

THERESA KISHKAN

*SLOW FOOD*

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You are writing this after spending two and a half hours in Powell River in between your ferry from Earls Cove and this ferry to Little River on Vancouver Island. You could write an essay about Powell River; you had this thought the minute you boarded the ferry. It would be about a place you never thought you'd write about. You could call it "Slow Food". You pull out your journal and your fountain pen. It helps you forget that this is an old ferry in an aging fleet, one of which rammed into an island and sank just three days earlier.

Driving from Saltery Bay where the Earls Cove ferry with its load of seven cars docked, in mist quickly becoming rain, I am struck as I have been on every visit by what has happened to Powell River over the years. Visiting there in the seventies, I'd thought it seemed prosperous. I remember lots of talk about the mill, jobs, the economy. But this time there are at least three small dead motels along the highway, one covered in what looked like aluminum foil. Another one is being consumed by blackberry canes. It has to do with the time of year, trees in bud but not leafy yet, so that every building stands out with its worn timbers showing, not softened by green. Each abandoned motel is grey with rain, as though holiday-makers and traveling salesmen just stopped coming and the buildings turned their sad faces from the road. An exception is the Marland but it's hardly contemporary. Tiny blue and white cubes, no pool, no hot tub, no decks hanging over the sea. John and I talk about how a movie could be made, set in the late fifties or early sixties, a murder mystery, with an investigating detective coming from afar to stay at the Marland Motel with its "Clean modern units, some with kitchenettes", each unit, maybe ten feet by ten feet, arranged around a traffic circle. The gal reporter he would become involved with might live with her mother in a faded pink house on Joyce Avenue. The reporter would visit at the Marland after dark, parking her Valiant just up the road, and the two would drink rye-and-7 from plastic cups provided in the tiny bathroom, each sanitarily wrapped for their protection. I imagine chenille bedspreads and the smell of better days.

Anyway, I like Powell River for its quirky pride – the ocean-life mosaics set into the sidewalks along Marine Drive but now chipped and repaired with cement, the hopeful neon, the friendly young woman in the toll booth at the ferry terminal where we park and then walk up to explore the lower town. A bus passes, Welcome, Bienvenue, #2 to Grief Point. (I try to make this into a haiku and it almost works.) Although it had been raining on the drive in, the skies clear just enough so that we can amble along and not worry about getting soaked. I was cold when I left our house for the first ferry, cold on the ferry itself, but now I put my gloves away, open my jacket.

There is the electrical shop with the dirty but useable generators and alternators in the window, a window I had noticed the last time we were in Powell River, back in December, because someone had hung a few Christmas lights around its frame. Peering in this time, I see the girlie calendar hanging on the back wall and a few men standing around, their hands in their pockets. No one is in a hurry.

We walk past the employment centre (surely this was a gift or craft shop once, years ago, when we did this same trip?), past the Love Shop with the little wispy bits of lingerie hanging in the window and a sign promising a good selection of adult toys. Past the pawn shops, the loan centres. We stop at a bakery, order a cup of dark roast coffee for my husband and two shots of espresso for myself. Long or short? I am asked, and I reply, Just the two shots please. John's mug is brought right away and the young woman works the steaming machines for a few minutes before bringing me two small blue cups, each holding a generous measure of espresso. I smile, drink one, then the other.

Up the hill to the men's wear shop where a beautiful silk shirt in the window catches my husband's eye and where he enters the shop, tries on the shirt, and buys it in a moment of uncharacteristic extravagance while the salesman holds forth about the pleasures of small-town life (we had mentioned Merritt and that set him off). Next door I admire, but don't try on, a jeweled bustier and goth-influenced cloak, though I wish I had special occasions for both.

At the bookstore we are pleased to see a display of our own books with a sign saying Local Authors, even though we live a ferry ride away and we've never been asked to the town's Writers Festival held every April. And when I pay for the books I have chosen, there is no delighted moment of recognition as my name is noticed on the credit card slip but for this I am actually grateful.

Down to Marine again where we are surprised to see a new bookstore in a storefront, gracious wood-framed window newly restored, so we open the door and enter. Wooden bookshelves, tidy and uncluttered, line the perimeter walls and a number of tables, neatly set with cutlery and wine glasses, are in the centre of the room. I quickly realize that this is heaven. Or The Kitchen Table, more precisely, a place specializing in books about food, some of them cookbooks, some treatises on gastronomy, all in excellent condition, first editions and rare editions alike. I choose two MFK Fishers I haven't read and one Diana Kennedy and restrain myself from also buying Artemis Cooper's biography of Elizabeth David and other wonderful volumes I devoured as a young woman learning about the joys of cheese, soups, ripe figs and mellow wine with peaches. There are also dated and numbered bottles of olive oil. I wonder, I say, if I will find a little tin of La Chinata paprika as mine is almost empty. And turn: there it is, the last one. A man in shorts and new wave glasses emerges from a little kitchen at the back to say, "You're in time for lunch!" which is a choice of Louisiana gumbo and another soup (we can smell garlic, fresh parsley, rich stock...). He tells us he has recently relocated to Powell River from sunny California to cook and sell books. "Some days I do menudo and posole," he confides as he washes his hands before adding up my purchases. We decline lunch - we have a ferry to catch and anyway I ate a large cookie with my two cups of espresso... -- but then passing the Italian delicatessen, two doors down from The Kitchen Table on our way back to the car, we enter and ask for sandwiches to go.

"Choose anything you like from the display case", we are told. So prosciutto salami and gorgonzola; and the man cuts fresh Calabrian Bakery buns from Vancouver and sets to work. He brings an open mason jar to us to ask if we'd like his parents' marinated green tomatoes in olive oil with herbs instead of mustard. It smells like summer in March. He takes 25 minutes to fill the buns with the meat, the cheese, the luscious relish, during which time I put a tube of tomato doppio on the counter, 2 tins of

olives stuffed with anchovies, limonata, some perciati pasta with cooking instructions only in Italian but I'm able to translate – Cottura: 9 minuti normale, 7 minuti al dente. I can almost taste them, maybe with a thick ragu, shaved parmesan, lots of garlic. And at the last minute, I buy seeds for Ruccola Coltivata and Basilico Napoletano a Foglia di Lattugo, and again I feel sure I can figure out the semina, the distanza ... I can almost taste some of the basil in the sauce for the pasta, a salad of the arugula alongside, though I know it will be months before I can cut the greens from my garden.

And finally we walk back to the ferry parking lot where our car is first in line. We say again to each other that we don't know what it is about Powell River but we think we could live here, the air soft, the food slow and long simmering and available with excellent things to read, untold erotic possibilities from a shop with beaded curtains, and even as we are saying this, the cactus sign is being carried to the sidewalk in front of La Casita Mexican Restaurant where the chili pepper lights strung around it speak of southern heat, of churros dusted with cinnamon sugar, of cold beer on a hot day in June. Already we are planning our return.