My Warmshowers host at Campbell River told me I would now be entering the more remote part of Vancouver Island. “You might have to wild camp,” he said. I knew I would have to camp in the wilderness on my solo ride from Seattle to Tuktoyaktuk, on the Arctic Ocean, but I didn’t think it would be so soon.

I rode up to the gas station and general store in the small hamlet of Woss, 80 miles north of Campbell River. I bought a bag of chocolate-covered almonds, connected to wifi, and sat outside the store in a folding chair while I Googled nearby campsites. From what I could gather, there was a campground five miles out of town on an old gravel road. I asked an elderly gentleman filling up his truck if he knew how to get there. “Hmm, I’ve never been there, but I don’t think it’s far.” I asked a lady coming in to buy cigarettes if she knew. She looked around and said, “Nope.”

I waited until the minivan was gone and asked the attendant. “Excuse me, do you know where the camping is in town?” “Yes, it is down the road,” he said.

“Down the road where?” “I don’t know,” he answered in a thick Chinese accent. “I am new to the area. I bought the store two years ago.”

Behind him was a local gentleman who overheard the conversation. “Are you looking for a place to pitch your tent?” “Yes,” I said, scoping the man for the tell-tale signs of a serial killer.

“I followed him despite knowing full well how this would all play out. I’d seen one too many episodes of Dateline to trust this seemingly good-natured man. Nevertheless, I followed his white minivan two miles down the street, around the corner, and through a residential area to a giant field with an oval running track beside an old boarded-up elementary school at the edge of town.

“You have the entire field to yourself,” he gestured with a big, friendly smile. “Have a nice evening!” he shouted from the window as he drove away. I waited until the minivan was
out of sight, then headed over to the abandoned school. I wasn't going to be a sitting duck in the middle of that field. I walked around the school until I found a sheltered area in the back situated just feet from thick, dark woods. I leaned my bike against the wall, squatted down, and studied my surroundings as if tracking a pack of wolves.

Vancouver Island has the largest population of cougars anywhere in North America and one of the largest black bear populations. I talked to a wildlife ranger in Campbell River who said that a grizzly had swum from the mainland and was spotted near Port McNeil just 47 miles away. The space between the covered area where I sat crouched and the beginning of the forest was a stone's toss away. I imagined any number of wild animals sizing me up, ready to pounce as soon as the sun set, which was very soon.

I jumped on my bike and rode straight to the convenience store. I plopped back down on the lawn chair to decide what to do next. In an hour, it would be completely dark. I was too tired to figure out how to get to the campsite. Dark clouds had formed and a light drizzle moved in; I had to act fast.

Over the past 10 days on Vancouver Island and the Olympic Peninsula, I had either stayed at a campground right off the highway or with a Warmshowers host, living the good life of an urban bike tourer. I barely had to put up my tent or pull out my stove. The reality of the wilderness caught me off guard. Had I done my research and left town earlier, I wouldn't be in this predicament, but remorse wouldn't save me now. I came up with a plan. I went back into the store to talk to the attendant.

“Um, excuse me,” I said.

The owner came out from the back room.

“What time do you close?”

“10:00 PM,” he said.

“Could I sleep in here tonight?”

The owner stared at me, his eyes ever widening with a slight hint of fear.

“Could I just lay my mattress out in the back of the store and sleep in here tonight?” I asked again.

“You want to sleep in the store?” he said, tilting his head sideways.

“Yes, that's right.”

“Oh no, so sorry. You cannot sleep in the store.”

I pointed to a corner where I would be out of the way. “I have my own food.” I reassured him.

“No, no,” he laughed nervously.

“Can I sleep outside of the store?” I asked when I sensed he was feeling for an emergency button under the counter.

“Outside is good.”

It was only two miles from the school and Big Scary Woods, but I felt safer at the convenience store, even if sleeping outside, because I could theoretically get inside somewhere faster, and there were people around in case something went sideways. Plus, what if that nice man had left as a ruse, and would come back later to find me alone?

I scouted the parking lot and walked around the building. In the alley out back, there was a space between the back of the building and a small room off to the side that led to a washer and dryer. Beside the room was a pile of odds and ends from the store such as old racks, buckets of paint, and empty plastic containers of milk. Across the alley were a few houses with porch lights on. A dumpster sat at the far end of the alley. The search was over. I had found the perfect place to sleep.

I set up camp, locked up my bike, and then used the bathroom inside the store to brush my teeth and get ready for bed.

As I walked back outside, the motion detector light went on next to my tent. A few feet from me were stairs that went up to a second-floor apartment. The door opened and a young man came out to smoke a cigarette. A few minutes later his mother came out behind him. They stared at me without saying a word. I smiled and waved.

“Sorry for the inconvenience,” I said. “I’ll be gone early in the morning.”

The mother smiled and the son continued staring. Rings of smoke drifted down and encircled my tent. Not that different from the smoke of a campfire, I thought.

I lay down on my sleeping pad, exhausted from the day’s events. I quickly fell asleep. What seemed like seconds later, a car came through the alley only feet away from my tent. The noise triggered the dogs across the street to bark and, in turn, the owner came out to yell at them to shut up.

I shifted position, closed my eyes, and drifted off again. As if in a dream, the pervasive odor of cigarette smoke enveloped my tent again, and the escalating voices of mother and son arguing, the sensor lights were triggered by someone walking near my tent. An elongated shadow moved across my rain fly and disappeared into the distance.

As I lay there semi-conscious, I imagined a bear trying to get into the dumpster just feet away. I became hypervigilant to any sounds coming from that direction. It didn't help that the dogs slept outside and continued to bark at any disturbance throughout the night. I looked at my clock. It was only midnight. I stared up at the ceiling of my tent wide awake.

I must have fallen asleep at some point during the night because I woke up with the sun on my tent. I gathered my clothes and toiletries and shuffled into the store with my unruly hair and my pajamas still on. The owner was back on duty. He looked at me as if a Sasquatch had just wandered in. I laid my dollar on the counter and filled up my mug with strong, bitter coffee, then headed straight to the restroom as if I lived there.

I broke down camp, loaded up my bike, thanked the owner again for his generosity, and rode out of town. I was happy that I had survived my first night of wild camping. The first night is always the hardest.

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