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Helmet Falls and Beyond

Steven Legault
Trumpeter

Stephen Legault lives at Lake Louise, Alberta.

FROM THE CREST OF LIMESTONE SUMMIT, A high, larch dotted saddle on the Rockwall Trail, the sound of water is all encompassing. Walking through the late afternoon heat to emerge in a subalpine meadow of globe flowers, anemone and paintbrush, the gentle hum of distant falls grows to a rumble.

We walk on, down from the pass, descending into lower sub-alpine forest, and the sound grows to a roar. Entering an avalanche path the falls - long awaited - materialize before us. I am not prepared for the sight of so much free falling water. Leaping into the valley below us, they are still 2 kilometres from where we stand. The drop is enormous, unlike anything I have ever seen.

For two days Cindy Hauge and I have been walking the Rockwall Trail in Kootenay National Park, B.C. It has been stunning; one high alpine pass after another. The high country is at its prime: wildflowers laid out like a rolling carpet of colour.

Kootenay Park is part of a protected area the size of Switzerland, comprised of Banff, Jasper and Yoho National parks, along with Mount Assinaboine, Mount Robson and Kananaskis Provincial Parks, it protects an enormous portion of the central and northern rockies ecosystem.

During our walk - about 70 kilometres all told - Helmet Falls has been there, in the back of our minds. Each turn in the trail, each high pass has brought optimism and wonder. The Earth is alive and well and doing fine, at least here, and for now. Each step has brought us closer to this spectacle: one of the highest waterfalls in Canada. This image of water plunging 1200 feet from a bench between Limestone Summit, Mount Helmet and Mount Sharp causes all other impressions to pale. Furious white water collides with the rock twice on its plummet, sending spray across the valley floor, and feeding Helmet Creek. Enticing rainbows to dance in the moist air.

Cindy and I set up camp, peel off boots and socks and put on Teva's. I submerge my sunburnt and dusty face in the torrent running from the falls, a kilometre up the valley. After dinner I walk alone, towards the head-wall of water. With each step the sound grows louder, the water seems larger, and I shrink away into a humility and insignificance that is comforting. At the base of the falls the rocks are arranged like the pews in a church, the falls being the alter. I scramble over them, pushing towards the cascade.

At once I am swept away in a spray of water and wind and a feeling that can only be described as religious. Any fatigue that remains from the day's walk is blown away in the frenzy of the fall's breath. Any residue left over from the work week is washed away in the cataract's tears. I sit in awe of the size, the strength, and the sheer overwhelming grandeur of this scene. Even this humility

seems trivial in the face of such a deity.

I walk back to camp. There is complete silence except for the constant plummet of water. The sun is low and the light is cool and soft and there is nothing here to distract me from the moment.

I remember seeing Takakkaw Falls for the first time, it was only a couple of years ago. Arguably the highest falls in the Rockies; Takakkaw Falls is in Yoho National Park, north of Kootenay. When I viewed those falls, I don't remember having any of these emotions. There were hundreds of people around, and I drove to within sight of them. It may be that my own relationship with this landscape has developed in that time, but it may be more.

To get to Helmet Falls takes considerable effort. It would be tough to do it in a day. A minimum walk of 15 kilometres each way compels most people to stay overnight. For many of these people it is the beginning, or end of the Rockwall Trail, further adding to the toil, and to the experience.

It is impossible to rush the event. To see the falls you must make a commitment to the task. Because the walk is uphill, and the horseflies are biting, and there is no restaurant, and often times it rains in the Rockies, the reward is that much sweeter. Because the view of Helmet Falls must be earned it adds to its value. It is not just a picture post card image, it is a scene that the viewer interacts with. The walker and the destination are not separated by steel and glass and air conditioning, the two are intimate.

My sleep that night is filled with the sound of water, and with the image of the falls. In my dreams I perceive the falls to be the weeping of the Earth for what has been lost, for what has been given away. The vision of that water, of the relentless way it pounds against the rock, the anger and rage and the fury, these things I understand as the anguish of the landscape slowly being consumed.

Others see things differently I'm sure. A celebration of the glory and majesty of the mountains? Maybe. I'm not certain. I woke before the dream was finished.

That morning I rose early and walked up Goodsir Pass for the view into Yoho Park. The Goodsirs towered in the distance, pinnacles of rock and ice surrounded by forest as far as the eye could see. The Rockwall Trail stretched out behind me. All around the sound of the falls echoed in my ears. It followed me awhile, then the sight and sound faded away. But despite this gradual deterioration, the religion and the feeling remain.

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