

# A Magical Place

**by John K. Nixon**

**I**t was a little after 4 p.m. one day in mid-January. I was standing near the pier at Dundarave in West Vancouver, staring transfixed at the western sky and gasping audibly at what I saw.

The sun was low over the undulating spine of Vancouver Island, just starting to sink behind a thin band of cloud hugging the horizon. The entire western sky was a panoply of multiple shades of pink, magenta, yellow and orange with streaks of crimson, stained against the stark outline of the island's mountain range. The colours seemed to leak into the sea beneath, at first with a reflected red that quickly turned to a burnished bronze as my eyes traced the path of the mirrored sunset to the shore before me. The surface of the sea was gently rippled, with not a breath of wind in evidence.

Out in the waters of English Bay, some seven or eight large freighters rode at anchor, the dark outline of their hulls and superstructure studded here and there with lights. On the far shore to the south a few more lights could be dimly seen in the distant houses of Point Grey and Kitsilano.

As I made my way slowly eastwards along the Sea Walk that skirts the northern shore of English Bay from Dundarave to Ambleside, I soon became aware of the stillness of my surroundings. The only sounds were the gentle lapping of small wavelets on the rocks and pebbles along the shore and the occasional keening of a wheeling seagull. The tide was out, exposing at the water's edge

all manner of rocks and stones of various hues of brown, black, grey and green. On a large rock a grey heron stood perfectly still on one leg, staring intently at the water in search of dinner. Not far away a seagull perched triumphant<sup>65</sup>

ly with one clawed foot pinning a small orange starfish to the slick surface of a rounded boulder.

Here and there along the shoreline an assortment of logs and gnarled tree stumps lay scattered in disarray on top of the large protective boulders that had been hauled into place below the footpath – the detritus of many past ocean storms. Some of the larger logs had been anchored by steel cables threaded through the logs and connected to eye bolts embedded in large boulders. In past storms untethered logs, tossed by surging waves, had caused extensive damage to parts of the Sea Walk. Large granite curb stones had been scattered like dominoes across the footpath and benches lining the pathway had been overturned and damaged. That day the logs and beached driftwood lay docile and defeated, bereft of any destructive intent.

Among the jetsam a length of badly frayed stranded manila rope, perhaps four inches in diameter, lay in a discarded tangle among clumps of dried grass and pebble-strewn sand. Fragments of white Styrofoam insulation were scattered here and there on the rocky shore, reminders of the intrusive hand of Man in this aquatic paradise.

As I continued walking eastwards I encountered a flotilla of small diving ducks, perform-



ing their time-honoured ballet. As if on cue one duck would dive beneath the surface followed by two, three or more ducks at intervals, submerging with almost military precision.

Beyond them a lone cormorant, in purposeful flight, skimmed a bare foot or so above the sea.

Sometimes, in previous walks, I have spotted the dog-like head of an inquisitive seal, surfacing near the shoreline, to observe the curious humans walking along the footpath, before diving in search of a fish. Occasionally I have seen the long sinuous body of a river otter undulating through the waves. On one large conifer bordering the footpath, a bald eagle can sometimes be seen, perched motionless by the hour on a bare branch near the tree-top, in imperious observance of the passing scene.

That cold January day, the seals, otters and bald eagle were absent, and the humans too were fewer than usual. Typically during my walks I will hear a medley of voices in various languages from passing strollers, including snatches of Farsi, Russian, Tagalog and Mandarin. Now the few walkers out for a stroll were silent, no doubt, like me, in awe of the scene playing out before them.

Continuing eastward I rounded a curve in the shoreline, revealing the darkening outline of Stanley Park across the inlet and the graceful arch of the Lions Gate suspension bridge spanning the entrance to Vancouver harbour. Now the muted hum of far-off traffic and the drone of a float plane flying west above the bridge reminded me that I was on

the fringe of a vibrant port city of some three million inhabitants.

My late wife Yuni loved this place. In late December, 2003, a small group of her immediate family took Yuni for her last outing in a wheel chair. She had expressly requested that we take her to see the ocean from the West Vancouver Sea Walk. She seemed happy that day and a photograph shows her bundled up against the cold and smiling. That was just eleven days before her untimely death.

Perhaps when my time comes, that, too, will be among my last requests. Over the years I have developed a close bond with this magical place, surely one of the most impressive seaside walks anywhere. I have seen it in its many moods. In winter storms with rolling breakers crashing against the pier and flinging spume across the footpath. I have seen it shrouded in fog or radiant and peaceful under a setting sun, as it was that memorable day in January.

For me it serves as a refuge and periodic reminder of the timelessness of Nature, the ebb and flow of life and the harmony of the natural world. All this is in welcome contrast to the turmoil and the constant reminders of Man's inhumanity to Man, with which, it seems, we are bombarded on a daily basis.

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