



At the End of the Highway

...and then some.
You'll find me in
Desolation Sound,
land of hermits,
misfits, and
endless wonder

by GRANT LAWRENCE

photography GRANT HARDER

IT WAS NEARING THE MIDDLE of another gorgeous day in Desolation Sound. We were sitting down to lunch on the deck when we heard a woman scream. The harrowing cry tore across the calm blue water and bounced off the granite cliffs that buffered our cabin on three sides.

My family instinctively looked up toward the sound, glancing around the leafy arbutus tree that provided us noontime shade. My wife, Jill, spotted it first: a black, two-metre dorsal fin, gleaming in the sunshine, sliced through the surface of the ocean a few feet away from a woman in a fibreglass kayak. A great exhale burst from the blowhole, misting the shocked paddler. Her screams morphed into joyous cries of laughter when she realized her once-in-a-lifetime baptism of whale snot.

“Orca!” shouted Jill with a gleeful smile. She pointed out the scene across the bay, just off Dead Man’s Island, as she placed the plain hot dog in front of our son, Joshua, then aged 5, who clambered for a better look. Our daughter, Grace, then aged two, repeated, “Orca!” and went on playing with her wiener. As we craned our necks from our picnic table, more orcas surfaced. We knew them to be a transient family that had fortunately chosen our pocket of Desolation Sound to frequent every month or so for the past five years. On that blazing summer day, the orcas made me think back to one of the favourite mantras of Russell Letawsky, Hermit of Desolation Sound, British Columbia: “There is always something to see.”

I was a nerdy six-year-old when I first came to this place, which can appear as equally foreboding as inviting, depending on the weather. No matter what the forecast, my adventuresome father considered it a mystical, oceanic paradise, dotted with islands and saltwater inlets, coves and lagoons, along a jagged granite coastline, backdropped by steep mountains carpeted in coniferous trees. That first weekend, in 1977, we camped out on a moss-encrusted rock in a dank canvas tent. The place scared the hell out of me.

Almost two centuries earlier, Captain George Vancouver sailed his two ships into the area in the stormy summer of 1792, surveying the inner coast while searching for the Northwest Passage. They were forced to enter every dead-end inlet along one of the most complicated coastlines in the world.

Staring up at a wall of impassable mountains, Vancouver bestowed the poetic moniker of “Desolation Sound” upon the area. It was meant to be dismissive, since he famously noted

in his logbook that the now-world-class boating destination held “not a single prospect that was pleasing to the eye.”

Back then, the area was far from desolate. For many centuries it was, and remains today, the traditional shared territory of the Tla’amin, Klahoose, and Homalco First Nations. They built their villages in the most desirable areas of the Sound, where they created elaborate and effective low and mid-tide clam gardens and fish traps. The terraced rock gardens fed villages of hundreds, if not thousands. The area close to our cabin site is known as *Kahkaykay*, meaning “camping place,” which once served as the sheltered winter village for all three nations. The village is gone, but if you know where to look, many of the clam gardens remain, and are still fertile.

Desolation Sound is located beyond the very northern tip of the Sunshine Coast, near the hamlet of Lund. With a hotel, a general store, and a few other charming shops—most notably Nancy’s Bakery, famous for its cinnamon buns—Lund is ingloriously hidden away at the terminus of Hwy. 101, part of one of the world’s longest routes: the Pan-American Highway. The blacktop stretches all the way from Argentina to Alaska. After two ferries, you’ll eventually find Lund, and the gateway to Desolation Sound.

These days, some of our cabin neighbours refer to the saltchuck that separates the Sound from the rest of the world as “the moat.” In 1973, the provincial government set aside more than 8,000 hectares to form the boat-access-only Desolation Sound Marine Provincial Park, noting at the time that parts of the Sound boast the warmest ocean water north of the Gulf of Mexico.

A combination of calm, protected water, granite rocks heated by the sun, and the outflow of warm water from shallow lakes and lagoons, all help to raise the summer temperature of the surface ocean water in some areas of the Sound to 27°C.

Only a tenth of the land in the marine park remains privately owned. After establishing the park’s borders, the government wanted no private land at all and attempted to buy up all the old homesteads that were either in receivership or for sale. Some they obtained, some they didn’t.

In 1976, one owner who had refused the province’s offer decided he wanted to sell after all. My dad spotted his one-line ad in the *Vancouver Sun*: “Five kilometres oceanfront, 180 acres land, coastal wilderness, British Columbia, \$155,000.” »

Grant Lawrence and Russell Letawsky, circa 1983. The author, his wife, the singer-songwriter Jill Barber, and their children, Grace and Joshua (opposite), explore the craggy shoreline near their cabin (pages 56–57).



THIS PAGE: COURTESY GRANT LAWRENCE

Dad has always said that the ad sounded more like an experience than a place. He scraped up the money and made the purchase, then divided up the property into 38 oceanfront lots to sell to individual owners, with the hopes of turning that jagged coastline into a haven where average people could seek out their own chunk of paradise. Dad's idea was to build rustic, livable cabins, constructed far enough apart from each other so as to provide natural privacy by the lay of the land, and to disrupt the surrounding wilderness as little as possible.

He chose a rocky outcrop for our cabin, which buttressed up against a little cove with a babbling creek. It flowed out of a dense forest onto a pebble beach that was layered in oysters, some as large as a basketball player's shoe. Dad grew up in Manitoba, and had always admired the prairie railway stations with their gently sloped, overhanging roofs, a design he painstakingly recreated for our cabin in the British Columbian coastal rainforest. He took into account my mom's love of the sun by including three levels of sprawling decks, all drenched in windswept sunshine. When first built, the huge deck space was the cabin's crown jewel, but over the years and through many ongoing expensive repairs to replace rotten wood, it has become the cabin's Achilles heel.

The interior post-and-beam design reached completion in 1983, and the cabin has always remained totally off grid. A large propane tank fuels the lights, the fridge, the stovetop, and the hot water heater, and our fresh water is piped in from a well in the forest. A jet-black, cast iron woodstove provides a cozy warmth in the colder months. These days, we receive one bar of cellular service, good enough for sporadically checking in with the outside world. We tried solar power for a few years, but the golf cart batteries were a hassle to maintain. Now we bring along small battery packs to power up our phones. Once a year, near or around July 1, a large propane barge lumbers into our bay to fill up our tank.

When my sister, Heather, thinks back to the early days of our cabin, it's often in disappointment at its ruggedness and isolated location. Unlike our athletic father and preppy mother, she and I were both nerds and we felt displaced in the wilderness. Heather's favourite book was *Anne of Green Gables*. Her favourite movie was *Dirty Dancing*, and she secretly hoped that our family cabin would be situated someplace that would be a combination of the two. What we ended up with in Desolation Sound was more like a cross between *The Beachcombers* and *The Shining*.

DESPITE THE SOUND'S raw beauty, it's the few rugged souls and larger-than-life characters who cling to the shore like barnacles that fill the area with a rich history. Many of those coastal loners have inspired me to tell their tales, good and bad, on radio and in podcasts and print. As one crusty oyster farmer recently told me, "Misfits always have the best stories."

The most impactful individual I ever encountered in Desolation Sound was Russell Letawsky. On the day we met, I was

While off-grid living requires some adjustments, this cabin has everything the family needs. The main floor is an open-plan combined living room, dining area, and kitchen. Up three stairs are the master and kids' bedrooms, and a shared bathroom with a flush toilet and shower.







Grant's dad, a mechanical engineer, designed, with Russell, the pulley boat mooring system, which spans 200 feet across a cove (p. 62, bottom left). Joshua, Grant's son, is also resourceful: for protection on hikes, he always carries a homemade duct-taped spear (at left, below).

a bespectacled and extremely anxious 11-year-old, afraid of my own shadow. While we unloaded our boat from our little aluminum skiff bumped up against the rocky outcrop in front of our cabin, Dad noticed him first.

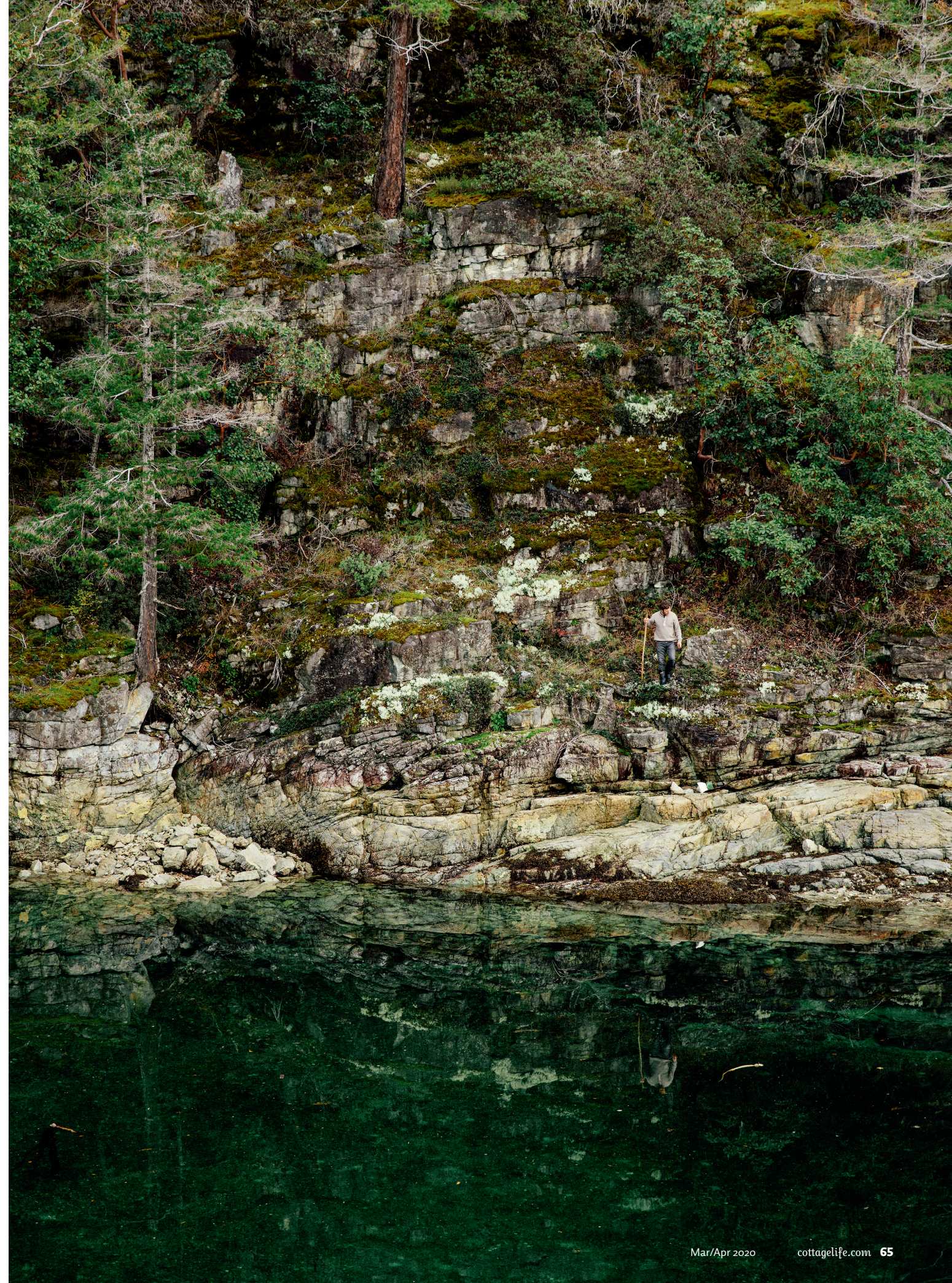
Blending in perfectly with the foliage at the edge of the forest a few hundred feet away was a bearded man with a long, thin face. He was casually sitting cross-legged on a fallen log, down in the cove adjacent to our property. His clothes were the same colour as the earth, woods, and rocks. The only reason Dad spotted him was because the man's Zippo lighter winked at us in the sun when he lit his pipe.

Slowly, the tall, lanky figure rose to his feet and, in a loping gait, crossed the stretch of pebble beach in the cove and began to climb up the rocky ledge to where we stood. He looked like a cross between Willie Nelson and Charles Manson. This was the first time our conservative West Vancouver family of four came face to face with the Hermit of Desolation Sound.

Much to my dad's initial chagrin, the hippie hermit was living full time in a tent down in the cove, which he would soon upgrade to a tiny hand-built one-room cabin. Dad was very straight-laced and loathed the hippie lifestyle, considering it dirty and lazy. To have this stranger living off the land next door to our cabin was something he had not envisioned.

Russell would call that cove his home for a decade, supposedly caretaking the property for his friend who owned the lot. He lived alone and way off the grid, without running water, electricity, a toilet, or any means of communication. At the time, neither Russell nor I had any inkling of the impact our meeting in the wilderness would have on our lives.

Russell came to mean so much to me, and his life of stories was so entertaining, that I have always felt the urge to share them: tales of how he went from being a self-described "Alberta hayseed" to downtown Toronto businessman to



B.C. hermit. It was in Toronto when Russell, then a suit-and-tie man, got married and had a daughter. Soon after, he was convinced to take a canoe trip with co-workers even though he didn't even own a pair of jeans, and the trip changed him. In the wilderness, he found a piece of himself that he didn't know existed, and soon felt the urge to spend as much time in wild places as possible. Russell was at one point staunchly against pot, but once he finally tried it, his mind was blown, and he felt like he could see the world in a much clearer light. On one searing-hot summer day, he found himself standing with the sweat-soaked masses at the corner of Yonge and Dundas in downtown Toronto. Right then, something snapped in Russell Letawsky. Suddenly, his tie and starched white collar felt like a noose. He left his job and his family, and, in his words, "went radical." As his hair grew out, he wandered west, which eventually culminated in an epic crossing of the Coast Mountains on foot, following only a compass. And that's how Russell found his way to Desolation Sound.

In contrast to the definition of the word "hermit," Russell was a kind, curious, engaged, and gregarious soul who loved philosophical discussion, political debate, and passionate conversation. Despite our cultural differences (and his vastly different political beliefs from that of my father), Russell became a true friend of our family and a mentor to me. He never trespassed and always respected our privacy until invited up for a visit, which my father appreciated. Like the rest of our family, over time Dad began to recognize that Russell was funny, intelligent, and charming, and came to think of him as a friend. Together, they would have raging political debates late into the night that would always defuse with collective laughter. Russell was a dreamer, and Dad the realist, and they made a highly unlikely but effective team, taking on many projects together, including digging our well, creating an ingenious rope

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Desolation Sound's isolation is part of its charm, but getting there can be a chore, so Grant's dad, now 79, goes to the cabin once a year; his mom, at 76, no longer makes the trip. His sister and her family come every so often.



pulley mooring system for the boat, and cutting out a network of hiking trails through the forest.

It fascinated me that the Hermit of Desolation Sound seemed like the exact opposite of my father. Russell was imperfect. He smoked, swore, and drank. A lot. None of which Dad did. Dad started each morning with 300 push-ups and 300 sit-ups. Russell started the morning with a giant doobie—a classic West Coast wake 'n' bake.

Each time we made the trip to the cabin, I spent more and more time down in the cove and wandering the woods with Russell. I had always felt somewhat insignificant in my dad's intimidating shadow, but Russell was a rebel who always took the path less travelled, and that drew me towards him. He slowly eased me out of my insecure shell, convincing me that the world around me wasn't going to bite. Russell taught me practicality in knots, knives, and fishing, as well as ambition and idealism, intellectualism and philosophical thought, including his favourite saying: *amor fati*... love your fate.

Russell challenged the way I perceived the world as a kid from West Vancouver: he graduated me from checkers to chess, and introduced me to life-altering books like *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. He also opened up my passion for rock 'n' roll, drawing out my own inner rebel. Mom and Dad were "greatest hits" parents who didn't delve too deeply into the musical alphabet: ABBA, the Beach Boys, and Elvis dominated our car's cassette deck, but out of Dad's earshot, Russell told me that Elvis was a phony; Chuck Berry was the real deal, because Berry wrote his own songs. Russell introduced me to countless artists that I would scribble down on scraps of paper and track down once I got back to the city: Buddy Holly, the Coasters, Link Wray, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Jimi Hendrix, the Guess Who. Russell would set the hook of rock 'n' roll so deeply within me that music would soon become my consuming passion.

Once, when Russell and I were walking down the boardwalk in Lund, we came face to face with Nick Thomas, a friend of mine from school who was on summer vacation with his family. Nick

was shocked to see an insecure dork like me wandering around a coastal backwater with a bearded, dirt-encrusted hippie with a knife in his belt and an eagle feather in his headband. Nick's first question when I saw him at school back in September to start grade eight was "Who was that guy?" I proudly grinned from ear to ear, pushed my glasses up my nose, and launched into the story.

It was that insurgent rock 'n' roll that Russell introduced me to that would eventually lead me far away from him, the Sound, and my family for many years. The cabin was the last place I wanted to be when I was an angry teen-aged punk rocker. I formed a band, the Smugglers, with that kid Nick Thomas, with the idea to make records and tour the world. When we had accomplished most of that, I eventually returned to the cabin after a decade-plus sabbatical.

On my first trip back, I somewhat reluctantly went up with my dad for a spring weekend. When Dad and I made the final turn in our car on the road leading down towards the government wharf, the trees parted like a curtain to reveal sparkling oceanic nature supreme. I had spent the 1990s in clubs painted black that smelled like urine and cigarettes in the paved heart of urban centres around the world. Why had I forsaken this natural serenity for so long? I've come to believe that such rejection is what many of us must go through to realize what we most hold dear. Unfortunately, Russell was no longer waiting for me in the cove. A few years earlier, he had met a woman at the Lund Pub who convinced him to finally move back to town. Their relationship didn't last, but Russell's move did. He went on to have a 20-year career as a driver for Powell River Taxi.

Last spring, while making a radio series and podcast about Russell's life (called, naturally, Hermit of Desolation Sound), I met with him many times at his rustic out-of-the-way cabin south of Lund, where he had spent the last several years after retiring from his cab driving. A 2016 stroke had slowed both his words and his walking, but he was still as lucid as ever, with an incredible recall for the many different episodes of his life. It is now time spent that I treasure.

The final chapter aired last June. Russell approvingly listened to every episode on his old transistor radio. Then, in the summer of 2019, to my great shock and sadness, Russell passed away peacefully in his favourite armchair. He was 76 years old and still very much living the hermit lifestyle in his ramshackle home near Powell River.

Russell Letawsky had his detractors. There were some who considered him to be nothing more than a hustler and a drunk, always on the run from responsibility. He once told me that his greatest disappointment was his estranged relationship with his adult daughter, who lived just down the road from him. But that old hermit changed the life of one lonely kid in the '80s, and for that, I will always fondly remember him. A few weeks after his death, I spread his ashes into the outgoing tide on the beach at the cabin, a couple of feet from where his tiny shack once stood, a place we now call Russell Cove.

Russell's saga is one of the countless Desolation Sound stories that I now share with my children. It's all become part of the lore that has the kids asking me the oft-repeated question, "When are we going to the cabin?"

Last year, while Jill was away on tour, I took the kids up to the cabin on my own, reliving my youth: the Beach Boys and ABBA blasted from the stereo as we wound our way up the stomach-churning hairpin curves of Hwy. 101. We arrived at the dock and threw our gear into *Big Buck\$*, our ironically named old speedboat, and soon we were roaring across the inlet on a gorgeous fall day.

Joshua, now six, spotted them first: two humpback whales, showing off the white undersides of their broad tails. I stopped the boat and put my arms around my kids as we watched those majestic creatures dive and surface. I found myself thinking back to my old friend, the Hermit Russell Letawsky: "There is always something to see." 🐋

Grant Lawrence is a broadcaster, podcaster, and author of three bestselling memoirs, including Adventures in Solitude: What Not to Wear to a Nude Potluck and Other Stories from Desolation Sound. A sequel comes out in 2021.