canceled on the tarmac. The family vote to return to Vaxholm for our unplanned extra vacation will be unanimous.

After I pack my tent and tighten the laces of my boots, I take one last moment to cherish the beginning of the summer solstice before strapping the bag to my back. I pause and close my eyes, take a deep breath, and open to gaze around me at a kaleidoscope of beauty I was not sure I'd see not long ago. An imaginary umbilical cord is cut, and I am reborn into the Swedish summer, taking my first breath of a new life. ●