

Jupiter Diego
A Scream Unheard

I HAD LONG ENTERTAINED A FANTASY of spiritual enlightenment coming as a result of a solo backcountry expedition into the wilderness. I had attempted this previously at the age of 18 with calamitous results in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park, and again at age 21 in the Appalachian wilderness. My job had become so stressful and unhappy that in spite of those prior poor outcomes, I determined that a third attempt was in order. I was 27 at the time, and chose as my starting point the relatively safe and beautiful Tuolumne Meadows, in the eastern part of Yosemite National Park. Being at least somewhat teachable from my prior backcountry fiascos, I packed ample freeze-dried provisions, a light-weight tent, a good sleeping bag, and a serious pair of hiking boots. I checked and rechecked my new state of the art Kelty backpack, and drove the next morning 335 miles from our tiny guest house in Culver City, to the eastern gate of Yosemite National Park. Dutifully and maturely, I praised myself, I visited the ranger's office, and obtained the proper backcountry permit and appropriate topographical maps, detailing my anticipated five day, 50 mile trek from Yosemite to Devil's Postpile near Mammoth Lakes, CA. The ranger did point out to me however, that after my first day of hiking, I would cross out of the park boundary and into the Sierra National Forest Service land, which was not patrolled by park rangers. When one obtains a backcountry wilderness permit, the camper is required to state an expected date of return, and emergency contact information in case, for whatever reason, one doesn't return or reach their planned destination as expected. The ranger took pains to explain to me that since I would be out of the national park's boundaries for most of my trek, these rules would not apply, and no one would know if I got into trouble. I sat by the side of the road afterwards with assorted hikers, hippies and bikers, ate my ham and cheese sandwich, and embarked thereafter on my trip. Hiking by myself, I climbed 4,000 feet out of the meadow to a high granite ridge called Donahue Pass, 12,500 feet in elevation. I was right on the border between Yosemite National Park and the equally vast Sierra National Forest service land, since renamed the Ansel Adams Wilderness. I pitched my tent, and overcome with an extraordinarily ferocious headache — high-altitude sickness — I climbed into my sleeping bag and went to sleep. The next morning, awakening to a glorious October morning, I got my gear together, and hiked down through fields of giant boulders, around glistening tarns, these are pristine high-alpine lakes, really more like ponds, very cold, very pure, the source of all life. I spent the whole day hiking in this manner, jumping from boulder to boulder, in a surreal high-altitude landscape, reminiscent of a Sci-fi movie. It got to be around 4 o' clock, and I had not seen one other human being all day. I knew I was tired and I knew I needed to stop, and I knew it would be dangerous to keep pressing on. I looked for a decent flat spot to pitch my tent. I passed up one, two, perhaps three perfectly reasonable candidates, small, flat grassy beds surrounded by round and chiseled rocks the size of a man or a horse. But I persuaded myself that the best was yet to come. As I leapt from yet another boulder to another boulder — there was no precise trail as such and GPS was but a future dream, a little voice in my head said, "You really need to stop and pitch your tent for the night now."

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

I chose not to listen to that voice just yet, convinced that the most perfect spot was yet shortly to come.

As I stepped off this one big rock, it seemed like slow motion as I landed on the granite slab below, and I heard a most terrible sound, a loud “snap” which I instantly knew could mean only one thing: I had broken my leg. Crying out in desperation, my first reaction was to grab for the cosmic remote, repeatedly pressing the rewind button, shouting “Rewind, rewind, REWIND just five seconds please! Just go back five seconds!”

But the evidence that met my eyes was incontrovertible, and could not be taken back to the store for a refund. My fibula in my left leg had broken in two pieces, and was protruding out through my skin. The pain was unbearable, as was the visual shock of seeing a part of my body that is supposed to be on the inside, and yet it’s waving hello to me on the outside. I screamed at the top of my lungs for help, but of course there was no one for miles in any direction. There were no rangers, I was alone in the vast land, there were no cell phones, no GPS, I was on my own and I could not even get up to walk a foot. As darkness began to descend, black clouds gathered large, and the temperature dropped precipitously. What if it were to snow?

October storms are not unusual in the eastern High Sierra. I was fucked. So very fucked.

With great difficulty, I managed to extract my sleeping bag, a candy bar, and a map from my backpack, and with shrieking painful difficulty, I managed to slide my bruised and bloody leg inside of the bag as a matter of sheer life and death. With the small amount of daylight remaining, I studied the map for the shortest possible route back to civilization. There I was still at least 30 miles from my planned destination of Mammoth Lakes, and that was clearly not going to happen. Unfortunately, the only alternative available, was to somehow get to June lake, which was but 10 miles away. I tried to memorize the new route as best I could, and fell into a whimpering, scorching, depleted sleep.

As I opened my eyes the next morning, the storm clouds loomed larger still, and a light dusting of snow was all around me. I hoped upon hope that the whole broken leg thing was merely a bad dream. But, the feel of sloshing warm blood at my protruding broken bone told another story. Realizing that I was genuinely in peril of losing my life, and that moving my body across those 10 remaining miles was essential to my continued participation in this thing we call living, I made a decision — well, it was really the only decision left — to fashion a splint, to ditch whatever contents of my backpack I could to lighten the load, and to crawl my way out of there by whatever means and at whatever cost.

I found a piece of a broken branch and jammed it into my boot, wrapping it around my calf with a bungee cord to keep it in place, and to provide some measure of support. I yanked myself up. Because I could no longer hop boulder to boulder, I sought out an alternate route indicated on the map which looked easier to navigate in my current state. I moved my body as best I could, sometimes holding on to trees or rocks for support, other times literally crawling on my belly to relieve the strain on my leg. I reached a certain juncture where the trail seemed to go left

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

or straight. Knowing that I could not afford to make the wrong decision, I pulled out my map and studied it once again. I determined to go left, and for the next several hours, I pulled myself along this uncertain trail, at the end of which appeared a sheer precipice with a 400 foot straight drop down. I had pulled my broken body two miles in the entirely wrong direction, and was now faced with an existential dilemma: Do I roll my body off this fucking cliff, ending the pain and drama, or do I pull myself back those two miles? Going back would mean I had dragged my body four unnecessary miles. I began to weep and wail and cry and scream to the depths of my soul. It just felt like the most dirty trick had been played upon me by sinister forces unseen.

After having my tantrum, I reckoned that I would not throw myself off that cliff, and I began to retrace those two misbegotten miles. This really to me was the absolute meaning of "lost." This really was my personal pit of despair. Alone in a vast forest, no one for miles, a bone protruding broken through my skin, and still ten miles from the nearest highway.

But manage I did, to pull myself back to that fork in the trail. And proceeding for another hour in the right direction now, I finally passed out, exhausted, on the dirt next to a creek, and I slept through the night.

In the morning, I was thrilled to hear voices, the voices of people, and the splashing of horse hooves through the stream beside which I lay. I sat up as best I could. I saw a train of eight horses, and several burrows. A tough country female guide, was leading the train. A man with a rifle sat mounted on the number 6 horse, a deer carcass lay spent and roped over the body of the burrow that brought up the rear. I frantically waved my arms and shouted, 'Help! Help! PLEASE stop! I need help!'

The woman trotted her horse through the stream, splashing my face and halted with an impatient glare thrown my way. "What's your problem dude?" she asked.

"I have a broken leg, and I need to get out to June lake. I desperately need your help."

"Get the fuck out of my way, or my horse will break your other leg too!" She replied.

My sense of being lost was now complete. I wasn't just geographically lost, I wasn't just medically at risk, I was now lost in the most important way of all: I was utterly cut off from the rest of humanity.

I was just incredulous at my sense of disconnection from the universe. And what I was seeking in the first place, was to feel a sublime connection with the universe. But in a really ironic upside down zen kind of nihilistic existential perturbation, or should i say perversion of everything, is it possible that this disconnection would prove to be exactly the path to enlightenment and connectedness that I was seeking in the first place? Nah, but nice try.

I just lay where I was, spent and unable to move any further. If these horses came this way, maybe somebody else will come too. Sure enough, a few hours later, I hear new voices, male voices. Here came three fishermen with four horses, their poles jutting in the air, their beer bellies jutting forward at 90 degrees. They approached a bit more gingerly than the prior

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

company, and the man in front says to me, "Yo boy! What you doing lying down on the ground like that for?"

"I'm dying, I can't walk, and this bitch who came by with like eight horses a couple of hours ago refused to ride me out, so I'm just looking for some help. You want to see my bone sticking out?"

So he said, "Well here's what we're gonna do. You gonna spend the night with us. Come on Hal! Help me lift this boy onto our empty horse!"

So the men came down and lifted me up and put me on their horse, backpack and all. We proceeded toward their campground, which was only half a mile away. When we got to the campground, one of the men revealed a hundred pill bottle of Darvon, a synthetic narcotic painkiller, and invited me to have as many as I wanted. That single act of compassion may well have served to keep me from becoming the next Charles Manson. They then fried up a delicious campfire dinner of freshly caught trout and of course, lots of beer. It was a heavenly respite from the hell I had endured.

In the morning, believe it or not, the men came to me as a group and informed me to my utter disbelief that they could take my backpack out to the highway junction at June Lake, but they really did not have the space to take me.

"You know, I'm the one who needs to get out, how bout you take me and leave the backpack here?" I asked. "I need to get to a hospital!"

"Oh no, you're gonna be fine! I don't even think it's broken. Don't you worry a bit, we'll take your backpack and it'll be waiting for you when you get out."

I spent the whole next day crawling the remaining six miles to June Lake, and when I finally arrived, I found an assortment of ungenerous spirits: A man with the Department of Defense, who would not consider driving me up toward Tioga Pass even though he was headed in that exact direction, the bitch horse guide not even deigning to say hello to the injured man she had threatened, the fishermen who had been so supportive the night before and so incongruously insensitive the next day, these and other agents of the High Sierra underworld stood around, arms crossed, cigarettes between their lips, shooting glares that pretended to not care but which reeked only of their own insecurities. I found my backpack and straggled off to the highway. I hitchhiked 35 miles back to Tuolumne Meadows. Night now falling, I find my 1972 Dodge Dart, and grateful that it was my left leg that is broken and not my right, so I can operate the gas and brake pedals, I drive the 335 miles home, arriving at my tiny guest house in Culver City at 5 in the morning. My fiancé takes one look at my leg and my now very swollen ankle, and she says, "You drove home 300 miles with your leg like that!? You're gonna need surgery tomorrow."

And so it was. Within hours, at the hospital, and under the gentle cloud of Fentanyl, I was cut open and surgical steel screws put in place, a cast wrapped around my leg, and that was the last time that I attempted a solo trip into the wilderness.