

Mud Slog

by

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Winter comes to northern Oregon as a single fat raindrop, clattering down through the fir needles to splash the thirsty ferns below. It is soon joined by its brethren, early scouts in an invasion that will progress from sprinkle to shower to thundering, crashing deluge in a distressingly short time.

From September to May, the rain blows through the trees with scant respite. In the little town of Lake Grove, the constant, oppressive downpour spans the larger portion of the Earth's passage around the Sun. To a ten-year-old boy, nose pressed against a dripping window pane, the wet time dominates a substantial fraction of his remembered existence. He suffers a hopeless, dreary vigil whose eventual ending must be taken on faith, for he has scant experience with the distant relief of Springtime.

Imperceptibly, the days grow colder and the nights longer, until both the bus ride to school and the one returning is endured in rattling darkness by the chattering, dripping children in their sunny yellow rain slickers. Week-end play days become too short for real fun -- the dim, leaden skies too uninviting, the effort of laying on the rough clothing not worth the few brief hours of diffuse daylight. Mothers and fathers roll their eyes heavenward, stoically bearing the surly indoor exuberance of their stir-crazed offspring.

In the exact calendar center of this endless, colorless time comes a singular, glorious event: February arrives, the month they drain The Lake.

The Lake: the center of summer activity in this village of exploring children. The Lake: its shores guarded by ancient stands of Douglas fir and daunting, footpath-choking blackberry vines. The Lake: place of The Swim, whose slippery, sliver-rich dock and grassy shores draw tiny bare feet like an irresistible magnet whenever the Summer Sun shines; little feet running, pounding, hopping in gleeful pain over a mile or more of hot tar roadways and creosote-fragrant railroad ties to plunge into the cool muddy waters of The Swim.

But now is the time that Winter has claimed, and memories of sun-baked days have been rudely drowned by the cold rains that occupy the dismal Oregon sky. If a gray-day-bored lad were to

watch closely the waters of The Swim during the first cold days of February, he would see something of interest: the windswept surface begins to splash a bit lower on the pilings. As the short days progress, the waters draw back noticeably, until the muddy bottom becomes exposed in a ragged ring around The Lake. The phenomenon continues, the water pulling away from the shore as if repelled. Yards of brown bottom are exposed, then acres; then, in places, miles.

The mud is ready. The slog begins.

The mud! In all of nature, what force can be so great as the attraction between a small boy and a mud puddle? Not bright toys, nor puppy dogs; not even the warm, enclosing arms of his mother. He will drop them all in a heartbeat to rush to a newly-espied puddle of mud. There he will circle it, sizing its circumference. He will eye the surface, judging its depth; classifying the find in his mind's inventory of puddles encountered. He will tease the wet margin with his toe, building his anticipation. He may lean over to sample its consistency, testing particularly the veneer of milky ice.

Then, after proper consideration and ceremony, he will run, jump high and -- always with both feet simultaneously -- deflower its geometric center with a giant brown splash and gleeful yell appropriate to the grand event. Manly duty accomplished, he will wander off in search of life's next dalliance, memories of the newly ravished puddle quickly fading.

If a simple puddle can enrapture so, how, then, can the appeal of an entire lake full of mud be measured? A lake that, for the briefest of months in the most miserable of seasons, lowers its watery gown, winsomely certain of a boy's fascinated gaze. An Amazon of a puddle, too great to circle; so large that, even in his wildest dreams, a boy couldn't hope to cross it during a short Winter day. But he must try.

Such an expedition needs careful planning. Equipment must be assembled; supplies gathered. Galoshes and rain hats, pocket snacks and gunnysack for booty. Companions are recruited for support in case of dangers encountered -- and for sharing in the certainty of delight. This complicates the scheduling, as parents must somehow be convinced of the worth of the trek. Even for young, conspiring minds, this is difficult. It is usually more expedient to avoid discussion of the playing field for the day; one could always claim a chance encounter later.

Finally, the safari is arranged. For the first time in many months, the children clamber down the trail to The Swim. Clustered on the dock, stretched tall and rickety on its spindly

exposed pilings, the adventurers regard their imminent conquest. The familiar rule-flat surface of the lake is gone, the virgin mud below exposed in its dun mounds and berms; its undulating surface laced with fresh-cut creeks still draining the oozing bottom.

The anxious eyes and uncontrolled grins are worn by the boys of experience. This is not their first encounter with the mud. Others are less certain. Confronted by the immensity of the alien landscape, earlier bravery wavers; nervous eyes steal glances up the pathway leading to warm houses and more familiar Saturday diversions.

Descriptions of the earthly pleasures of the day, so vividly portrayed by their elder companions, are, after all, but words. Young eyes view something quite different, and dark imagination predicts the outcome: an expanse so vast, so forbidding it could easily swallow a little boy whole, leaving only pitiful bubbles on the smooth, uncaring surface. Such dark oblivion could be endured, except for the certainty that Mother would learn of his shameful treachery, his daring of independence; of his leaving her for the Siren call of the devouring mud.

Each must face this moment in his own way; many would remember it as a rite of passage. The reward comes on the next visit, when he can be the very first to take to the mud, smiling derisively upon the sissies who hang back in their cowardice.

Before long, one rubber-shod foot ventures out, followed quickly by the others. Eventually, the party is cast adrift from the shore, looking back, wondering at the new perspective. The expedition slogs silently onto the wasteland in single file.

At first, the safari clings to the shoreline. Slogging past the summer homes of the rich folk, admiring broad expanses of lawn hidden from view by high walls on the road side. Past abandoned swimming docks and empty boat houses. Warily circling the workmen stacking stones and mending sea walls, cursing the very mud embraced by the band of adventurers. Catching acrid, wind-shredded whiffs of their rough talk and unfiltered Camels. Collective courage gathered, the party soon forsakes the shallows and strikes out toward deeper places. The destination is uncertain; the trail unmarked. In single file, the boys skulk in gaudy parade; brilliant yellow raincoats tracing a short dotted trail across the dun wilderness. Soon, the shore is forgotten, obscured by fog and rain. Civilization abandoned, the sounds are now of rattling rain on the slickers and the slurp of small galoshes in the mud.

A lesson is soon learned: mud can be treacherous. More than simply water and dirt, it devises myriad obstacles. Easiest to traverse is the shore-hugging mud, hardly as thick as a schoolbook and supported by firm gravel below. Further out, it's deeper -- much deeper. It can become so with teasing subtlety, or with foot-swallowing suddenness. You have to be very careful.

Sometimes, the mud can support your weight. Creep onto its jellied surface as you would untested ice. Push a foot down here, and a shuddering wave of earth will roll 'way over there. Be gentle, though. Tickle it too much, and a sudden split in the stretched surface will gobble your leg up to the knee.

In other places, the mud looks quite solid, but is so loose a spirited gust of wind can ruffle its surface. It's best to give such expanses a wide berth.

Mostly, the mud simply sucks. Place a foot forward, and the glazed surface will swallow your foot, and then your ankle as you carefully test the depths. The probing galosh will disappear up to your calf before support is sufficient to shift forward. The icy mud instantly collapses the flimsy footgear, pressing cold around your leg, grasping it with the tenacity of a bear trap. You are committed to the step.

The challenge then is to lift the rearmost foot without leaving the boot behind. This takes a special technique, bending the knee down, lifting the heel first. If executed properly, the reward is a gratifying slurpy sucking sound, far too rude to not be delightful.

The worst disaster -- difficult to avoid -- is to step out of your boot, leaving you in wavering balance on one captured leg, loath to touch your dry Argyll onto the slimy surface before you recover the lost footgear. Everyone does it once, and slogs in lopsided gritty misery the rest of the day as appropriate penance.

This specialized technique of the sloggers quickly ensures two things: early, aching exhaustion and a dual stripe of splattered filth up the back of the pants, coat and even hat. This is the main reason the slog is so special; why, for some, it only happens once per year. For, try as you might, there is no way to clean up the clothing before Mother discovers it. Further expeditionary permission is unlikely until the next February, and is not even certain then.

The party follows the random gravelly bottoms of just-born creek beds. It sets out across vast plains of smooth brown sameness.

It circles isolated lakelets as big as softball fields. The explorers wonder at oozing dark coloration and the rainbow sheen of smelly petroleum contamination bubbling up from sources unimagined. They trek through stands of silent tree stumps, their soggy stubs exposing the ragged wounds inflicted by rough saws and sweating lumberjacks a hundred years in the grave.

Occasionally the party stops cold, looking about in wonder at the forbidden place they have discovered. They should not be here, could not be here -- 'way below the surface of The Lake. The tallest of them, reaching as high as he might, would come a dozen feet short of reaching the surface where the foolish coots paddle in the Summertime. Why, fish should be swimming right where we are standing!

"Look out! Here comes a boat!" Our eyes follow the pointed arm to the imagined threat. "It's a big Chris-Craft, and it's headed right toward us!" We crouch in feigned terror, mouthing the intruder's roar as it flashes overhead.

"Look there! It's a water skier," another voice shouts, pointing in the wake of the boat just past. We all duck the other way in giggling reaction.

There is treasure. We ignore the tin cans and bottle tops, so easily found ashore. No, we are looking for exotica. Fumbled fishing lures and sunken screwdrivers, pocket combs and mysterious, unidentifiable metal gadgets. A tackle box, even empty, brings bragging rights until Easter. Legend tells of a whole outboard motor once extracted, washed clean and laboriously dragged to the shore -- where it was summarily claimed by its waiting owner.

If nothing else, there are pop bottles. Smooth brown stubbies, worth a penny. Knobby Coke bottles and big, heavy Nehis. Stuffed with mud, they are easy to clean and worth two cents each at Remsen's. Treasure, indeed.

Occasionally, the wandering band encounters another foraging party. The groups mingle in yellow-slickered confusion, each exaggerating adventures in tones of feigned bravery, delivered in short puffs of chilled breath. Booty is compared; sometimes traded. Such parleys are brief, however. It's too cold to halt movement for long, and everyone knows the light of the short February day will fade all too suddenly.

Reluctantly, the leaders herd the party to higher ground, finally making shorefall. The place they exit the mud is hardly ever their starting point at The Swim, so the path home is uncertain. Left, or to the right on this road? Uphill or down?

We've never seen this place before! The retreat is a long one, often enduring after dark. The lights of home glow as welcome beacons, calling to weary legs and frigid pink cheeks.

The hour is late, the clothing filthy. Adult faces are harried, perhaps angry. Trouble is certain, but supper is warm in the oven. You can say where you were today, but can't explain why. The mud has called you, and you went. There can be no apology for that.

The End