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canoer, or a potter-paddler. Nor was the phenomenon limited to artists. While having dinner with Peter Kemp, who was a *counselor-kayaker* and a close friend of a friend, I asked him if he had ever paddled to Abel Tasman National Park, which at that sunset moment appeared as a broad black hump on the horizon, some 25 miles across the Tasman Bay.

"Nah," he said in a low voice released through a shy smile. "That would be too hard and boring. I'd rather just put the boat in the water here and paddle an hour or two."

I liked his attitude toward the outdoors: Exercise was all about fun, enjoyment, and relaxation; there was nothing to prove, no need to be a *counselor-marathon kayaker*.

"IF THERE'S A GOD, I'M pretty sure he lives around here somewhere," Angela said, as I stopped to photograph yet more fat sheep grazing yet another velvety green hillside gilded in yet more golden light, as we made our way to the wild West Coast. Soon, when we dropped into the misty valley formed by the green Buller River, we were alone. Ahead of us the road unraveled smooth and empty. Somewhere in that general area I took a liking to the big, throaty roar that the RV's diesel engine emitted whenever I took my foot off the accelerator on a downhill or dropped to a lower gear going up. I've never named a car, but that sound suggested a title: *Big Boy*.

Everything was grand as we drove along through spectacular scenery – and then *Big Boy's* water pump quit. The one that powered the sink...and the toilet.

"Maybe it doesn't run unless we're hooked up," I said to Angela. "No, that can't be right. Try it again."

"It's not going on," she said, flipping the switch.

"Let's try later. If it doesn't kick in, we'll call someone."

It stayed broken. (Had I unwittingly done the "don't ever" on our very first day out?) As dusk approached, I parked just south of Westport, on a dirt road by the ocean, and we all turned in, tired and with a little road grime on us.

The following morning broke sunny and clear. We were on the road in New Zealand's gorgeous, sparsely populated Wild West, and water or not, what could we do? What

would any Kiwi do? Grit it out; stay dirty and keep pushing, subsisting on a steady diet of pâté, sun-sweetened tangerines, sauvignon blanc, and chocolate cookies.

We were equipped with nothing but our wits, a fully stocked fridge, our comforters, our Italian stove-top espresso maker, and an intermittent-wiper setup that would make Zoe Battersby proud. We would endure.

Still, as the day wore on, and despite the beauty of the so-called "Pancake Rocks" – a series of stacked limestone formations at a place called Punakaiki – and the micron of

riches we earned panning for gold at Shantytown, and the intrigue of the "kiwihouse" in Hokitika (I alone saw the national bird because the kids were fast asleep), a certain limpness of spirit seemed to set in. At 7:30 P.M. we were still on the road, not far from our destination, Fox Glacier, but we needed food, so we pulled over in the town of Franz Josef Glacier. I looked around and again became jealous of my backpacking 23-year-old self – and all those like him. There they were, drinking beer and wine in the sun after a leisurely day of frolicking in one of New Zealand's top natural playgrounds. Meanwhile, in our RV sat two children and their parents – hungry, road-wearied, needing a shower. At a buffet-style place called the "Cheeky Kea Café" (named for the island's mischievous mountain parrots) we grabbed



some overcooked lamb with equally overcooked peas, roast potatoes, and carrots to "take away"; then I keyed *Big Boy* back to life.

Moping toward sunset, I had a brainstorm. Christmas was coming, and we had packed our kids' favorite holiday CD. I popped it in, and with the day's last light filtering in, we began the final downhill run into Fox Glacier with Sachio, Bianca, Angela, and me belting out the Pointer Sisters' rollicking rendition of "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town."

CLEANED UP AND IN HIGH SPIRITS THE NEXT MORNING, WITH the toilet refreshed, the gray water drained, and the pump repaired (faulty switch) by the world's friendliest mechanic, and with the snows of Mount Tasman and Mount Cook