

THE Complexity of SIMPLE

by the green mama
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Photo: Vanessa Filley

Summer 2018



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I live on an island that speaks of loneliness, independence, separation, a flight from the madding crowd. A place where one can take stock and leave behind the distractions from the fundamentals of family and self. But living on an island can be an existential shock, compelling you to face realities that are often easier left unvisited. It is a road less travelled, but one I gladly chose. EcoParent asked me, "Why don't you do something a little different this time? How about you tell us a story about how you live?" So I did.

A bit about the photographer: Vanessa whispers to me, "I find your life beautiful and terrifying." Then she pulls out her camera. She brings with her painstakingly curated items and lovingly handmade accessories to feature in her photographs. Her work is eerie, gorgeous, and epic. She captures the shadows that hide behind the everyday moments of life; the intersection of the fairytale and the mundane. She sees value in the real. She sees me. She is my best friend.

Vanessa Filley is an award-winning fine art photographer and artist. See more of her work at vanessafilley.com.

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There are mornings where the sky turns orange and then pink, and the ocean becomes so still it appears that it is the stable force and the sky is the tumultuous one. On these mornings, I am drawn like a waking sleepwalker out the door and into the ocean. I stop for shoes. Rocks and oysters and barnacles will wake a person up from their dream life faster than coffee and far more painfully.

In the summer, the light shines through my window just after 5 a.m. I have watched it now for nearly two years as it does its wild swing from winter solstice, where it comes up over the ridge at the far south of our land, to the summer solstice, where it rises over the distant hills and pours light into the ocean. I am obsessed with the light these days. In the summer, at this latitude, we never really have black-out night, just this deep blue twilight. The relentless daylight lasts over 16 hours. It drives us to work hard, swim, stay up all night. Nobody can sleep without herbs or melatonin. But with so much light, who needs to sleep?

Then there is the winter where we have only 8 or so hours of daylight, and the sun is never really overhead, but stretches its long fingers to make eerie shadows. On these days, I rise in the dark and cold, and my daughter and I watch the sun rise as we walk the kilometre down (and up and up and down) the dirt road to meet her school bus. With so much dark, I wonder why we bother to insist on school and work deadlines and waking. Why have we forsaken what the trees and animals all seem to know: hibernation is good for the soul. Plus, it would save on firewood and food and all the sweeping and dishes that go with it.

In my new life I want to know the names for things. Starting with the sun and the moon and the things they govern: seasons, tides, the way I feel as I walk my daughter to the school bus. What is that tree? What is this berry? Why are those rocks pink and these grey? What is this place? Who are these people? What are their stories? Who am I? What is my story?

Prologue

In my life before, I felt that each day I grew slightly more anemic—not from a lack of iron, but from a lack of *joie de vivre*. It wasn't immediately fatal, but every time I drove across the highway bridge that spanned from our home to my kids' school, every time my cellphone rang just as I got to the playground and became yet another parent pushing their kid on the swing and negotiating what was for dinner on their mobile; and every Saturday morning as I biked across the nearby field and watched the kids parsed into soccer teams and the parents under umbrellas watching from the sidelines, I felt something essential being slowly siphoned off.

I wanted to wring out the magic from the mundane moments of my life. I wanted to give my children a sense that behind the work that monopolizes the everyday, there is something more. Children learn from what we do; they model our



behaviours. And what was my behaviour? Did the collection of all those little moments reflect my commitment to something greater—spirit, community, family—or did it appear as if we just rushed headlong from event to event? Some of the events were great: a morning spent in the cozy embrace of a warm Waldorf classroom. Some of the events were not so great: a morning spent in the stuffy interior of a noisy car stuck on the highway. A year ago my daughter sat down and made a board game. She was six. It was pretty dreadful. Every move ended with the player stuck to the side, or moving backward, or missing a turn. She called it "Hurry".

One day I was on the highway in Vancouver, sitting in traffic to cross the bridge to my children's Waldorf school, and I just knew I was done. A person can do everything "right" in this life: eat the best foods, research the heck out of everything, write the books she set out to write, become well-known in her work, volunteer for organizations in which she believes, send cards on her mother's birthdays, marry the man of her dreams, and have children she loves and adores. But what did I want from the millions of tiny moments that exist within and between these things?

Making a new story

On this island where I now live, there are many stories of the early settlers. Perhaps I should call them colonizers, but it is hard to use such loaded words in conjunction with these scrappy and poor early pioneers, especially the women. The stories I've heard include the woman whose husband set her up with their eight children and some goats on an island that was little more than a rock nearby. The story goes that she lived with the kids on this barren rock for years as her husband earned money, likely being hired on the crews to log, fish, or mine. Or there is Gillian Douglas, born to a wealthy family in Toronto in 1900, who found herself four-times divorced, living in a house that clung to the edge of a cliff nearly as far west as one can go in this country. She is known now for her photography and writing as well as her deep love of the land, her pioneering spirit, and her strong feminism. There are numerous other women who made this land their own in the early days: learned to sail and hunt, birth their own babies, raise their own crops, and make their own entertainment. Many of them did so for months—or years—without the help of men, who would leave to earn money. In nearer times, there are the women who raised three kids (always with cloth diapers, of course) in cabins with no running water and no electricity, or the ones who would swim across the inky lake at night, naked, after a party, and then hike through the star-lit night to their homes, with the sounds of the wolves as their only company.

Things have changed a lot for us and also not at all. When we moved here two years ago, my husband kept his job in the city—nine hours away, and three ferries from our new home. Our city friends thought we were crazy, or divorcing. They would call me up and say things like: you are so hard core and I'm in total awe. Yet, I've never swum across a lake in the dark, and my toilets flush (most of the time). Here, I am just another parent whose partner has to work off-island because

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where land is cheap(er) and the living wild(er), jobs are scarce. These families have one partner who leaves to plant trees, fish, or run businesses that take them away for days, weeks, or months at a time. Or one of the parents leaves so their child or children can go to high school, as there is none on the island, or within a commutable distance.

In my case, this long distance affair has the added irony that my husband works in city government. Indeed, we are both city lovers. I've nearly always lived in cities: I did my honours thesis on city living, and my favourite places in the world are big cities like Chicago, Istanbul, Barcelona, London, Edinburgh, and Sydney. My husband, literally, wrote the book on greening cities.

Where does a story begin?

What made Gillian Douglas leave her wealthy Toronto life and decide to carve a new world, often alone, out of the wilderness? What made Ma and Pa pack little Mary and Laura and baby Carrie into their wagon to leave behind everything and everyone they knew and take a gamble on the unknown? What made me leave behind a relatively privileged and easy life in one of the "most livable" cities in the world to play at mock-frontier-woman?

I don't know. Perhaps we all heard the same call to adventure that was carried in the wind to those middle-America locations where we had our common origins. Or, perhaps it is faith: in the human spirit, in the universe, or in that magic that is hiding there, just behind the laundry hanging on the line, the wood pile forever needing tending, and the garden always wanting cultivation.

Perhaps every one of us hears the call at some point, but it is just not possible for us all to answer. Or, at least, not right now. There were certainly more good reasons to not listen: give-up our affordable-for-Vancouver rental apartment; move nine hours from my husband's work; uproot our children—including one with learning differences—from their school; and say goodbye to our friends.

Yet, I have moved between homes, cities, and even nations, every couple of years for my entire life. I had lived in places where we were the poor, mixed, and broken family, and in places where we were the rich ones, who leave their shoes outside to be stolen. All these moves taught me a secret not everybody learns: it's easy to find reasons to *not* do something. It is much harder to imagine the rewards of *doing* it.

Where is the magic in all this practical living?

Now I live on this tiny island. It takes me two different ferries and many hours to get to the closest town centre. For most of the year there are no restaurants, no clothing stores, no hardware stores, or drug stores. There are fewer than 1,000 people here, year-round. There are no recreation centres or daycares or hospitals. There are no streetlights or sidewalks. Our big entertainment is twice a year when we dress up and hold a community lip-sync show, and the entire island lines up to get tickets and laugh and sing together. That's our culture. We also have an art museum that's open for

three months of the summer, weekends only.

"Is this what I wanted?" I ask myself when I wake in the dark to haul wood into the cold house and light the fire; during those days when we lose power and I have to boil water for my tea (slowly) on the wood-burning fireplace; and every Saturday night as I make and clean-up from the 21st meal of the week.

I asked this for the eight days we had no power or running water, and when that long dirt road was impassable in our first winter. I ask it every time I awake early, with that beautiful sun reaching toward me, and my children worrying I had abandoned them when I was really just trying to make breakfast and bring in firewood and ignore the call of the ocean. Or on the days when we head to town to buy all those luxuries we can't get on this island—like underwear—and come back in the cold and dark, hungry, and the kids are mad, *oh so mad*, because it's exhausting to be in transit for more than five hours all so we can visit the vet and get new underwear and I ask myself *why oh why* isn't there another parent around right now?

"Is this what I wanted?" I wonder as I struggle to homeschool one child and be an active school parent with the other; as I try to avoid eye contact with the guy who just, illegally, clearcut that section of old growth for his grow-op; and I try and make a writing deadline and suddenly the water doesn't run—*why doesn't the water run?!*—and I must begin the process of following all the pipes to the well and looking at fuse boxes and calling so-and-so's friend who might come one day and look at it too. And then the septic field tank starts beeping. *What is that smell?* Oh, and great, the power has just gone out again, did I save that last draft of my article?

When I have to get away from it all, there is no bar or swanky restaurant, or even a real coffee shop to escape to. Instead, I am left to walk into the forest, or down to the beach, or up to the nearby point. From there I can see snow-capped mountains, the ocean on almost all sides, and sometimes, whales playing. Maybe these things, too, are distractions, but they seem to also be reminders that there is more in this moment than the buzzing of my daughter whining, the garden devastated by deer, or the rice burnt.

There is a great myth in how most people view the practical life, or, as some call it, the simple life. It isn't so simple. There are simply fewer distractions from who I am - both the good and the bad. Fewer distractions are only a good thing if you want to see what's behind it all. It's a great place to be if you are willing to sit with your self/spirit/whatever-you-call-it. Perhaps it's more accurate to say anything other than "sit". So, here I am, rocking a sick child, toiling over a reluctant garden, and making and cleaning-up from the 21st meal in a week, and here also are all those dark bits of my soul—my discomfort, pettiness, and shame—and here too is the glory of another spectacular moonrise and the magic hovering around the edges of it all. •

