

The Republic of George's Island

One man against the elements.

Donna McMahon

On Tuesday afternoon, with the weather reports still forecasting hurricane-force winds, I hauled my decrepit fibre-glass dinghy down to Davis Bay and rowed out to try to talk that old throwback into coming ashore. I knew it was futile, but I felt like I had to make an attempt.

Westerly gusts drove whitecaps down the fetch of Georgia Strait. They rolled and crashed across the shallow shoreline, nearly overturning my clumsy boat. Icy spray slapped me as I strained at the oars, and within a minute I was soaked and achingly cold.

In the lee of the house, I tied up to a rusty trailer hitch. Decades ago, George had started driving deep steel pilings into the sandy soil around his house. He built a concrete retaining wall using old car and truck frames as rebar, and then piled up any other junk he could find for a breakwater. We kids watched with fascination while his neighbours, already besieged behind sandbag walls, shook their heads with a mixture of dismay and derision, but 30 years later, after three metres of sea level rise, his was the only original waterfront house remaining on the bay. And his sign, spray-painted on a full sheet of plywood nailed to the south side of the house, had become a local landmark:

“THE INDEPENDANT REPUBLIC OF GEORGE'S ISLAND — PISS OFF!”

I picked my way cautiously along the rough, algae-coated breakwater and positioned myself to one side of George's door before pounding on it and shouting.

“George, it's Logan. Let me in, OK?”

I couldn't hear much over the roar of wind and surf, but after several repetitions, a gruff voice bellowed back.

“Piss off!”

“I brought a bottle of rye.”

There was a pause — probably George checking all his surveillance cams for evidence of an ambush — then the warped door opened a crack, revealing a wild tangle of grey beard and a bloodshot eye.

“You could've brought a 40-pounder,” he grumbled. But he let me in.

So I sat for an hour at George's kitchen table in a stench of mildew and rotting carpet, trying to talk some sense into a guy with a rifle on his lap, chugging whisky straight from the bottle. Long ago he'd been a big man with a big gut, but he was well past 70 now, and his ancient, dirty clothes hung off him. I often wondered what he was eating

these days. Any remaining cases of canned food must surely have rusted, and there wasn't much left in these plundered waters except barnacles and a few tenacious shore crabs. Even the glaucous gull population had plummeted.

The Pacific was slowly undermining George's foundations, and his cupboard doors hung askew, their melamine surface mildew-spotted and bulging with damp. Every room was crammed with piles and boxes of stuff — a mouldering graveyard of



ancient flatscreen televisions, home appliances and power tools that had been sold or given away when people couldn't afford to run them any more. An ancient tungsten lightbulb, powered by a home-made solar system, illuminated the dirty kitchen and the illegal wood stove that George burned driftwood in.

He waved the bottle at me, interrupting my warning about record-breaking winds and storm surges. I shook my head.

“No thanks. I don't drink.”

“That just figures. Well, it's crap rye anyway.”

Crap that I'd paid for out of my own pocket, I thought angrily, but I said: “Look, how about coming ashore until the storm is over?”

“So you can lock me up and then tear

down the house like you did to Lawsons? Just how stupid do you think I am?” he muttered.

Pretty stupid, I thought. But mostly selfish. I'd met any number of old people who'd expected to be cocooned in consumer comfort all their lives, and who just couldn't get it through their heads that those days were over. They even had the gall to go crying to people like me who struggled to live off the scraps of their greed while busting our asses to rescue remnants of the ecosystem.

I wanted nothing to do with George, but my job as remediation team leader made it unavoidable. We were trying to re-establish intertidal zones on human-altered and polluted shorelines — filthy, frustrating work, the worst part of which was expropriating property that had fallen below sea level. The rolling easement laws were clear, but people nonetheless clung to their houses with blind tenacity. And George was the worst — sitting in his fortified pile and dumping raw sewage and garbage into my bay. Last summer, when I discovered he'd been digging for clams in the bivalve test site we'd spent three years building, I'd been ready to go out at low tide with a fire bomb.

“Last chance,” I said finally. When George shook his head, I got up and walked to the door.

“Hey!” He rose unsteadily, and when I turned to meet his eyes, I saw fear. He knew.

Unexpectedly, he held out a grimy hand.

“Uh... Thanks, eh?”

I felt an unexpected lump in my throat as I shook his hand.

I didn't sleep much that night. I could hear the pounding surf even from my bedroom, a kilometre away from the beach. The next morning, the streets were littered with wind-shredded branches, broken glass, chimney bricks and roof tiles.

Down in the bay, waves foamed against a stump like a broken molar — chunks of concrete, twisted truck skeletons, and snapped off two-by-sixes. No house. No George.

I'd expected that. But I hadn't expected that I might miss him. ■

Donna McMahon lives in the small coastal town of Gibson's Landing (north of Vancouver, Canada), but spends much of her time in the twenty-second-century Pacific Northwest. Her degree is in history, which she stubbornly maintains is the field of the future as “there's more history every day”.

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