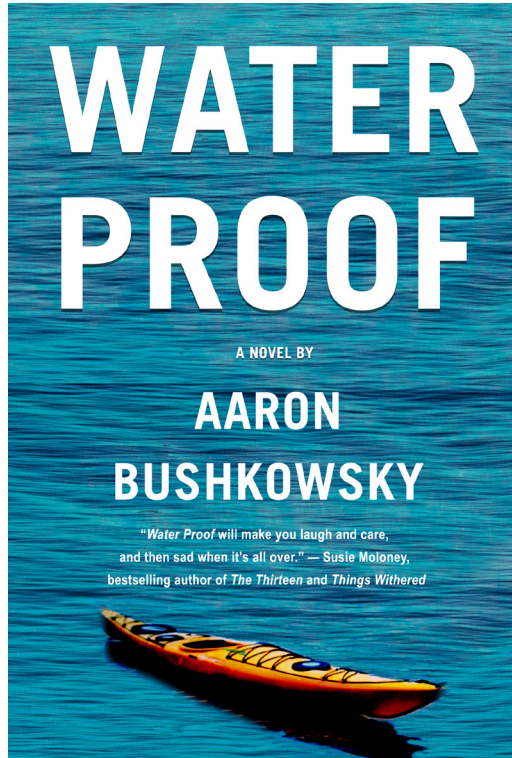


Excerpt from *Water Proof*
by Aaron Bushkowsky



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Chapter One

Let me first be clear about kayaking: I don't like it. You're at the mercy of the sea and when the sea is angry, you're just a bug to it. One misstep and you're in the drink. And once you're in the drink in late September, you have minutes to live. People die all the time doing this. But I'm doing this to save our marriage.

Desolation Sound.

East of Vancouver Island and quite far north of Vancouver, British Columbia.

It's called Desolation for a reason, especially in late September. There's nothing up there except kayak tours and whale watchers. Occasionally a nice sailboat splashes by, helmed by aging stockbrokers who name their vessels Lucky, Serenity or Providential. The view is to die for: endless blue waters, mountains as pristine as bachelors wearing brand new tuxedos, stiff and formal in the biting, cold, cold wind. Our paddles cut the flat waters as precise as surgeons' scalpels. Ten kayaks, mostly orange and red, moving silently across the open still water, gulls following us suspiciously as we make our way to our bivouac on the east side of Cortes Island, on the north end of Gulf of Georgia. We've seen killer whales and seals and in the distance, the telltale plumes of whale spouts. Humpbacks. But it's cold. And the fog starts to gather us into her skirt, the shore turning soft focus, movie-like and foreboding.

If there were a soundtrack to go with this, it would be a cello, naturally. A build to it.

You'd need a big lens to get all this, maybe a Nikon 14-24mm or something like that. Something professional to get all the blues and greens and browns and white — yeah, there's white. The tops of mountains everywhere around us: white, white, white.

I'm actually tired of breathing all this in.

My lungs hurt.

The wonder in my eyes is draining.

I'm overthinking scenery, experiencing too much, too long.

Even my ears ache. I'm tired of listening to silence all day.

And watching the forever horizon for the water's dark blue edge.

Nothing happens except for views to die for.

And it's a slow death.

My shoulders are killing me. My hands shake. And my cracked lips feel like Mister Salty pretzels. The ones before they eased up on the coarse salt. We've just paddled for two hours across open water. The first hour we kept our bows turned into the three-foot swells, up and down, fighting the waves and wind, and eventually nausea. Watch the kayak in front of you. Watch it disappear six feet away. Watch the kayak ahead of you. Disappear. Don't panic. Never panic. Paddle. Throw your fist out, jab the air with your hand on the paddle. Jab the other fist. Establish a rhythm. Steady. Steady. Back and forth as the sea writhes in slow motion.

You can do this! You can! Dig! Dig! Dig!

This is the coxswain in my head and he's a bastard.

The shore doesn't appear until the second hour when the water flattens out into an ominous green belly swell. I see dark shapes low under my bow. I can only imagine what they are: killer whales, sharks, giant otters, the kraken.

It's quiet. As they say in the movies, too quiet.

It's Waterworld out here except with more islands and fewer smokers and minus Dennis Hopper, who was brilliant in the movie. Brilliant.

No, out here is a lot of flat wallow. The ocean senses us. And we're ruining the planet. Well, not all of us.

It's empty beyond empty and for all we know, we could be on an

alien planet searching for land.

Distance. Lots of distance between us.

Anna has ear buds in, you can barely tell because she has shoulder-length hair and a Tilley hat on. Loves Lady Gaga on the water.

In her own world in this world.

My wife is.

Strange.

We met online years ago when meeting online became the thing to do. She showed up late for the date wearing a jaunty nautical hat and white gloves with the fingertips cut off. Her short, mousy-brown hair was tied back by elastic bands, her big cheekbones only exaggerated the runny mascara because she had been crying a lot, worrying about first impressions. There was an irony to this initial date that eluded me for years: the sorrow the precluded it wasn't really about me, but about how things were about to change forever.

And. Things change. Mostly when you're not watching. You grow apart. You drift. You forget what kept you in sight. What was it she said that first date that made you laugh? What was it that made you stop and look around? What did she smell like? Where did she go when you dropped her off in the Safeway parking lot? Swinging her purse like a lasso. Stumbling a bit in her black high heels and dark yoga pants. Looking back at me in my car looking back at her, tossing her short Princess Diana hair. Both of us smiling and thinking here it comes, here comes my future, the asphalt shimmering between us.

But where am I now?

What am I doing?

Then a majestic oil tanker appears and crawls toward us, its massive rusty hull sweating water. It seems to take forever, but then it slides by an island and disappears like a gator on the prowl.

I hear a ship's horn.

Across the water, of course.

Then.

I feel the water bulge under me. I imagine it, I guess. It goes by fast.

The others look around as if trying to figure out what just happened.

Holy crap.

A warning?

A bad sign?

An accident?

We don't say much because we're worried about dying. You don't want to ditch in this shit. Not a chance. You'd never last.

My opinion, of course. And I'm an extremist. But the fact is I'm terrible in water and on water. I was never much of a swimmer and I get nauseated fast because of vertigo. There's also a rhythm to the ocean and I can't dance.

It's swell to have swell, but as my mother used to say: enough is enough, go to your room if you think you've got moves.

Wow, is it quiet out here, I say to nobody in particular.

Not a single murmur in agreement.

What's with these people? Aren't we paying for this?

The ocean gurgles. It's a deep one, far beneath our skinny hulls and fat asses.

A silence. As vast as it is out here. All-consuming. The edge of dusk swallowing us slowly. We mean nothing. Nothing. The great expanse has not been expanding our minds, that's for sure.

A real quiet ride, wave after wave.

Solitude with each stroke, building.

Later Anna will say nobody talked because nobody talked. It was because of the natural beauty. The sky. The mountains. The

water. Etcetera.

The inescapable fact is, we feel totally insignificant in the emptiness out here.

You do. And you start to regret many things that are out of your control.

Like global warming.

And oil production.

Pipelines.

Marriage.

I shiver like hell.

Can barely swallow.

Or talk.

Also.

It's Friday, the 13th.

It really is.

Most of us beach without a problem. We scrape the shore with the bottoms of our boats, snap off the Oh Shit handles on the spray skirts, and creep out ankle-deep in the cold, cold water. My feet feel like they just went to the dentist, completely numb. I stumble getting to the shore and look amateurish because I drop my sunglasses a couple of times. I want to throw up. I might be seasick. My fingers are white raisins. Our fearless leader, Emma, a bright, curvy, dark-haired Environmental Sciences major from the University of Victoria, wades out in her bright yellow gum boots, scanning the soft cloth of fog starting to muffle our very existence on the rocky shore.

Andy, Anna, Allan, Faith, Colin, Kayla, Robert, his partner, Chris ... and Sarah?

Emma reads from her list.

Sarah?

Sarah?

She says the last Sarah as if knowing what the answer is.

We all stand like sentinels, each on our own rock, to study the fog. We're knights and our watch is the endless, dirty green water. Our bright waterproof jackets lose their glow as the fog settles even though we're blinking a lot.

Am I tearing over?

Through the veil, and I don't use that word lightly, an empty bright red kayak drifts toward us. And somebody behind me screams.

It's Anna.

Sarah is her best friend in the world.

Was.