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GROUND FIRES: Essays on Land and Scouting

By

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BA, Carleton College, Northfield, MN, 2011

Thesis

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Ground Fires: Essays on Land and Scouting

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Abstract: *Ground Fires* is a collection of creative nonfiction probing the social and environmental complexities that marked the narrator's long membership in the Boy Scouts of America. I grew up a Scout, part of a quirky, adventurous troop in a New England college town. After earning Eagle and graduating high school, I moved west, working for seven summers and a few more seasons at Philmont Scout Ranch in northern New Mexico. I led backpacking trips through the mountains and high desert, teaching teenagers about land I knew and loved, land that was changing fast. From bears to wildfire to challenging politics, these stories seek the colorful people and places behind a uniquely American institution, in hopes that Scouting might serve as a bright force in shaping the future of our diverse and wild country.

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Prologue

The storm will not stop. Across western Nebraska and eastern Colorado, rain hammers the windshield of the old green hatchback. The wind howls and lightning shreds the ink sky, turns it purple. West of the state line, I pull off the interstate in Sterling. I park the shuddering car in the back of a rest area, recline the seat, crawl into a sleeping bag. Enough for tonight.

I had graduated from college two days earlier. I drove west toward the mountains because I knew nowhere better to go. I went as a Boy Scout, my khaki uniform hanging in the backseat, because that was how I had always gone to the mountains before.

Scouting began to frame me when I was six years old. As a Tiger Cub in Western Massachusetts, I visited a dam on the Connecticut River that once powered the paper mills of brick-hewn Holyoke. I stared at the fish ladder, waiting for gray bodies to flail through a tube of yellow water.

I lived in a Scouting family. My father and his two brothers were Eagle Scouts. My own two brothers became Tiger Cubs, then Cub Scouts, then Boy Scouts. Our dad, an estates lawyer with an endless backlog, chose Scouting for his few free hours. He served first as cubmaster, then, shortly after I joined the Boy Scouts at age ten, as scoutmaster of Troop 504, the best troop in the universe. My involvement went without question.

When I started to look at Scouting for myself, it was already stitched deep into my fabric. My closest friendships came from the Scout troop. My fondest adventures occurred under its

auspices. I was marching like a regular along “The Trail to Eagle,” as Scouts affectionately call their rank advancement program. And I wasn’t much for quitting things. In the dying light of November, I’d stay out in the driveway shooting baskets with until I finally made my self-mandate of ten straight free throws. I would stay in Scouts and make Eagle, too. That much had always been obvious.

Then, near the end of high school, the relationship turned. Scouting’s role shifted—from a kid’s source of adventure to a searcher’s source of consistency. As I finished off Eagle, I fell in love with a place, and Scouting was how I could get there. The place was Philmont Scout Ranch in northern New Mexico, a sprawling mountain reserve owned by the Boy Scouts of America, the biggest and wildest of summer camps. I had backpacked there for ten days when I was fourteen, then for three weeks when I was seventeen. I would work there leading trips for seven summers. I learned the guts of Scouting as I did: the old-fashioned self-presentation, the hard lines of budgets, and the people behind the khaki uniforms who resisted labels. I learned land, too: high green subalpine and caked-dirt canyons, hungry bears and tough trees. Each year I left in late August and returned to smaller places—the tight island of a Minnesota liberal-arts college, then scattered jobs writing and teaching, mostly seasonal. New Mexico would wallop me around February, the hot smell of ponderosa pine rising from a cup of coffee, cascading me into longing. I didn’t care for the politics in Scouting, but they never managed to repel me as hard as the place and the people who knew it drew me.

At dawn the westward passage resumes. I stop under slate skies for gas and coffee in Brush, Colorado. At 6:30 in the morning I can already taste blowing dirt. The clouds burn off and I turn south onto an empty and blue Highway 71, splitting the sea of plains, racing. The

music is loud and the grass on either side of the car turns from gray-green to parched brown by the time I reach La Junta.

Somewhere in the ponderosa pines near Raton Pass—the Colorado-New Mexico border, 7,800 feet above the sea—a wildfire started last night. I roll down the windows in Trinidad, on Colorado's side of the pass, and the air is acrid, thickening with smoke and ash. Signs and squad cars, hastily assembled, announce that the pass is closed. There's no time to learn more. I'm supposed to report for a summer of work, starting that afternoon. A hundred-mile detour east plunges my gas gauge perilously low as I cross the state line at Negro Mesa and wind through the sage and low mountains of New Mexico's northeast corner.

Finally, I turn back west, then south, and the sun-drenched skyline appears. Omens be damned—after a thousand miles, it is the most beautiful sight on Earth. The summits stand hazy in the heat, shoulder to broad shoulder like siblings. Black Mountain and Bear Mountain, Cito Peak and Shaefer's, Touch-Me-Not and Baldy. They form the Cimarron Range of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the easternmost flank of the Southern Rockies, the backbone of the enchanting land I have come to know.

Part I: Self-Reliance

Lasting Terrain

The Pelham Hills rise in plum swells through the big east windows of the church. In November, in New England, the bare branches of oaks and maples frame a muted ridge five miles away. I stand in a pew next to my father, small and straight in my khaki Scout uniform, staring out at the hills. Today is Scout Sunday, the day of the year when our troop leads worship, and Dad's square shoulders rise above mine to fill his own uniform. His iron baritone sings the third verse of the old hymn: *Before the hills in order stood or Earth received her frame, from everlasting thou art God to endless years the same.*

Dad was always next to me on those Sundays spent staring at the hills from our second-story sanctuary. After my own voice dropped, we'd move together from the melody to the bass line during the last verse of a hymn, when the words in the hymnal were close enough to the bottom clef to read both at the same time. I focused less on the lyrics than on sight-reading the harmony, listening always for Dad's voice and trying to match its tone.

My mom was often there too, and my ears would catch lilt of her soft soprano above Dad's ring. There were days when she left the congregation, however, their frequency growing as I did. On one of them, we are singing an old hymn from a new book, the United Church of Christ's black *New Century Hymnal* that now sits beside the old faded-red *Pilgrim Hymnal*. My two brothers are off to college by now and I am left standing between my parents as tradition breaks. I realize as we sing that the new book has tweaked the lyrics, turned *God our King* into a

genderless *God our Friend*. Mom notices the revision too, and it shatters the spell of song, strips heritage from the hymn. She closes the book and quietly walks from the sanctuary, bound for the car and a drive to the next town over, where she can pull off beside a cornfield and feel earth beneath her again.

I came to understand these escapes, to love her for the way her rural upbringing bred in her such loyalty to tradition. But my own roots had not found the same soil. They were lodged instead between the trees and sidewalks of a change-minded college town. I worried for my mother, but I sang the new words.

A beaver pond and a patch of mixed hardwood forest spread adjacent to our house. I caught wriggling tadpoles in hand nets as a toddler, watched great blue herons stand rigid in the cattails. Soon it was off into Holyoke Range State Park, the old stubble of a mountain range just a mile from our Western Massachusetts home. At four, I tagged along on my brother's birthday party, a treasure hunt all the way up Rattlesnake Knob. Mom and Dad buried coins and candy in the woods, drew calligraphic maps and cut cloth into bandanas for all the little pirates to wear around their heads. We ran and shrieked to the birches and everyone made it home safe.

In the summer, we'd often drive the five hours up to New York's Adirondack State Park. The Park, as locals call it: a huge patchwork of state and private land—about a fifty-fifty split—that occupies most of the Empire State's northern bulge. It's bigger than Glacier, Yellowstone and Yosemite national parks combined, and it's where Dad, a suburban baby-boomer from Rochester, came to love wild places. Canadian Shield lake country runs into the Appalachians there, and the proximity of freshwater and mountain stirs people. They climb, paddle, hunt, fish, ski, log, and tap maples—all within the Park. Dad's chosen escape vehicle became our family's:

a nineteen-foot Kevlar canoe, forest green, lightweight, big enough to hold four of us, with one brother alongside in a red kayak. We'd paddle out to a Goose or Spruce or Moose Island and camp in a family-sized dome tent. One of those nights—I was seven or eight—it poured from high heaven. I was pinched into a corner and woke up damp. Water was seeping in fast, and Dad was telling us to move. I picked up the Monopoly cards, grabbed sleeping bags, stood under a leaky spruce as Mom dropped the tent and Dad raced around in his boxers and his Indiana Jones hat, searching for drier ground. Lightning flashed and in the middle of it all he bellowed over the roar of rain, “*Hoyyy*, I gotta go pee!” My brothers and I dissolved into pools of laughter, unconcerned with the violent storm and our soggy fate.

My father is the middle of three brothers, all Eagle Scouts. I'm the youngest of three, with a brother who made Eagle and one who walked away a few requirements short. At seventeen, he picked French horn over first aid and Dad, beautifully, did not fight him about it. As I grew into adolescence, Mom's knees and back ached into arthritis and the Scout troop replaced the family as my primary conduit to wildness. Dad, our scoutmaster, became the parent with whom I learned the woods. We camped locally every month, but once or twice a year, he'd lead the troop up to the Park for a long-weekend canoe trip. In between our gossip about girls and the lessons in astronomy or geology that rose from the eclectic parents of our college-town troop, we would catch a story or two from Dad, from the summers when his troop paid him to take the younger boys out for a week or two in the Park. He'd tilt his paddling hat back—a fraying straw fedora with a homemade chin strap—and wax about the day they paddled eighteen miles down Long Lake, the afternoon when little Frankie Schiffer learned to swim, the night a

black bear ransacked camp and didn't wake a soul. The picture of my twenty-year old dad—cheerful, lean, wise in the woods—crystallized.

On Sunday mornings during those campouts, we'd hold a short nonsectarian worship. The Boy Scouts of America requires its members to acknowledge religious duty. *The Scout Handbook* reads, "No member can grow into the best kind of citizen without recognizing an obligation to God." But the BSA doesn't tell you how to define God. Define God, somehow, and honor God—that's all. Gihan, my best friend in the troop and the son of Sri Lankan immigrants, practiced Buddhism at home. Sometimes he'd bring a meditation to share with us on those Sunday mornings. Aaron was Jewish and when his mom camped with us, she sometimes offered a lesson or two from her faith. What we all professed was a reverence for these outdoor opportunities, and for the land that held them. On a winter morning snapping with sun and cold, we sat in snowy woods by a lean-to deep in the Berkshires. We sang "For the Beauty of the Earth," and it made easy sense. I had so much fun in this space that people called nature. Of course it was a gift from God—the same blurry God of whom we sang in church, who might help us fly safely to a California vacation, who might someday help the Red Sox win the World Series. I followed Dad's snowshoe tracks through the woods that morning. Another hymn from our service was stuck in my head: *This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears, all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres.*

The view from ten thousand feet in New Mexico was nothing like the Berkshires or the Pelham Hills. From a high mountain saddle it rolled down dark fir-clad drainages, dropped through jagged granite to sagebrush and an arid sea of plains. I had just turned fourteen, and was six days into our ten-day backpacking trek at Philmont, the Boy Scouts' legendary ranch

preserve in the southern Rocky Mountains. The crew had elected me its youth chaplain, charged me with leading daily devotionals and keeping an eye on morale. On our fifth day out, we trudged through baking heat and camped on a ridge beneath Comanche Peak. We were boys that night, farting like dogs after our rice-and-beans dinner, giggling and gossiping in our tents after lights-out, none of us inclined to follow the early-bedtime-and-get-up-for-sunrise plan that Dad had suggested.

And so I was still half-asleep when the world began to brighten. The adults prevailed and we rose early after all, walking a quarter-mile by headlamp to an east-facing lookout. Now the sun stole into the long horizon, a blood orange over the high desert plain. I felt it warm me by slow degrees. In the rare quiet, a bulb of awe swelled in my belly, its shoots rising into my nostrils. The world was impossibly large, and I was small. A raven wheeled and cawed over the dark slopes. A few minutes later, I read a devotional to the crew—stilted words about witnessing God’s handiwork in the wilderness—and I knew for the first time that this source of mountains, this wild thing I’d felt in my navel, didn’t need a name or a throne. As we walked back to camp, I hung behind the crew, picking my own way through the trees.

I returned to boyhood quickly, spent the rest of the trip telling more fart jokes. Then, in the year that followed, puberty rushed in like vertigo. High school and homework and crushes kept my thoughts glued to the surface of early adolescence. The next summer, we took a week-long trip back in the Adirondacks, with Dad steering in the stern once again. It had all the elements I’d come to love: late-afternoon swims, starry island nights, lake-fog mornings pierced by loon call. But there was something new, too—girls.

We'd started a crew through the Venturing program, the Boy Scouts' coed offshoot, its purpose to offer high schoolers a space for supervised outdoor learning away from the screaming eleven-year old boys of the troop. Now it was July in the green lake country and I became predictably smitten—not with one of my female crewmates from home, but with our twenty-year old guide, Bridget. She was dark-featured and wavy-haired, consistently kind, and she knew the land better than any of us, maybe even better than Dad. She named bird calls, foretold the weather, cheered us on when we built a half-functional reflector oven using black trash bags and an aluminum canoe. The brownies were soupy, but she praised our efforts.

We were blushing nerdy teens, not much like the rowdy boys Dad had guided on those lakes when he was Bridget's age. Far, too, from the gassy clowns of the previous summer. And Dad loved it all. He admired Bridget's charisma and know-how and didn't bat an eye when I told him after the trip that I now wanted to go to St. Lawrence for college, Bridget's college, wanted to lead trips in the summer, just like she did. I suppose he knew then that I wouldn't follow his steps to the marble halls of Amherst, to a fraternity and the glee club and law school after. The world, that summer, was fresh as a clear morning. Boys camped with girls, the words changed in the hymns, and Dad was smiling from the stern of the canoe. Mom even joined us for the end of the trip and her back survived a few nights on the hard ground. As it so happened, the Red Sox finally won the World Series that fall.

The smile cracked a year later. The Bridget trip was the last long paddle I took with Dad. Mom sat me down in the family room one afternoon and I knew something was up from her shifting posture on the pale green couch. She was a full-time mother with a master's in developmental psychology. I rarely saw the duties of parenthood rattle her even slightly.

“Dad’s colonoscopy results came back,” she said. “They found something called a polyp. It’s like a small tumor. They found cancer in it.”

I turned my head, swallowed dry spit. It was March outside and the gray sky pushed flatly on the dark spruces at the edge of the yard.

It was small. They had caught it early. His lymphatic system was clean. They would operate and probably get rid of it and leave this all a blip on the map. But nothing was failsafe now. My father had cancer, unhypothetically.

I had given Dad a photo of the sunrise from that morning in New Mexico. The sky and the plains are black, and a thin line of orange bands across the middle of the horizontal frame, the half-risen sun at its center. The photo looks like it could have been taken from space, with the sun slowly peeking around the curve of a dark Earth. It sat in a tan frame on a corner of Dad’s desk. Sometimes, in high school, I’d walk to his office downtown after school or baseball practice. Gray trails of rain tumbled on his windows during the March of his diagnosis as I wrestled with the dilemma of a fortunate teenager—whether to keep playing baseball, the game I’d loved since kindergarten, or commit full-time to our surprisingly competitive ultimate Frisbee team, embracing something new, something to which my new long-armed body seemed better adapted. There was an ultimate tournament at Dartmouth that weekend—we’d be the only high-schoolers, facing and beating college teams—and the coach had invited me to join. But the varsity baseball squad for which I longed to play was holding an important pre-season workout. I laid it out before Dad and he sat, quiet for longer than usual, sturdy hands folded together.

“Well, my man,” he finally said. “It’s your decision to make.”

For a moment, I felt frustration flushing into my cheeks. *Why would I have told you this, Dad, if I didn’t want your opinion?* I swallowed the words. I thought about his cancer, watched

raindrops creep down the window then vanish. He was right. I was sixteen and there was no good reason why anyone else should make the decision. I looked at the sunrise photo and it held no answers or warmth, just a cold universe turning.

I kept playing baseball, ever-nostalgic, and we didn't lose Dad. The odds held and the operation worked. The cancer stayed clear as I finished high school and left for college. Dad turned sixty the spring I graduated. He beamed and teared up at my Eagle Scout Court of Honor, his own parents and one of his brothers there to celebrate with us. He had his health, could still shuffle through a squash match with a buddy twice a week, but there was no going back to his fifties. His beard came in more gray than red now, so he shaved his cheeks daily, leaving only a hearty mustache. His big expedition-sized backpack hung in the basement, gathering dust. The green canoe hadn't spent the night on an island in years.

The course that I charted for myself led west. St. Lawrence was cold and preppy when I visited, and I didn't even apply. I went to college in Minnesota and spent the summers leading trips at Philmont. The dry spice of ponderosa pines shot the damp of the Adirondacks far back into memory. I was neither Dad nor Bridget. My chops grew from their models, but I had found my own stage.

"The gaps are the thing," writes Annie Dillard late in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. "They are fissures between mountains and cells the wind lances through, the icy narrowing fiords splitting the cliffs of mystery." I read the words sometime between summers in the West, and they burrowed in me. There had been moments over those footloose years when I'd felt Dillard's lancing wind: hiking an aster meadow after teaching Scouts, walking in sun along a ribbon of trout stream, sleeping out under enormous sky. The bulb of awe found me again in moments

when I knew I belonged to the world, and I began to follow Dillard's directive: "stalk the gaps." I found them most often in wild places and quoted Edward Abbey when asked about religion. "I'm not an atheist," the mantra went. "I'm an earthiest."

The first close death of my young adulthood came the year after college. Gramp fell down the stairs on Thanksgiving and a few weeks later, I watched my father watch his father die. I had a teaching job in Texas and the principal let me end the semester a few days early so I could make it north for the memorial service. Dad's eulogy was terse, grief still bubbling. A few tears seeped from his eyes as he thanked God for Gramp's life. I'd been writing more since college, and my own tribute stuck to the tangible. I remembered the things Gramp had taught me on visits to Rochester—how to fish, how to pull carrots from the garden, the names of a dozen operas and foreign countries. I thought of his life as the deep roots of an enduring family tree. He had left the family farm and become an engineer, but his love for both the earthy and the cosmopolitan had trickled to us all. We spent that Christmas with Grammy, five of us jammed into a sterile guest room at her nursing home.

Sometime after I left the job in Texas and moved to Colorado to teach skiing for a winter, I began to think about turning back east. Loss hung around my borders that snowy season: in January three students from my college skidded into a semi-truck and died on an icy Minnesota road, on their way to the airport and an ultimate tournament in California. A month later, I flew home for the funeral of a surrogate uncle, the father of a dear friend whom I'd known since we were toddlers. Dan was younger and wilder than my own dad: after church on Christmas Eve one year, he talked our two families into going out to Chili's, the only restaurant still open, then he and Dad drank beer and tried to talk the waitstaff into singing happy birthday to Jesus. A decade later, throat cancer silenced him. Our old church felt smaller than I remembered and I sat shaken

and silent as Dan's brother sang "The Parting Glass," an Irish sendoff, potent as any hymn. Bare branches still framed the hills, the world raw and still flecked with beauty.

That winter, I read Wendell Berry's collected stories of the Port William membership, a rural Kentucky community holding tight to its homegrown traditions against the crush of monoculture. Berry's agrarian prose rose off the page like heat from fresh bread, a quiet counter to the flights across time zones, the scattered friends and family. I thought about sticking somewhere. On the next trip back east, we visited Mom's family in the familiar country outside Rochester. I knew the land from our annual visits, but I watched with older eyes now—the gentle hills and swales, the little patches of woods. I was no longer bored when we visited cemeteries. I helped Mom pull weeds from her parents' plot, asked Dad about the generations before Gramp, the line of Harts who'd lived there since the Revolution, whose bones lay scattered in the same soil they farmed. They were mostly Scotch Presbyterians, and I thought of the old hymns I'd grown up singing, their melodies stuck soul-deep within me. I felt an unlikely pull, back along a crooked path, toward some side door of the church.

I still live in the West, searching for compromise. I stick close to my new home, cooking meals with friends and talking late into the evenings, running and skiing in the mountains around Missoula instead of dashing to the distant unexplored. But it is not always enough. The family is scattered—one brother married in Denver, another finishing a doctorate in Michigan. The parents are stiffening, slowing, restless for grandchildren.

I flew east last July after Dad's surgery. He'd kept chronic back pain in check for decades thanks to zealous stretching, moderate exercise and occasional acupuncture. But a year shy of seventy, the thing snarled into preeminence. He and Mom had visited Montana and our slow

walks stopped every five minutes so Dad could rest and stretch. We drove up to Glacier National Park and I ran by myself in the cold May rain while Mom and Dad stayed near their rented sedan.

I was running again on a humid morning after the operation. We were in the Adirondacks. The procedure had helped—a surgeon spliced a metal stabilizer into Dad’s lower spine so the vertebrae wouldn’t pinch—and I flew east to convalesce with him and Mom at an old lakeside lodge with family-style dining, heaps of pancakes and real maple syrup every morning. The smell of bacon wafted from the kitchen at 7 a.m. as I tiptoed from the cot in our cramped room. I tied on running shoes and sped into hardwoods, my legs wrought metal springs, bouncing off rocks and roots, climbing through beech and oak, fast breath and a blur of green. A bit of Dad’s vigor must have passed to me in the night. On Castle Rock, above the big star of lake, a loon call rose to me, clean as cold gin.

I thought ahead, to the dive into cool water that would follow the run, to Dad on the dock, wincing with jealousy. The extent of his recovery remained uncertain. It still does. How far we hike or paddle the next time is not what’s important. That we both want a next time is. Perhaps we’ll get it. The lakes won’t vanish overnight and the mountains won’t crumble. The land will endure, one way or another, bedrock and backdrop to our free-range lives. The love will remain, and I do not believe we will let it grow stale.

Good Turns

On my honor I will do my best—to do my duty—to God and my country—and to obey the Scout Law—to help other people at all times—and to keep myself physically strong—mentally awake—and morally straight.

A Scout is: Trustworthy—Loyal—Helpful—Friendly—Courteous—Kind—Obedient—Cheerful—Thrifty—Brave—Clean—and Reverent.

I can still recite the words as mechanistically as a phone number. In the infancy of the twenty-first century, the Scout Oath and the Scout Law joined alternative rock radio and the school band as competing choruses of my teenage years.

I recited the Scout Oath and Law at my first Troop Meeting. Ten and a half years old, five foot nothing, the khaki uniform baggy over my shoulders. I recited the words—*courteous, kind, obedient*—and before shivering candlelight on the second floor of a church parish hall, I shook the huge hands of men and older boys. “Welcome to the troop,” they all said.

Seven years later, I recited the Scout Oath and Law at my Eagle Scout Court of Honor. I was five-eleven by then, and my shoulders filling out the khaki uniform were sore from too much long-tossing at baseball practice the day before. My father, uncle, older brother—all Eagles—smiled back at me from the church pews, some of the fifty or so guests assembled to watch as I pledged anew to help other people at all times, to live by the words I memorized when

I was ten. The Eagle Court of Honor is a graduation of sorts, but my time with Scouting would not end with marble cake and hearty handshakes. In a few weeks, I would put the uniform back on and direct a dozen staff members and four dozen Scouts through the weeklong summer leadership course for our Western Massachusetts region. The following June I would finish my first year of college and put it on again, now as a Ranger at Philmont Scout Ranch, the huge camping preserve owned by the Boy Scouts of America in northern New Mexico.

When you become a Scout, one of the 2.5 million around the country, you hear about Philmont. If you're lucky, you get to go. Even luckier and you might get to work there someday. I worked there for seven summers. Eight years after my Eagle Court of Honor, I was wearing the same uniform and reciting the same creeded words for a final time. It was Staff Arrival Day, the official start to my final summer with Scouting. Most of my co-workers had pulled in the night before, their cars and airport shuttles stuffed with gear, but I'd been at Philmont for more than a year, working full-time as an assistant manager. In a few months, I would bend a steering wheel north and west to Montana, graduate school, new dreams. But for now, my hand curled one more time into the three raised fingers of the Scout Sign as I joined my friends in a last "On My Honor."

On the night I joined Scouting, my father handed me a plastic gold-painted coin. He was our scoutmaster, and the words "Do a Good Turn Daily" were etched on one side of the token. Once each of us new initiates held one, Dad told us the origin story.

The roots of American Scouting reach back in legend to a foggy night in London in 1909. William D. Boyce is a publisher from Chicago and he is lost in the old spoked streets. A boy materializes and leads him to his destination. Thankful, Boyce offers him a tip upon arrival. The

helpful lad refuses, explains that he is just a Scout doing his daily good turn. Intrigued, Boyce asks where he can learn more. Later in the trip, he meets leaders of the English Scouting movement, founded as a pre-military body two years earlier by Robert Baden-Powell, a celebrity general of the Boer Wars. Boyce returns to Chicago and establishes the Boy Scouts of America.

Over the next year, he joins forces with the naturalist authors and artists Earnest Thompson Seton and Daniel Carter Beard, who have recently started their own youth organizations focused on outdoor survival skills. Much woodsier and a little less military than Baden-Powell's model, their synthesis is a decidedly American enterprise. It awkwardly borrows from its continent some of her Native coming-of-age rites: American Boy Scouts learn not just how to salute and hold a rifle, but how to start fire from twigs and grass, how to weave baskets and carve totems. Imagining a new wave of self-reliant frontiersmen, Theodore Roosevelt offers hearty support. By 1911, the Scout Oath and Law are codified. To honor the legend of Boyce's young helper, which some reports have since dubbed a fabrication, the BSA's slogan becomes *Do a Good Turn Daily*. By 1913, religious organizations have begun to sponsor Scout troops and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints adopts Scouting as its official development program for young men. Over the next twenty-five years, more than a million American boys become Scouts. In the sixties, the program adds a coed branch for fourteen to twenty-one year olds. Each pledges to live by the Scout Oath and Law, and many, like me, receive a Good Turn coin upon joining.

"Keep it in your right pocket every day," Dad said. "And once you've done your good turn, once you've helped someone without expecting a reward, move it to your left."

It is cold wet October now, half a year after I joined Scouting, and in the woods of northwest Connecticut I am engaged in a heated pinecone fight. Kevin proposed the idea after we set up our tents, and naturally we were as thrilled about it as you would expect a dozen eleven- and twelve-year old boys on their first backpacking trip to be. Kevin is the shortest kid in the troop and full of Napoleon Complex. He is determined to hold the position of Chief Mischiefmaker and his mouselike squeals pierce through everyone else's voices and through the gray woods as it rains pinecones.

I have climbed high into the branches of an Eastern white pine and am leading an aerial assault. The tree is vast, even bigger than the one sprawling across the southeast corner of my front yard. It has the same large and plentiful branches that allow you to climb it like a ladder.

“Pass me some cones, Matty!” screams Kevin from below. He is in my patrol, the Dragons, our seven-person cohort within the troop of thirty. We are battling the Grizzlies and I rip cones off the white pine branches, tossing some down, hurling others at my enemies with unhinged abandon.

White pine cones are long and thin, typically falling and dispersing seeds in the fall after eighteen months on the tree. A mature white pine is monarch of the forest, the tallest tree in eastern North America. It can grow two hundred feet above the soil, live four hundred years, house and feed a hamlet of animal relatives. Its needles are packed with Vitamin C and its resin can waterproof a canoe or disinfect a wound. The Haudenosaunee—or Iroquois—celebrate white pines as trees of peace. Their bundles of needles represent the Six Nations—Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora—joining in the world's oldest active democracy. The white pine's roots symbolically spread as offerings to other peoples to sit in its shade together. I know none of this at age ten and it is primal release, not peace, on my mind as I bombard my

troopmates with the cones of the kingly pine. I'm trying to be brave, to be strong. Afterward, the resin sticks to our hands and arms so persistently that my dad tells us to use a little of our campstoves' gasoline to get it off.

That night, still pitchy, a handful of us crowd into one tent and test our fortitude in another way—Girl Talk, the ritual sharing of crushes that occurs often enough on our campouts to earn the acronym GT. Kevin has brought the pamphlet to Britney Spears' new album—*Oops!...I Did It Again*—and we all marvel at how little her short brown tanktop hides. “Look at her belly-button!” Kevin cries. Joel giggles then makes a passionate case for the artistic superiority of the group Destiny's Child over Britney.

Of course, I prefer hard rock like my older brother. He recently shared his Red Hot Chili Peppers CD with me and I must have grown an inch overnight. I know Britney's belly-button and Destiny's Child about as little as I know white pines. But I'm learning, slowly. Wide-eyed in my sleeping bag, I laugh when I'm supposed to laugh, confess my crush on our classmate Monica Lopez when it's my turn, memorize every piece of gossip. Then we abandon modern attractions, become not troopmates but packmates, surrendering to the blind animal through a game of Wormhole, in which everyone crawls headfirst into their sleeping bag and thrashes around, into, and on top of one other.

My father and the other grown-ups are in tents nearby, probably sore as hell after a long day of heavy packs and feral scouts. They surely hear our chatter and roughhousing and it is not until later, during round two of GT, that Dad puts on his stern voice and tells us to quiet down and go to sleep.

Another thing I knew little of then was the kind of policy that undergirded the Scout Oath and Law. In 1991, two years after I was born, Scouting stumbled into the fray of civil rights. As AIDS had scarred the eighties, the gay rights movement gathered force and pressure built for institutions to address it. Individually, Scout troops had long practiced their own forms of exclusion and inclusion both. But now came blanket policy, a ban on openly gay individuals from becoming either youth members or adult leaders within the BSA. “We believe,” read the statement from the organization’s national board, “that homosexual conduct is inconsistent with the requirement in the Scout Oath that a Scout be morally straight and in the Scout Law that a Scout be clean in word and deed.”

Shortly after the statement’s release, the Supreme Court defended the BSA’s right to set discriminatory membership standards as a private non-profit organization. In *Boy Scouts of America vs. Timothy Dale*, the court ruled five-to-four and the BSA revoked the membership of Mr. Dale, a gay Assistant Scoutmaster.

It was almost Christmas, sometime during high school, when I first learned about the ban. For decades, our troop had sold Christmas trees from a fenced-in lot at Kendrick Park in downtown Amherst, Massachusetts. On the day after Thanksgiving, we raised a little wooden shack, fired up an old woodstove, and trucked in trees from hilltown farms. I sat in the hut solving algebra between customers on chilly December nights, the walls of the building bearing graffiti that dated back to the sixties.

Then, one year, we nearly lost the tree sale. Activists familiar with BSA policy had pushed the town to deny our lease of the park. I was a sheltered kid in a college town, and I didn’t know what to think. The nation to which I pledged allegiance was at war in Iraq, a place that I could not comprehend, and the bombs falling on the desert city looked green and evil

through a television screen. I'd been brought up on "I Have a Dream" at school and "Do Unto Others" at home, and I couldn't imagine bombing anyone or telling anyone they couldn't be a Scout. But what was wrong with us selling Christmas trees?

Joel, for the record, was the cleanest boy in the troop. Beyond his love of Destiny's Child, he loved being warm. In the next year, he would suffer mild hypothermia on a winter campout, and quit the troop shortly after. In high school, he became a brilliant cellist and an all-state distance runner. When I heard in college that he'd come out, I smiled and thought of Destiny's Child, of Girl Talk and Dad in the next tent over, and how nobody had once thought that Joel didn't belong among us.

Dad didn't tell me the details of how we kept the lease on our tree lot, but I imagine his lawyerly calm and logic playing a role. I imagine him explaining warmly to the concerned zoning manager that our troop did not reflect the national policy, that we welcomed all and didn't ask questions, and that our former scoutmaster who now worked for the BSA regionally, representing our link to the national office in Texas, didn't ask questions either. It's possible that he even explained the context I would learn later: that the LDS Church hung in ubiquitous presence over it all. Although the relationship is increasingly strained, Scouting remains the official youth organization for all Mormon boys under fourteen. There's no youth group after church—there's Scouts. The church has more than fifteen million members and Reuters recently estimated its net worth at over \$40 billion. It is the largest financial contributor to the BSA and its all-male priesthood rejects homosexuality as sin.

I, for one, was quick to connect the dots. I had known vaguely of a Mormon troop in our area, but they kept to themselves. They didn't come to our regional summer camp, didn't march in the Memorial Day parade. They'd been out of sight and out of mind, just like some statement

from Dallas. It was sometime after I hit my growth spurt when Dad told me his preferred acronym for the national policy. OBS: Official Boy Scout. Official BS.

Not long after the pinecone fight, Derek joined the troop. Derek lives with Asperger syndrome. At eleven, he has next to no verbal self-control. In the middle of a natural history talk or a knot-tying workshop, he will often scream out of the blue, “Dad, this is boring! Can we go home?”

His father, who will always be Dr. Austin in my mind—a *Scout is courteous*—consistently models composure to any of us taking notice. If Derek continues to disrupt the event, the two leave the room or the campsite for a conversation about respect. Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes Derek gets his wish and goes home. But he always comes back to the next troop event, and through all of what must have been embarrassment—think Derek screaming unannounced in the middle of a Park Ranger’s talk—Dr. Austin never gives in to rage. He rarely raises his voice, and I never see his loyal hands do more than firmly guide his son away from the scene.

Slowly, we start getting used to Derek. Sometimes his interruptions are even a relief, a not-so-subtle hint to the presenter that maybe it isn’t just the kid with autism who’s bored. When Derek is having fun, and shrieking to the universe about it, everyone’s spirits get a lift. Picture him, eleven and skinny as a pine needle, standing on my brother’s shoulders while the rest of the troop builds a human pyramid on the windy Cape Cod beach. Picture him playing dodgeball, jumping back and forth like a grasshopper, a cascade of laughs and shouts pouring out in the joy of movement and unpredictability.

Sometime around thirteen, Derek figures out that he loves to flirt. I walk into a troop meeting and he bounds up to greet me with a “Hey Sexy!” and smooching noises. I’m only a year older, square in the thick of puberty, and I respond, like the others, with prescribed disgust: “No, Derek!”, “Ewww, Derek!”, “Get Away from Me, Derek!”

But the surprise wears off. It becomes no more than that—surprise—and after a few months I realize the harmlessness of it all. I start to smile and say, “Hi Derek!” before we take our places for the start of the meeting. I start to think a little more deeply when I say that a Scout is loyal, friendly, kind. Of course, somewhere within my own adolescent mess, there’s probably a pill of satisfaction, too—at least *someone* is calling me sexy.

Derek grows out of flirting. As he keeps coming back to Scouts, his outbursts become less frequent. At school, he finds another welcoming home as a techie in the theater program. By the end of high school, the bulk of the student body knows and adores him. During spring of my first year of college, the email arrives inviting me to Derek’s Eagle Court of Honor. Sitting at my desk on the third floor of a sterile dorm, I look out at a haze of yellow and green on the campus arboretum. I think of Dr. Austin pinning the badge on his son’s chest. I think of the fact that one out of every fifty boys who joins Scouts earns the rank of Eagle. One out of fifty completes the twenty-one required merit badge courses ranging from citizenship to swimming to first aid to environmental science. One out of fifty spends the required time holding a leadership position in the troop, helping plan meetings and campouts and fundraisers, eventually organizing and leading his own large-scale community service project.

One out of fifty, and Derek is one of the ones.

The air is stocking-cap chilly and the stars impossibly bright. The creek next to our campsite is *rushhhhhing* in full voice, swollen with snowmelt. It is late May, the first night in the backcountry, my final summer at Philmont, and I am training staff.

Philip looks like the movie character named Napoleon Dynamite, tall and bandylegged and curlyhaired, with a wooly-bear moustache he has labored through the winter to grow. He is the most articulate twenty-one-year old I know, a philosophy and political science double major at a state university in Texas. His favorite musical artist is the Wu-Tang Clan.

“My perfect day would have to start and end with my chauffer-slash-romantic partner,” he says in response to a favorite training hike conversation topic. We are sitting around a small campfire telling abbreviated life stories and asking each other a mix of goofy and deep questions. “My chauffer-slash-romantic partner drives me in a limousine to a café for breakfast, which is Belgian waffles,” Philip explains. “We spend some time reading later in the day. We go for a hike. And we end the day on the beach around a fire looking at the stars.”

Later in the trip, Jack—stocky, effervescent, quickly burning off the work of his small Pennsylvania college’s dining hall—will explain with characteristic zeal his celebrity crushes on Beyoncé and George Clooney. Harper will call her mother her hero and tell us that she really truly wants to be President of the United States someday. Dave will brief us on the countless teenage hours he spent in Junior ROTC, how tired he is of working at the same outdoor gear store back home in North Carolina, how dedicated he still feels to his home troop. He sarcastically offers to be Philip’s chauffer if he can’t find anyone else. We learn some of these things while the seven of us are squashed inside a two-person tent like a log cabin of bodies and sleeping bags on a thirty-degree night at the edge of a meadow nine thousand feet above sea

level, where the aspens haven't leafed out yet. A Scout is thrifty; a Scout is helpful. No body heat wasted.

During the five-day hike, we hardly discuss the membership policy. The quick consensus is familiar: it's OBS. Meanwhile, there's a summer of work to prepare for, and when we aren't doing that, we're busy laughing at Jack's celebrity crushes.

In the spring of 2014, the BSA publicly lifts its ban on openly gay youth members. In July of 2015, it lifts its ban on gay adult leaders. Around the same time, the LDS church makes its own public statement of inclusivity regarding gay members within its communities, though two years later it partially severs ties with the Scouts, announcing that only boys under fourteen will participate in church-sponsored troops.

Pressure for the change comes from many sides. A discrimination lawsuit in New York gains national media attention. A straight Eagle Scout from Iowa with two gay moms starts a group called Scouts for Equality, and its online petitions draws millions of signatures. In April of 2015, Robert Gates, an Eagle Scout, the former Secretary of Defense and the current President of the BSA, publicly urges the national board to drop the ban and adopt a new resolution articulating inclusive membership standards. He visits Philmont two months later, just before the resolution passes, and a few of the other younger managers and I eat lunch with him. In a ballcap and jeans, Gates smiles and chats casually with us about learning to fly fish as a boy at Scout camp in Colorado. I give him a final handshake after the meal and thank him for his speech to the board, tell him it means a lot. A small man with a firm grip, Gates holds my hand and looks me in the eyes. His own are ice-melt blue.

"I know," he sighs. "I think we'll get it done."

A few months earlier, a group of Mormon Scout leaders had visited the ranch for a leadership conference. Near the end of their course, they spent a few nights in the backcountry. On a chilly spring morning, I drove up from Base Camp before dawn to pick them up at the trailhead where they'd camped the night before. We were bumping along frozen dirt track in the warm Suburban when the conversation about hunting stalled and one of the men quipped to his neighbor in the middle seat, "So have you heard about Michelle's son? He—uh, *she*—is a transvestite."

"Well, I guess we won't have to worry about seeing him at troop meetings anymore," chuckled a voice from the back.

Then a pause. Then the initial neighbor, speaking slowly, kindly. "Now guys, that's not very Christ-like. We're still talking about a human being here."

Silence. We were driving east and the sun was rising, deep orange over the high plains.

Expect the Unexpected

Eighteen days into the trip, we almost had our first animal incident. I was lying on my back at the green edge of a subalpine meadow when a golden-mantled ground squirrel tried to take my face off. Zipping through bunchgrass toward the safety of trees, the rodent shot toward my head until, inches away, he detected my animate nature and peeled off, barely avoiding my left ear. I caught his escape in peripheral blur, feeling the slim column of air pass like someone blowing on me through a straw. I turned, suddenly alert, and saw him disappear into trees, a flash of cinnamon flanks and cigarette tail darting for cover behind an aspen trunk.

It was somewhere around 10:30 a.m., I guessed. Nine thousand feet above sea level, in early August, in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of northern New Mexico, the mid-morning sun had cleared the tops of the trees that lined the meadow. It broiled indiscriminately. I had awoken, left my tent, and retreated to shade and swishing leaves at the edge of an aspen colony. I sat up, propped my back against a large trunk, and opened a small black spiral-bound journal.

Three years earlier, to the date, I'd been sitting in a different high country meadow, on the same ranch, scribbling in a different notebook. I was seventeen years old then and had wanted to be a Ranger at Philmont Scout Ranch since. I wanted, more precisely, to be a Ranger for the Rayado program. I was a quick kid from Massachusetts, in the West without my family for the first time, one of seven in a crew of Scouts from scattershot hometowns, and we had walked two hundred miles over eighteen days. Two Rangers, both around twenty, led us. The

course was called Rayado—Spanish for “marked”—and it was the most rigorous backpacking program that the Boy Scouts of America offered at Philmont, the organization’s vast mountain preserve that hosts tens of thousands of campers every summer, most on treks half the length of Rayado. We had walked through Carson National Forest up near the Colorado border, then swung south, spending the bulk of our long itinerary on Philmont’s 140,000-acre property. We traversed high alpine ridges and dry dusty canyons, scree fields and trout streams, passing aspen and prickly pear, black bear and elk and diamondback rattlesnakes.

I considered the rush of three years as I opened my journal after the ground squirrel drive-by. It was my second summer as a Ranger now, and I had made it back to Rayado, to the pinnacle. My own Scouts were scattered in isolation around the meadow, spending precious hours in reflection before our three-week romp wrapped up. Jimmy, my garrulous Texan partner, had taken our two ten-liter water bladders and set off for the nearest outpost camp, several miles away. I knew he would spend the rest of the morning—and probably half the afternoon—on the errand, chatting up whatever staff he met, bumming a few days’ worth of cigarettes if he could. I laughed at my luck. I was alone on the land, with time to burn, for the first time in weeks. I thought back to the summer when I’d been in my Scouts’ shoes, and the moments flooded into new meaning, a blur of bright color and motion.

“Well, this is interesting,” Robert had declared, awakening me. He was standing near the mouth of the empty hayloft holding a folded scrap of paper. The rest of us were still in our sleeping bags, tired teenagers scattered across old floorboards and bits of hay. We had spent the night—our fourth together as a Rayado crew—at the old Ring Family Ranch, a national forest

inholding that the Scouts now owned. Beyond the hayloft, I could see the blue-gray chill of dawn still hanging on the land.

Robert was nineteen, a couple years older than most of us. The sprouts of a blond beard already contoured his face and he possessed a wry humor that irritated the boys in the crew. Grumbles greeted his alarm-clock proclamation, but they soon gave way to intrigue. Our Rangers had given us a set of map coordinates and nothing else. “Expected the unexpected,” they had told us on Day One. This must have been what they meant.

Guideless and bushwhacking for the first time, we hiked shoulder-to-shoulder, an animate being that had been a line. We were in the Valle Vidal unit of Carson National Forest—“Valley of Life” in Spanish. The coordinates led us off-trail, through a wide ponderosa pine woods. The last four days had been clear and dry, the sky dyed bright blue by nine, but low clouds now shielded us from the heat. In the cool air between the burnt-orange pines, we figured our way forward, checking maps and compasses, eager to prove our competency. Soon we were climbing, the forest thicker with underbrush, black bands of vesicled rock strewn by the ancient creep of lava. We bickered over routes periodically, splitting into factions as we picked our way around outcrops, but we always stayed within earshot, then rejoined like braids in a stream.

Late in the morning, we marched together to our destination, a little bench of stone from which the forest dropped and curled in a dark blanket. We ate dry granola and admired our navigation. “Who needs Rangers, anyway?” quipped Robert. We all laughed and agreed with him this time. A baseline of shared confidence took root. We were stronger when we stayed together. There were larger mountains to the west, and our next directions led us into them.

For my crew of Scouts three years later, the foundational moment—when disjointed parts become capable cogs—arrived earlier. Jimmy and I had recognized it quickly. I laughed beneath the aspen as I scribbled notes about that evening. Of course, it had started with Trinkle.

On their second night in the backcountry, the boys still tiptoed around one another. We had hiked through ovenlike heat all afternoon, up in the dry northeast corner of Philmont, where the sun had just disappeared behind the high orange walls of Cook Canyon. We were sunburned, and fresh mountain lion tracks stared out of the dust as we shuffled around camp. Supper was barely-rehydrated rice and chicken, and afterward, Jimmy and I decided a little sugar would do everyone some good. We pulled from a pack the makings of no-bake cookies—peanut butter, oatmeal, cocoa powder. With the right amount of water, the mixture kneads together nicely in a Ziploc bag, to be squeezed out in doughy balls that satisfy the backcountry sweet tooth. But of course, Jose, mild-mannered and eager to please, a lanky kid from Houston, added a few too many splashes of water. The bag became runny brown pudding, and Trinkle couldn't resist.

“What's the matter, guys?” he grinned, the tallest and loudest of the seven, a lean and long-armed wrestler from Seattle, with a smile that threatened to leave his cheeks behind. “You've never eaten shit before?” And relieving Jose of the bag, he snipped off a bottom corner with his Swiss Army knife and squeezed a generous helping straight into his mouth, groaning *yunnhhhh* in exaggerated pleasure.

It was like an ice dam had broken. Laughter began to rush from the boys, and soon Jimmy and I were clutching our ribs too. One by one, we took our turn squeezing the ugly, sweet dessert down our throats, giggling like toddlers. Soon Jose was telling the story of another culinary mishap, the time he botched a batch of guacamole for a crush he wanted to impress. He added too much chili powder, turned it brown.

“*Ooh*, you were gonna make her guacamole, were you?” Trinkle cooed. “I think we all know what *that* means, Jose.”

That night it meant a formation. The boys who had been strangers owned the beginning of a tribal language. With Trinkle loosing the first howl, the wolfpack had a homegrown chord. From now on, their frequent discussions of high school romance always involved some version of the question: *Did you make guacamole?*

From Spanish, *rayado* translates most closely as “striped.” Along the southern fringe of Philmont, the Rayado River carves a deep east-west canyon. North of the river, rufous black-streaked cliffs drop to willows and fast water from the bulk of Rayado Peak, an old volcano crouched on the land like a sleeping buffalo. To the south, shaded stands of fir and aspen cling to steep drainages.

The Rayado program is not just named for the river or the peak—Rayado stripes people.

“Designed to challenge participants’ mental and physical abilities,” reads the description in Philmont’s marketing material. Aside from the predictable subjects—backcountry navigation, wilderness first aid, Leave No Trace—the ranch leaves the course description vague. But since its origin in the mid-seventies, the program has built a reputation strong enough that Scouts from all corners rush to apply. Philmont accepts those who demonstrate basic backpacking experience and desire for growth, and every summer, a few hundred in their late teens take the plunge, flying or driving or catching trains to New Mexico with a backpack and little sense of what awaits.

“I’ll be hiking a lot,” I remember thinking as I rode the ranch’s airport shuttle down from Colorado. My brother Gabe had returned from the program four years earlier with rave reviews. I

had been to Philmont myself three years prior, a squeaky-voiced fourteen-year old on one of the ranch's standard ten-day treks. I'd been with my home troop, with gossiping goofy agemates, and I'd spent the trip largely outside my own head. There were hard hot climbs and pretty sunsets, but Brian making fun of Mark's shoes had been far more important than reflecting on the land, on myself. Still, a brother's urging and my fond juvenile memories of the place compelled me toward Rayado. Gabe had kept his crew's secrets, however. As I stepped from the shuttle onto the dry dirt of Philmont, I had no idea what to expect.

A few days after the hayloft in the Valle Vidal, we were bushwhacking again. We were up at ten thousand feet, dropping down the steep east side of Touch-Me-Not Mountain, choked into a narrow draw full of windfall and wet spruce. A thunderstorm had rushed us from the trailless summit, drowning our afternoon high. Instead of backtracking along the mountain's long alpine ridge as planned, we fled the storm and dropped straight to tree cover, funneling into a thick-treed and tight drainage. It had been raining for a few hours now and I was tired. Every few steps another downed tree loomed, sometimes two or three crisscrossed. The scrambling over and squeezing under had left my boots and pack and legs soaked and muddy. Beside a fallen spruce eight feet in diameter, I lost it.

"God *fucking* dammit!" I screamed at the old dead tree, leaning into its chest-high bulk, shoulders heaving beneath my pack.

I was done. If a helicopter had chopped into the draw at that moment and offered passage home to New England, I would have boarded without thinking. But there was no helicopter. There were no dry bedsheets and forgiving parents to save me. Instead, there was my Ranger, Chris.

He strode up to my sorry circumstance, six and a half feet tall, towering over me in his blond ponytail and cropped beard. He put a hand on my pack. “What’s going on?” he asked. I fumed silently, unable to pull myself around to his gaze. He waited. Then, finally, another question: “How many people do you think have ever been here before, Matt? How many people do you think have stood in that spot where you’re standing?”

Then he walked away, leaving me spinning.

I made it to the end of the wild draw on that sodden afternoon. I had exhausted my anger and was left with Chris’ words lodged in my brain like a doorstop. Behind the opening was light, and I edged into it as I hoisted myself over the fallen spruce. He was right—we were high in the high country, stuck in the top drainage of a rarely-climbed peak. Who knew the last time a human being had walked in this tangle. It was far from any trails and itineraries—and it was beautiful in the rain. I listened as water percussed on dark needles and limbs. I inhaled and smelled damp vegetal earth, the kind I remembered from the spring skunk cabbage woods back home. I looked around at my crewmates. We’d hiked a hundred miles through quarrels and wind and they were trudging doggedly on. The next tree in my way was not a roadblock. It was a springboard, and the next—a high one—was a limbo pole at the roller-skating rink where my friends had once thrown birthday parties. I laughed at the thought and called out, “Hey guys! Remember playing on the jungle gym in elementary school? That’s all we’re doing now, right?”

We did not arrive in camp until 11:30 that night. Sometime after we escaped the dense drainage, after its overgrown creekbed met a bigger one with moving water and a trail beside it, Chris went off to pee in the rain. He came back and told us he’d seen orange eyes, mountain lion eyes, staring at him out of the dark. “Everyone grab a rock and make some noise. Let’s keep hiking. We’ve still got five miles to camp.”

I snapped myself from the fear of fangs quickly. Sure, a cat could have been watching Chris tinkle. It didn't matter. There were nine of us with rocks, and what mattered was keeping our legs moving, getting to camp and into dry sleeping bags. I started singing in the rain, fortissimo, and the others joined.

“Oh my darlin', oh my darlin', oh my *daaaaarlin'* Clementine...”

After the bushwhack off Touch-Me-Not, I became biting mad one more time on the trip. It was the end of another long hike, and a wrong turn had put us on a circuitous route to camp, climbing up an old jeep road. A downpour had turned the dirt track into brown chowder, and a pound of thick mud caked each of my boots. There were no expletives this time. I might not have been ready for Chris' role, but I knew at least that the muddy slog would end, just as the jungle bushwhack had.

A few days later, I sat by a little meadow in the arms of an aspen, alone, unconcerned. The rest of the guys must be nearby, I thought once or twice, but I was far more interested in the inchworm navigating the trees of my leg hair, in the way the morning sun and the breeze passed through the forest, turning the bottoms of the little aspen leaves into bright green spades, into quaking fibrous hearts. I listened to my nose inhale and wrote in my journal about everything that had happened in the days before now. The stillness of the meadow seemed absolute, Massachusetts a light-year away. Perched in that tree, I wrote for hours, something I had never done before.

Trinkle became the de facto morale captain after breaking the ice dam. His first name was also Matt, and I watched from behind the crew as his extroversions kept the rest of the boys in motion. After a long hike one night, he ate six Pro Bars without pause. Packed with oats and nuts

and dried fruit, each 400-calorie bar claims to be as a meal of its own. The dense nutrition bricks grow even denser when they bang around a pack for days. Afterward, eating just one is a tiresome feat of chewing. How Trinkle put down six in one go I will never know. The kid's hunger was enormous, and the choices it led him to kept the crew laughing for days.

We had our own battle with Touch-Me-Not before long. Unlike the last time, we were attempting the double: we had climbed Baldy Mountain first, the ranch's tallest peak, 12,441 feet above sea level. Five miles of alpine ridge separated it from Touch-Me-Not's empty summit, and two miles into the traverse, stormclouds began bulging behind us. A few of the boys complained of headaches even though they were well-hydrated. Jimmy and I conferred and I swallowed ambition, swallowed my hot desire to lead this crew up the mountain that had rebooted me three years before. I recognized the danger of the storm and the boys' altitude sickness, and I heard the wisdom behind my older partner's caution. We stopped the group, backtracked, and found the trail that would lead to our camp for the night. Trinkle and the other stronger ones were crestfallen, but they trusted the decision. A hailstorm blew in an hour later, confirming it, but by evening the sun was sliding out from under cloud, the campsite turning wet gold, and the boys were laughing over rice and beans. No bushwhacking this time.

Instead, there was a twist that none of us expected. Two days later, Trinkle left the trail. It was only after the injury that he explained to us his nagging knee problems, the result of his wrestling career. Prepatellar bursitis, the bulging of knee fluid, colloquially called water-on-the-knee—the malady had raged back into Trinkle's right leg in the dark. We were hiking the final footsore hour of the trek's longest day, a marathon of twenty-five miles that took us from under Touch-Me-Not down to the ranch's central country. The last thing Trinkle had wanted was to hold up bedtime. When his knee swelled and throbbed, he asked everyone to slow down a bit, his

voice atypically soft. We should have stopped the crew then and there, pitched tents, altered course. But Trinkle was downplaying, clinging to some stubborn and threatened pride, and we kept walking.

In the morning, he could barely leave his tent. The bursitis was rocketing pain up and down the leg upon the slightest impact. He needed crutches and rest, and he knew it. But he had also rallied himself into a fierce resolution that after a few days in the Health Lodge at Base Camp, he'd be good as new. He told the guys he'd be back. We radioed in, buddy-hiked him to a nearby service road, and said rushed goodbyes as the Suburban roared up from Base Camp.

"Hard to imagine him coming back," I confessed to Jimmy as we returned to camp. I was already wondering what would happen to group dynamics. "The Health Lodge will be cautious about this kind of thing."

"Yeah, but who knows?" he drawled back. "Have some faith! It's Trinkle after all."

Indeed. The kid and his silver tongue could have convinced a rock to smile. Four quiet but efficient days later, he intercepted them near a trailhead, dark hair combed, pack full and face freshly-washed, grinning like Christmas morning.

"I talked them into letting me back on the trail, fellas! What have I missed?"

I could tell immediately that his joy was an overcompensation. He winced when he thought nobody was watching. Without our help, the crew knew enough to let him hike in front, but the pace grew slower and slower. The next day, they crawled over Fowler Pass and into Beaubien, one of the ranch's largest staffed outpost camps. A six-mile hike had taken eight hours. They were supposed to hike another four miles up to a high subalpine campsite that night, but they would not. Jimmy and I trailed them into Beaubien, crossing a wide meadow in late-day haze. Trinkle was already sitting on the cabin porch, an ice bag pressed to his knee as the day's

bright blues and greens faded. His big pack, once filled to bursting, sat shriveled beside him, folding in on itself. He had already divvied out his crew gear.

“I’m done, guys,” he said flatly. “It blew again on me today. I think it’s a full torn ACL this time.” Beaubien staff had already called it in. A vehicle was on its way from Base Camp and just like that, it was time for goodbyes.

What I hadn’t realized, when I was seventeen, was that great things end fast and callously. I had ridden Rayado’s composed confidence back home, earned Eagle Scout, graduated high school and set off for college in the year that followed. The friendships from my crew faded softly, but I held strong to moments like the Touch-Me-Not bushwhack. When a hard assignment frustrated me, I took a breath and thought of Chris’ words, of the inchworm and the quiet meadow, the happy place. An Abe Lincoln quote became my mantra: “Most folks are as happy as they make up their mind to be.” Life was good and long, sprawling with opportunity, and Philmont awaited. I returned after my first year of college, a greenhorn Ranger.

I fell in love that summer. Jen worked at a backcountry camp, and as fate—I assumed—would have it, she was headed to the same college as me that fall. We went on a single date when our days off collided. In the dark beneath an old cottonwood at the edge of Base Camp, she told me about her family in Illinois. I touched her slim shoulders, her straight brown hair, and we kissed goodnight beneath blazing stars and the sideways glow of the laundry room lights.

As fate would also have it, things fell apart at school that fall. The scene had shifted—from the quiet of backcountry life to the overload of her freshman year. I was more than she could balance, and I balked at this reality—once-benevolent Philmont betraying me under the gray skies of Minnesota. Over the winter, I clung to the fleeing strands of her affection, until

finally the weather thawed and I remembered what awaited. The mountains, the meadows, another summer.

Now that long-expected summer was closing, and the circle of Rayado with it. By unspoken rule, a Ranger may only lead one Rayado crew, and a participant may only complete the program once. The positions are too precious, the experience too unique for recycling. I sat at the edge of this new meadow, imagining the six remaining boys scattered around its fingered perimeter, invisible to one another. I mourned the loss of Trinkle, but I knew it had not been without benefit. The night of his exit, Jimmy and I had agreed not to discuss it with the crew until later. We wanted to see how they handled it. We pulled Nick aside, the quiet Alaskan, oldest and steadiest among them, and told him to make sure the guys got some sleep that night. The next day, they were off like cannon shot, breaking camp in a flash and making up for lost time. They had caught back up with the itinerary by mid-morning, climbed four peaks over the fifteen-mile day, pulled into camp along the Rayado River weary and hardened. Jimmy and I had struggled to keep up.

On the edge of the meadow, I thought now about Jen. She was back at the ranch, too, but I hadn't seen her all summer, and hadn't spent much time wanting to. That would change tomorrow. We were hiking down the Rayado and would pass through her camp, and unless she was on days off, there would be a meeting. I resisted the hope that she'd be gone, and in the next breath tried to resist the opposite hope—that she'd be there and hug me hard and want to reconvene. I looked around the meadow, placid as calm sea. Breeze fluttered the aspens. I was part of a world here, a fleeting and important world. My past with Jen was just that—a past—and I resolved to be as warm and broad with her as I felt beneath the high-country sun. I thought about finding my watch in the tent. How much longer did I have until Jimmy came back? I didn't

move. It didn't matter. The quiet morning would end when it did, as Rayado would end in two days, as the summer would end and the nights turn cold and the geese fly south from the campus pond. I could not stop the turning, but I could travel it all with a bit of the grace I'd found here. I could let it all expand me, like ice melting in a pothole. I could spend each day spinning with thanks.

Three years later, Trinkle died. I was at home when I learned. It was night in November and I was sitting by a hot woodstove, tired from a long run through brown New England woods. Trinkle had leapt headlong into wildness after Rayado, his hunger still immense. He'd gone to Alaska with the National Outdoor Leadership School, learned to mountaineer, become a competitive rock climber in the Pacific Northwest's fast-growing college circuit. The knee problems must have cleared up. He'd been climbing somewhere in the Cascades that summer, fulfilling that fateful human urge that burned so hot in him—to test the bounds of the possible. One unseen misstep had turned ellipsis to period.

I found out accidentally, a friend's Facebook post choosing now to appear. I read it, and swallowed hard, and followed a link to the memorial page Trinkle's parents had set up. I wondered when and how the crew would learn. Nick had returned as a Ranger the summer after Rayado, Jose the following one once he turned eighteen. They had all begun a message thread online, but it was short-lived. The language of the backcountry couldn't translate through satellites and disparate lives. Would any of them have seen Trinkle again? Would I have?

I stood, stretched, and the questions passed, for now. I put another log on the fire and watched it slowly burn.

Part II: Reciprocity

Inspiration Point

There was no wind and the air was hot as the family of four stood by the guardrail, staring west at Colorado Springs. A little boy and a little girl leaned into the steel retainer, shoulders touching. Their eyes locked on the white mushroom of smoke that hung in the blue sky, dwarfing the city and the mountains beneath it like a beast from science fiction.

Their parents stood behind and shuffled. Soon, the mother walked away, making a phone call, as several others were doing nearby.

“This is crazy,” she said to the plastic against her ear. “I love you too. Stay safe.”

Fifteen yards from the children, I leaned against the passenger door of my car, flipped open my old cell phone, and took a grainy picture. It was uncommonly still without the wind and I returned my key to the ignition. Over the highway, a large electronic signboard, the kind that usually reports traffic levels: WALDO CANYON FIRE—DRIVE WITH CAUTION.

I pulled off Interstate 25 three hours later in Raton, New Mexico, and drove the forty miles of US-64 back to Philmont Scout Ranch, where I was working for the fifth consecutive summer. As I drove southwest, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and their sage-stubbed foothills plastered against the passenger window under a sky so awash in blue as to seem painted.

“Brightest New Mexico,” Edward Abbey called it.

Hottest New Mexico, he might have said that summer. He would have nearly been right—the summer of 2012 came in just shy of its predecessor for the statewide June-through-

August heat record—but for now I was just glad that the Waldo Canyon Fire hadn't delayed my return to work after a couple days off in Denver. The year before, a smaller burn had closed Raton Pass on the day I reported for the summer. I showed up late, and nearly ran out of gas on the long detour. Now, the car thermometer read "96" in red robotic numerals as I turned into the ranch, dodged rocks and ruts, and found an open spot in the cracked dirt of the staff lot. I pulled out the key, and stepped from air conditioning into the oven heat of the high desert plains.

If someone had asked me about wildfires before that summer, before I saw Waldo Canyon, I wouldn't have had too much to say. I might have recited facts about the Ponil Complex Fire. Everyone who worked at Philmont knew those basics: it burned in 2002, started by lightning. It shut down most of the ranch's North Country for most of the summer. The land was still recovering. Carry extra water and sunscreen if hiking through the burn zone.

But the warzone that was Colorado Springs that afternoon sparked me, set me to reading. I learned that someone's brush fire had blown into a wildfire in Waldo Canyon, four miles northwest of the city. It forced 32,000 people to evacuate their homes, missing the city but torching the outskirts. It left behind a ballooning legacy of \$450 million in insurance claims. By those numbers, it was the most violent fire in Colorado history. It would be surpassed in less than a year.

I read about the Waldo Canyon Fire from an old computer in the Ranger Office at Philmont. The so-called office is a brown stucco box the size of two train cars, with low ceilings, no air conditioning, and an old A-frame chapel behind it. The chapel has been the gathering place for Rangers since they started leading Boy Scouts into the Sangre de Cristos in 1957. A grid of beige canvas tents on concrete platforms—staff housing—and a half mile of sage are all

that stand between the office and the base of Tooth Ridge, the threshold between mountain and plain, Base Camp and backcountry.

A thousand feet up the ridge, the last of the sage and juniper give way to thick-barked ponderosa and bunchgrass. Jagged fins and crests of igneous rock punch sporadically through the pine forest. The largest of them is the Tooth of Time, a massive molar-like intrusion that thrust up through sedimentary bedrock some twenty-two to thirty million years ago. Eight thousand feet above the sea and 2,300 above Base Camp, the Tooth towers over the high desert, a smaller Half Dome. A century and a half earlier, settlers gave the monolith its goofy English name in a nod to its role as signpost along the Santa Fe Trail. See the Tooth of Time, the saying went, and its ten more days 'til Santa Fe. Watch out for Apache.

A dozen years into the twenty-first century, I worked under the Tooth as a Ranger Trainer. There were two dozen of us trainers at the ranch. We were the mid-level supervisors, not running our department but ensuring its quality. We took out a few groups of Scouts ourselves, but mostly we trained, observed, evaluated, and otherwise mentored two hundred college-aged Rangers—eight for each of us. They taught the basics of Rocky Mountain backpacking to twenty thousand Scouts from June through August. The place was, and is, a massive adventure of an operation. Behind the Tooth lies the classroom: the largest camp in the world, 140,000 acres of rock and forest and scarce water, all of it owned by the Boy Scouts of America, a sprawling preserve that we call wilderness and fill with teenagers every summer.

“Rise and shine,” I called to the predawn campsite at five in the morning. Six teenagers from West Virginia uncorked themselves from sleep and tents, emerging in lumpy fleece. Two better-kempt fathers joined us—one, Steve, had beaten me awake—and I led my crew out of

camp toward the top of the mesa. We left our bear bags hanging and skirted the meadow we had camped by, striding through wide ponderosa forest. After ten minutes, we reached the base of a rockband that I knew well and scrambled by headlamp, up to an east-facing promontory, just beneath the table-top of Urraca Mesa.

In the fragile minutes before sunrise, everything was silhouette: a sprawl of high desert pocked by the silver puddles of small reservoirs and the little congregations of village lights ten, forty, sixty miles away. Most of these Scouts had never seen anything like it. They lived in the twisted hills of Appalachia, where the horizon is always cut short by something. Most of them had never been west.

“Boys, I’ve seen a lot of sunrises,” said Steve, the father, a short and modest man with a graying business cut who woke in the dark daily and drove to work at a plant near Morgantown. “Each one is a good reason to thank God for another day.”

The crew spread out along the rocky point and watched as day broke to the east. But this was not the direction of their travel: when the orange orb crested the black horizon, it set the rising land behind us on fire. The slabs of volcanic rock on the edge of the mesa glowed ferrous, and five miles to the north the Tooth of Time’s stone face gleamed dark gold, every crack and clinging tree naked in the morning. One by one, the sun lit the miles of mountain to the west. It crept up the arm of Tooth Ridge to the dry top of Shaefer’s Peak, then higher, past the shoulder joint and into the thick torso of the Philmont backcountry, stopping on the dark forested hulk of Black Mountain, a huge isosceles triangle with the point snipped off.

In camp the evening before, we’d surveyed the land on topo maps as heat slipped out of the day. The Philmont Ranger Department is a teaching organization, not a guide service. We send our instructors out with each crew for three days and two nights of training, and then,

barring bald incompetence, the Scouts and their adult leaders are loosed on the land for another week, checking in periodically at backcountry outposts. On my last night with the crew, I talked them through the remaining week of their trek, tried to tell them a bit of the story of the land they would travel.

We were deep in South Country, I told the West Virginians in camp, asking one of the boys to find the skull-shaped contour lines of Urraca Mesa on paper. The name is Spanish for magpie: when the Anasazi lived here, I explained, they considered the top of the mesa charged with uncommon spiritual energy due to the way its wide hump of volcanic rock attracted lightning. It was known as a portal to an immaterial dimension, the frequent site of vision quests, and magpies patrolled it in large numbers.

We turned back to the two-dimensional reality on paper in front of them as I asked the boys to locate Shaefer's Pass, their next camp, and plot a route there. They would hike north and west from the mesa, dropping down to the South Fork of Urraca Creek, then over a small ridge and down again to the North Fork, before a long switchbacking climb through dry forest to the pass. There, they'd camp at their first major crossroads of the backcountry.

Shaefer's Pass is a protected saddle at the joint where the east-west arm of Tooth Ridge meets the bigger north-south body of mountains. It is lush during wet years, when the clearing fills with the creams and purples of Rocky Mountain iris and aspen fleabane. A spring lies just above camp and serves as a popular barometer for area rainfall. If Shaefer's is dry, chances are high that the ranch is in drought. I asked if they remembered what the big water board said in Base Camp said about Shaefer's.

"Dry," a few said together.

Where these Scouts wouldn't hike was the burn zone of North Country. From Shaefer's, they'd wind west, back into the ranch's southern high country, where the ponderosas fade to Douglas fir and Engelmann spruce, quaking aspen colonies clinging to the wettest fingers of soil. If their itinerary continued north, however, it would eventually reach the five-pronged Ponil Watershed, site of the 2002 wildfire. Up there, the sides of the canyons and the ridges that split them know little of rebirth. They house tough bunchgrass, red dryland paintbrush, low scrappy scrub oak. The ground is brick hard beneath, and the only forms taller than a person are the standing skeletons of pines. Many have dropped in the wind, their trunks crossing and piling into a jungle that can leave bushwhackers resembling chimney sweeps. Mule deer and ground squirrels skirt anxiously between sun-baked rocks, lacking cover. Mountain lions and coyotes hole up until twilight. Red-tailed hawks and turkey vultures wheel overhead.

I told the Scouts about the Ponil Complex Fire, about a third of the ranch closing and how it started: a big lightning storm sparking several fires at once before high winds merged them into the complex blaze. The forest wasn't ready for it. The thing rose on strong winds into a whirl of smoke and heat, torching the land from ground to treetop. Two years into a new century, Smokey Bear's legacy from the last one had gone up in flames. For decades, Scouts—and backcountry travelers across the West—had learned that only they could prevent forest fires, that keeping the dry woods from burning amounted to patriotic duty.

The two fathers stood up, stretching. I asked the boys how often they thought a forest like this one burns.

“Once in a hundred years?” one of them guessed. “Two hundred?”

“Not quite.”

A healthy forest in the arid West burns low and cool every two to fifteen years. If they traveled north of Philmont, they would see this in Carson National Forest, where federally-managed burns have helped the land in recent years. The fire smolders for days while the thick-scaled bark of the pines and firs protects the trees' living layers, keeping the flames from climbing far off the ground. Then, the tonic of fire leaves the soil rejuvenated with carbon-rich ash. A wide palette of grasses and flowers sprout up in the broad spaces between trees. A ponderosa forest is healthy when it is open, when you can drive a car through it easily, someone once told me.

Forest managers broke that cycle in the name of safety. When fires started, they rushed the smokejumpers in with noble speed. These were natural disasters, they told the public, just like tornadoes. And they are now, because we thought they were then. As government employees doused every blaze on impulse, the unburned places stocked vegetation. Windblown limbs piled up, falling on top of old giants dead from natural causes, and shrubs shot scraggly up into a middle story that would not exist in the normal pattern of things. When fire did come, it came hotter and faster than before, sometimes too hot to control, feasting on the platter of fuels, rising from the understory, hot enough to pierce the big trees' shields of bark, to climb their limb ladders and leap between needle crowns. A coup hit the forest. It left few survivors.

I wrapped up my dystopian lecture, asking the crew why this all mattered since they wouldn't be hiking in the burn zone. Silence followed. It was getting dark, cooling by the minute. We'd need our fleeces and hats soon. I pressed them to think about what would happen if the forest here in South Country caught.

"It would be bad," one of them said. "There were a lot of dead trees."

"So, what can we do about it?" another said, a hint of anxiety in his voice.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Controlled burns, right?” came the quick response.

“That’s a good thought,” I began. “But it’s not as easy as that.”

The paradox that Philmont still faces is financial and not ecological. The Ponil Complex Fire offers a warning of what will happen when a crown fire hits the crowded slopes of South Country. With twenty thousand Scouts on the land each summer, little room exists for managed burns, and even in the spring or fall, the option is fraught with danger. Two years before Ponil Complex, sixty miles southwest of the ranch, the Cerro Grande Fire began as a managed burn. Unexpected winds launched it past control and it torched 48,000 acres near the Los Alamos National Laboratories, burning an area a third the size of Philmont. It caused a billion dollars in damage, destroyed four hundred homes and nearly engulfed the labs’ cutting-edge nuclear facilities.

The Boy Scouts of America could not afford such a twist of fate. Philmont nets the organization many millions each summer, from modest participation fees to immodest souvenir prices at the Trading Post in Base Camp. When the ranch burns, it will also burn budgets. In 2002, managers scrambled to reroute crews out of the North Country. The campsites of South Country were as crowded as a jamboree. Had it been any worse, had the fire ballooned to Waldo Canyon size, the ranch would have started telling Scout troops to stay home.

Many of us on staff muttered in private that budgets be damned, the place just needed to burn. We had to close Philmont for a summer and clean it out. But even that was risky. What would be left? Up in the Ponil Watershed, the ponderosas were not coming back. The burn had been so hot that it seared deep into the soil, turning it from life-giver to a hard floor of hostility. If South Country burned, we’d be leading Scouts through a hell of matchsticks for years to come.

“So why aren’t we gathering fuel right now?” Steve asked. He’d played the role of advisor perfectly until now, honoring my request that the fathers stay quiet during teaching time. But in the stony silence that followed my *Catch-22* narrative, his mind had settled on the one decent solution.

I told him he was onto something. The crew, like every crew, would complete three hours of conservation work later in their trek, a requirement to earn the coveted Philmont arrowhead patch. Some of these projects now included thinning the understory, but one could only reach so much in three hours of work. The forests ringing the outpost camps might be clean, but farther back into the roadless country, fuels gathered. It would take countless hours of volunteer labor to hand-thin the ranch.

“The other side of the coin,” I said, “is that you guys didn’t just come out here to play with saws and loppers, did you?”

It’s a challenge of communication, I was learning, as much as anything else. Maybe more than anything else. I’d worked with my fair share of hard-headed American dads, and I knew the narrative didn’t sell easily. When science turns into politics, doors close. If I ended a talk on fire suppression and drought by explaining that it was only going to get worse as the climate warmed—that models showed the fires would only get bigger and more savage—I lost them. I stopped being the approachable teacher and became the preaching environmentalist. They might play nice until I left on the third morning, but they’d spend the rest of the trip undermining my efforts, telling the boys not to worry about all that eco stuff the Ranger was going on about, that they were here to have fun.

And who was I to say they weren’t? I knew the statistics: the last summer had been the hottest in state history, with an average temperature three and half degrees above twentieth

century norms, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association. This summer was fast challenging that record. I had read articles and looked up data. I stopped eating meat in the dining hall, and not just because it could be hard sometimes to tell the Salisbury steak from a cow pie. But I was no saint. I grimaced as I put key into ignition and drove off to trailheads to watch my Rangers teach, as I thought about the thousand-mile road trips that would bookend my summer, the gas I'd buy and markets I'd fuel. We were all complicit. The megafires were nobody's fault if not mine.

But I was equally worried about puritanism. I wasn't ready to give up on the stubborn dads, and I certainly wasn't going to give up on their sons. I knew that nothing but hate would come from tone-deaf yells for everyone to stop driving their trucks and eating cheeseburgers. I knew that whatever progress I could help with here, it would be slow and unspectacular—a ground fire, not a glorious blaze. And sometimes, too, I would compromise the ethics I taught. Sometimes I would need to grab a few friends and drive into town for a case of beer, then keep driving up to some trailhead in Colorado for a night under the clear sky, a hungover hike up a big mountain the next morning. We might moan to our beers about the state of things, but when we got above treeline into crisp air, when the view expanded, we'd know that for now, this flush of freedom was worth the gas we burned to find it.

I told the Scouts to enjoy themselves, to shout with joy every now and then, even if it scared the birds. I gave them a favorite quote from Ed Abbey, one he told a conference full of environmentalists in the 1970s: "It's not enough to fight for the land. It's even more important to enjoy it while you can."

But I didn't let them off the hook. As our rare morning light turned quickly toward midday heat, I wrapped up my sunrise meditation and we walked down from the lookout, a spot

we Rangers call Inspiration Point. It was time for them to walk on without me, and when we reached camp I started saying goodbyes and good luck. The challenge began when they got home, I reminded them. If they wanted to bring their own sons or daughters to Philmont someday, they'd need to take more than joy from the place. They'd need to start thinking more seriously about how to change themselves, how to change their communities.

“If Scouting’s about anything,” I told them in closing, “it’s about giving back, right?”

It was later in August when the scare came. Two summers had passed, and I had skipped one, trying out a full-time writing job back east. Now I was back, had moved into an assistant manager role, and on a fog-chilled morning we were searching for lost Scouts.

“Unit 102 to Base,” the radio had crackled late the night before. “I’m up here at Iris Park with a couple of Scouts, and they’re reporting that the rest of their crew has not made it back to camp from their side-hike up Ash Mountain today.”

I was driving back to Base with a carry team after a false alarm, an adult leader whose chest pain had subsided. Now the call blared in like a siren from Iris Park, a remote campsite up in Carson National Forest, where Philmont holds a special usage permit and sends only a few of its itineraries. I knew we’d be headed there. It was late, and it was hard enough to pull one team’s worth of free staff. Most folks had crews to meet the next morning. The Rangers already in the Suburban were sacrificing time off, and we’d ask them to sacrifice more. We got back to Base and I headed straight for the Logistics Office. I huddled over a map with our program director, drew up search routes, then we slapped together sandwiches in the Dining Hall and drove back into the night.

“You don’t think they would have actually stopped on a slope this steep, do you?” Mary called as we trudged up the sheer southeast flank of Ash Mountain. She was a first-year Ranger, tall and tough, the youngest in the trio I was leading up this side of the mountain. Three others were sweeping up Ash’s southwest aspect while the final two stayed below, driving laps on the stretch of road close to camp, knowing the Suburban might be the first thing a lost crew saw from above after a sleepless night.

Ash Mountain is long and rocky, its name nodding to a volcanic past. There are no trails up it, and Philmont advises that only experienced crews attempt the climb. The group we were looking for had started late the day before, then halfway up one of the boys had gotten sick. He and his father dropped back to camp for rest, expecting their triumphant crew to return in time for a late supper. But when darkness hit without them, the dad booked it three miles over to a Forest Service campground, talked a visitor into driving him down the road until he found cell service, then called in his missing crew. Now we marched through dew and flat light, hoping chilled and sleepless Scouts were the worst we’d find.

We were nearly up the steepest stretch when we saw the smoke. From the side of Ash Mountain, an extravagant view reaches south, down the long green U of the Valle Vidal—“Valley of Life” in Spanish—and onto Philmont proper, where the swells of peaks drop eastward into tangled canyons. Thirty-five crow miles away, we could see the hazy bumps of Tooth Ridge. Closer than that, maybe ten miles south, a thin spire of smoke rose toward the blueing sky.

“There’s no way that’s just fog,” Mary said as we caught our breath against a fir trunk. I agreed with her. The morning was heating up, the fog had lifted, and the column climbing from those distant trees was chalk-pale. I turned up my radio.

We weren't the only ones who noticed it. Scouts camping near the spot had hustled two miles to the closest outpost and the staff there was relaying information to Base. The radio squawked and Kyle broke in, another assistant manager who was elsewhere with staff and had a bearing on the smoke. He reported it, and then it was my turn to help.

"Unit 33 to Base," I called. "I'm up here on Ash Mountain and can give you another bearing on that 10-70." We didn't use the word fire on the radio. No need to raise pulses higher.

I read off our location from the GPS I carried, two strings of digits that the staff back in Base would use to pinpoint our location. Then I squinted down an old compass and gave the bearing: 192 degrees, a little past south. Between our data, Kyle's, and the guessed location the Scouts had given, Base would triangulate the site of the blaze. Staff in the area were already en route; they'd copy the location, bushwhack to it, and dig a first hand-line around the fire. The regulars would follow, our local volunteer fire crew, and, if necessary, helicopters full of pink chemical retardant, crews from around the state. It was too early to tell what this might become.

Of course, we still had Scouts to find. We started walking again, and it didn't take long. Morning had broken a couple hours ago, and the crew had done as we'd hoped. After hunkering against trees for the night, they walked downhill at first light, down toward the road. Our pair back at the truck called in the good news: the crew had seen our vehicle and were now beside it, all accounted for, cold and hungry but nothing worse. We turned back down the mountain, breathing a thin measure of relief. Soon we dropped too low to see the smoke.

We still don't know how the fire started. There had been no lightning for several days and the ranch had been gifted a relatively wet summer, which is to say a return to near-normal after three years of withering drought. Spring snow and the steady July storms of the southwestern monsoon season were keeping the ranch greener than I'd ever seen it. But I knew it

was not enough. One green year does not a century defeat. The woods were still bursting with fuel and this fire had started high up a drainage, above the reach of the 2002 burn. If it stayed dry in the coming days, if the wind picked wickedly up, we would have our Big One.

Once we made it down from Ash, we rallied our search teams back together, joined the happy crew with its last two members, and started the long drive to Base. We were exhausted, and by now I half-expected a devil deer to jump out from a rock and send me swerving the Suburban into chaos. But the road stayed clear. I cruised down the hard gravel and kept the camp radio on, listening to the fallout as Philmont woke up to fire.

The skies and the breezes spared us that week. We put the thing out, no choppers needed. The summer ended and I stayed for the fall, taking a job coordinating our small autumn camping program. Philmont keeps only a shell of staff through the offseason, eighty full-time employees, less than a tenth of the summer workforce. I got to know the regulars that year, the ones who had watched the gears of change turn the land for longer than I had.

One of them was John, a lean tower of a man, brown-bearded and deep-voiced. He'd been around Philmont for fifteen years: college summers as a Ranger, then leading backcountry trail crews, then, for most of the years I knew him, directing the ranch's Conservation Department, what we all called Cons. Since the seventies, Philmont had dedicated summer jobs to trail and campsite maintenance, and it had long required three hours of trail work from every crew, but around the time I started at the place, Cons added a new wing: environmental education. They started teaching Scouts the consequences of soil erosion, not just how to swing a pickax. Jealous, I imagined the Ranger Department incorporating more science into our training of crews. My fire ecology lectures were not exactly required curriculum. I imagined land-based

learning becoming not just an offshoot of Cons, but the mission of the ranch, which currently reads, “delivering wilderness adventures that last a lifetime.”

It is not enough. The place itself may not last a lifetime, not as the welcoming thing we know, if we do not give it more.

During the offseason I worked there, we took a first step. John had been running Cons on seasonal contracts for most of a decade. He’d been a Ranger during the 2002 fire, had seen the ranch grow even drier since, taught thousands of Scouts and staff the importance of careful forest management. He’d taught me how to run a chainsaw, and which trees not to fell. John would show up in the spring and stay through the fall, but the ranch and the national Scouting office behind it couldn’t seem to find the budget space to give him health insurance and a year-round paycheck. Until 2014, the place had exactly zero full-time employees focused on the health of the land.

On the day word got out of John’s promotion, it snowed. A quick squall found us in late October. The sun was back out and the temperature climbing by noon, but the morning was dreamy and placid, a hood of white draping the mountains. John had already told me that if we had a decent winter, he’d show me some good skiing spots in the backcountry. These fall flurries were a hopeful start. I walked into the headquarters building, where we based ourselves for the offseason, and bounced over to John’s office. He was the Recreation Resource Manager now. His khaki uniform bore the gold epaulets of a full-time national employee, not the red loops bought by every eleven-year old who joins a troop.

“Congrats, buddy,” I said as he looked up from his desk.

“Thanks,” he growled back, smiling over his beard. “We’ve got a lot of good work to do.”

Coexistence Training

I got a momentary thrill when I chased my first bear. The adrenaline and the swell of ego wore off quickly, though, about the time the animal slowed to a trot at the edge of camp and looked at me as if to say, “I’ll be back.”

It was the heat-record summer of 2011 in northern New Mexico, and my boss at the Scout camp where I worked had given me an unusual assignment: take a team of younger staff to patrol a troublesome campsite for bears. Scouts had been leaving food and trash in camp while embarking on a popular side-hike, and after a few consecutive days of reward, the black bears had started to hover.

We had just finished a quick circuit of the area and a gangly bear was sniffing around our tents. White markings on his face and blond streaks through the ridge of his back fur immediately revealed him as one of the problem bears about whom we’d been warned. We yelled, and picked up rocks, and I threw a few in his direction while running toward him with my arms windmilling. A few lopes and he was into the ponderosa pines on the edge of camp.

It was not a typical summer, and I did not work at a typical summer camp. There were no merit badges, no raucous songs in the dining hall, no lake. Philmont Scout Ranch is enormous, and mostly wild. The Boy Scouts of America owns 220 square miles of land in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the long spine of the Southern Rockies that stretches from central Colorado to Santa Fe. With tens of thousands of Scouts flocking there every summer, the place has become something of a Disneyworld for teenage boys.

They come from across the country, a few even from overseas, to climb 12,000-foot peaks and camp in sprawling groves of spruce, fir and quaking aspen, to sweat and curse and kick up dust in baked canyons of juniper and piñon pine. They spend a handful of their ten backcountry nights at living-history outpost camps, where a college-aged staff reenacts the land's recent past, impersonating 1914 loggers, 1870 homesteaders, or 1935 cattlemen, teaching Scouts how to crosscut, lasso, milk goats, pan for gold.

Alongside all the human traffic, there are bears. Mountain lions, too, but the cats are cautious of crowds and rarely show themselves. Ranchers and hunters killed the last wolves and grizzlies a century ago, but the scrappy black bears persist, at least a hundred of them across the property. For seven summers, it was my job to enable a tenuous coexistence between *Ursus americanus* and the Boy Scouts of America. It wasn't always easy—for the bears, for the Scouts, or for me.

“Let's talk about bears,” I'd say to each group after we arrived in camp on our first afternoon in the backcountry. As a Ranger, one of two hundred that the ranch employs from May to August, I hiked with a dozen or so crews each summer, usually eight to ten boys and a few fathers. I taught them for their first two days on the trail—after that, they were on their own on the land, with a handful of check-ins at outpost camps the only means of monitoring their whereabouts. Plenty could go wrong between those check-ins, and I had forty-eight hours to make sure it didn't. On night one, as groaning fathers wrestled off their stuffed packs and the fifteen-year olds talked about video games, I started their training.

I taught them about more than just bears, of course, but the wilderness first aid and the fire ecology could wait. The first lesson in camp was always bear procedures. For it to stick, for

the boys to understand not just how to coexist, but why, I'd need to hold their imaginations. Fortunately, I had an animal subject that holds hard on imaginations.

The bear had loomed mythic in my mind since childhood. I was raised in Western Massachusetts, somewhere between the suburbs and the country. A neighborhood of cul-de-sacs sat directly to the north, our little horse pasture and a hundred acres of town-owned conservation land to the south. The rocky hills of Holyoke Range State Park were one more road crossing away. I woke wide-eyed on a fall morning at age seven to a toppled section of fence and Dad trying to bridle the anxious appaloosa in the middle of the front yard. Mom had reined in Oaky, the quarter horse, but Appy was a stubborn cuss, and was still terrified.

"It must have been a bear coming down from the range earlier this morning," Dad said after he finally corralled Appy and we righted the fence. "I can't imagine anything else spooking them enough to bring down the fence."

What kind of animal causes a pair of thousand-pound horses to flail against wooden rails and deep-planted posts until the fence falls? I felt the bear's wildness in Appy's trembling flanks, saw it in his dark-flashing eyes. I pictured the creature, huge and coal-black, lumbering down from the hills and across our gravel driveway, something ancient beyond my reckoning. The woods were alive.

"So, who's ever seen a bear before?" I'd ask the Scouts as they traded boots for Crocs or tennis shoes. A story first, takeaways later. Often, tales of raided campsites in the Smokies or bear jams in Yellowstone emerged. Bears were novelties, part of a good vacation. If they were country kids, it was different, and this was old hat. Bears were part of the land. They got into chicken coops and spooked livestock. Repeat offenders were shot—not wickedly or happily, but necessarily. One of the dads might have hunted bear, and he might tell with suppressed pride of

the cold-ass October morning and the tasty stew meat it provided. But for plenty of them, there was no context for the wild species. Suburban or city life had given them nothing but zoo trips, Smokey, and Baloo for reference points. If that was the case, I introduced them to my first Philmont bear.

It was really my brother Gabe's story. "We'd just gotten to camp on our first night," he had stammered back in 2000, voice rising the characteristic octave with excitement. I was a wide-eyed eleven, he a gangly fourteen with a sandy bowl cut, fresh off his first trip to Philmont. "I went off to the latrine, and when I walked out, there was a big blond bear!"

The animal was as startled as he was, high-tailing it away before Gabe had time to snap a picture or call to the rest of the crew. Best-case scenario, to be sure. But at eleven, the image of a blond bear waiting by the outhouse stayed with me for years. I saw no bears on my own first Philmont trek at fourteen, nor my second at seventeen. Until I started working at the ranch, Latrine Bear lived large in my imagination alongside the horse-spooker. Some of the mythic terror wore off—Latrine Bear had run away, after all—but the question still lingered: *what if he hadn't?*

"What do bears do during the winter?" I'd ask. The segue from story time.

"Sleep! Hibernate!" This one was easy enough for even the diehard Nintendo addicts.

"Right. And if you were going to sleep for four months, what would you want to do a lot of beforehand?"

The sharper ones caught on quickly. "Eat!"

"Yes! Good, Tyler." (Or Cody, or Ben, or a hundred others.) "So, what do bears eat?"

Things were getting tougher. Time for the first vocab word: *omnivore*.

Bears are creative, adaptable and smart as hell. In a Yosemite parking lot, a black bear once figured out that jumping on top of a locked Volkswagen enough times pops its doors open. A friend living on Kodiak Island once told me of a brown bear who had learned the neighbors' work schedules and timed garbage raids accordingly, hitting each house just before its owners got home in the evening. Her boyfriend came home early one day to the bear in their garage and summoned the courage to hit it with enough bear spray that it began avoiding their house. A recent study showed that bears living near towns in dry eastern Colorado possessed a diet of more than thirty percent human-derived material. If a bear can get its paws on an easy meal, it will, and the habit will develop quickly. Leftover hamburger is a lot less work than digging for tubers.

“A Fed Bear is a Dead Bear” became the mantra at Philmont sometime before I worked there. I'd introduce it to Scouts after vocab time. It's a melodramatic phrase, but based in sad truth. Repeated food rewards in campsites strip black bears of instinctual fear, and the potential for erratic or aggressive behavior around people skyrockets. Philmont has occasionally tranquilized and relocated problem bears before a violent incident occurs, but the habitual creatures have returned to reward sites from scores of miles away. Often, ranch managers kill multiple offenders, even if they've never touched a person, to spare themselves the trouble of marginally successful relocation.

That wasn't an ideal solution for me, or for plenty of other Philmont staff members. The bears were here first, after all. I had a Ranger friend who was fascinated with the legends of spirit bears in the Pacific Northwest. She drew little replicas of Native bear art onto stones and gave them out for us to carry in our packs, a reminder that there was wisdom out there beyond our science. I liked the thought. Meanwhile, we taught our Scouts the alternative to aggression—

diligence in the name of coexistence. Everything with an unnatural scent would be hung at night: batteries, Sharpies, toothpaste, Chapstick. Water bottles that had ever held anything besides water. Clothes with spilled food on them. If you weren't sure, hang it. Emergency medication could go in the bottom of your boot—it's smelly enough in there already. Otherwise, stuff those bear bags close to bursting.

One summer, the ranch came up with a new piece of Disneyworld fun: passports. Scouts would carry the little booklets on the trail, and receive a stamp from each outpost camp visited. In one case, the initiative backfired terribly. A bear raided an unattended backpack, immediately associating the smell of fresh ink with the trail mix or crackers that sat right next to the passport in the boy's pack. More bears began plundering the camp at night, tearing through packs even when the Scouts had virtuously hung all their smellables. What brought them? Fresh ink, and the food it falsely promised. Each morning after a raid, passport booklets lay shredded and scattered around the site. The camp promptly halted stamping, and passports were added to the list of smellables. The raids subsided as the summer went on.

But such events were a rarity. Over seven summers, I witnessed just a handful of crises like the passports. For such a high-use area as Philmont—220 square miles, twenty thousand Scouts per summer—we do reasonably well. And a large reason is our rigid adherence to concentrated impact camping. With a few thousand Scouts in the backcountry on any given night in June or July, we must confine our presence to designated places. The bulk of the land is left untraveled by us bipeds, permitting the lives of cougars and bobcats, elk and bears. Where we do camp, the tents go in marked sites, the meals are cooked near established fire pits. Afterward, the dishwasher goes down a fifteen-foot L-shaped PVC pipe, deep into the soil. The trash and the scraps are packed out carefully, and the bear bags are hung over thick cables stretched between

two trees, at least a dozen feet off the ground. “Who’s the basketball star in the crew?” I’d ask. “Okay, Brandon. Try to jump up and touch those bear bags. You’re the tester from now on. You’ve got better hops than a bear.”

But even amid strict policy, accidents happen. A crew can follow bear procedures perfectly and still run into trouble. If they camp in the site of a previous reward, all bets are off. That was the case during my first summer on staff, when I listened over intercamp radio to the saga of a rare Philmont bear attack.

I’d departed from a crew that morning, and was cozy in my sleeping bag on the porch of an outpost cabin where a friend worked. In the dark, six miles south of us, a bear had returned to a remembered campsite, and spooked at the sight of movement while passing a tent. Instinctively, she bit through the plastic, right onto a Scout's butt. Screaming and flailing ensued, and the bear quickly fled, leaving the boy with a clean wound and an A-plus story. After a ride down to Base Camp and a quick examination at the Health Lodge, he was back on the trail. Meanwhile, I hiked by the camp involved the next morning. A half mile past, I waved to a state game warden. He was riding a big sorrel with a rifle across the saddle horn.

The goal of my bear patrol was to avoid a similar series of events. We would brief the Scout crews on recent events, check before bed that they’d hung everything, and walk between sites in case of a raid. The camp we monitored was typically a crew’s last: Base Camp and showers and ice cream lay a seven-mile hike away the next morning, and anticipation had led to apathy too many times when it came to bear procedures. Later that evening, after the first chase, we hazed the same yearling out of two more campsites, and a bigger cinnamon bear from a third. They were hovering, just as expected. Our grim-faced reminders to the Scouts would be necessary.

“I’m just gonna go for a little walk,” I told the guys as we returned to our tents from final rounds. With the air cooling and the last drops of low sun filtering through the ponderosas, I needed breathing room. Chasing bears had been exciting for a moment, but I was hardly excited that I had to do it in the first place. I’d seen a few bears in previous summers, but those encounters had gone as hoped. Surprised by company, the bear had always beaten it, crashing away into forest. These hungry lingerers were my first hard taste of the problem.

Just outside of camp, I found the unexpected. Rather than investigating our tents, a small dark sow and her cub were scavenging in the pines fifty yards away. Up and down, she lifted large rocks with ease, searching underneath for grubs or roots. Her cub took careful notice of each movement, no doubt hungry at the end of a drought summer. The pair moved methodically, their backs turned to me, upwind of my scent. Unaware, or at least unconcerned. I watched the foragers for what might have been two minutes or twenty. My presence, for a few moments, seemed to vanish from the place. Eventually, they ambled out of sight and I did not follow. I returned to camp in the hastening dark and did not tell the others.

I achieved some balance of luck and success when it came to bears at Philmont. In seven summers, none of my crews were raided. In the later years, as I moved into supervisory jobs and began training Rangers, my chances for on-the-ground influence diminished. I took out only a couple of crews per summer, busy with early-season training of staff and ongoing development of our Rangers through the season. Along with a few other budding ecologists in management, I began teaching our guides the biological grounding for their lessons. I equipped them with facts: every year since 2000, for example, the average temperature in our zone of northeast New Mexico had been more than a full degree higher than the historic average of the past century. In

2002, the Ponil Complex Fire that burned 92,000 acres, including much of Philmont's northern country, was the largest in state history at the time. Many crews would hike through its matchstick-laden burn zone. Nine years later, during the bear patrol summer, the Las Conchas Fire burned more than 150,000 acres south of Philmont, only to be dwarfed the following year by Whitewater-Baldy, which burned nearly 300,000. It was unnaturally hot and dry out here, and the bears were hungry. Campfires had to be small or nonexistent. Bear procedures carried critical importance.

The statistic I didn't have yet was that black bears, according to a 1980 study still cited widely, drastically reduce their activity levels any time temperatures exceed seventy-seven degrees. It seems obvious: hunker down in the heat. It's a main reason why the thick-furred creatures are crepuscular, foraging most actively around dawn and dusk. But with a concrete threshold comes the knowledge of how often it is exceeded. Temperatures in the mountains of northern New Mexico are not returning to the norms of recent centuries. In the town of Cimarron, four miles from Base Camp and 6,400 feet above sea level, the average daily high in July 2016 was 88.9 degrees, six degrees higher than the monthly standard from 1981-2010. By the middle of July, the region should be in monsoon season, with daily afternoon thunderstorms cooling and greening the landscape. But the rains are later and rarer now, the heatwaves longer and hotter, and the bears must know it. Their window of time when it's cool enough to forage all day is shrinking. They'll take what they can, whenever they can.

Somewhere during one of those later summers, I stumbled upon a copy of Doug Peacock's *Grizzly Years* in a corner of the Ranger Office. I was already enamored with the bold and witty insights of Edward Abbey, so I knew Peacock as the real-life inspiration for Abbey's

iconic character, George Washington Hayduke, the ex-green beret medic who returns home from Vietnam to fight industrial development of the American West at any cost. But when I read *Grizzly Years*, Peacock's first-person chronicle of overcoming Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder through long exposure in grizzly country, I met a narrator on the page who carried far more humility and sense than Abbey's caricature. I also met *Ursus arctos*, a species of bear more potent and embattled than our New Mexican campsite raiders. The figures of Peacock's Bitter Creek Griz and Medicine Grizzly jumped off the page and into my imagination with the same mythic size of that horse-spooker of childhood. Up there in the Northern Rockies lived something enormous and timeless, a holdout of the untamable West. I wanted to feel its wisdom, and, of course, to emerge unscathed.

When I moved to Montana for graduate school, I'd never seen a grizzly in real backcountry. From a tour bus in Denali, from the middle of a motorist crowd in Yellowstone, I'd watched big silver-tipped bears foraging, as concerned with me as an elephant with an ant. But I believed deeply in Peacock's lifework of grizzly protection, in his mission of giving the species back a bit more than the two percent of historic range they currently occupy in the Lower 48, and in teaching Americans humility through this coexistence with the great bear. After a year of coursework, I jumped at the opportunity for a summer internship with a nonprofit dedicated to preserving and restoring grizzly habitat. Instead of teaching Scouts how to hang bear bags, I wrote articles about electric fencing and bear-proof trash bins. I researched the downfall of the whitebark pine in Yellowstone, their nuts a main grizzly food source, the trees now ravaged across the West by beetles whose natural control—cold, cold winters—is vanishing. I read, too, the stories of the occasional grizzly mauling or killing. I knew that coexistence up here was bloodier and harder to sell. But my hands were nowhere near that blood.

The same summer, my best friend Sam flew up from New Mexico for a week in August. We backpacked into the Cabinet Mountains of northwest Montana at the height of huckleberry season. I knew all about the Cabinets and their grizzlies from work: the population was down to a couple dozen bears, highways and developed river valleys splitting them from other subpopulations. They were struggling in an island of protection too small for their genetic need to range. We strapped on our bear spray, kept the conversation loud as we grazed on berries, and hoped to pass through unobtrusively.

“Jeez, I’m really glad to see you guys here,” stammered Kristina, the breathless hiker entering our campsite. It was dusktime and cooling quickly at seven thousand feet. Sam had just pulled his first Montana cutthroat trout out of the little alpine lake beside which we camped. A flask of whiskey and the promise of hearty conversation awaited as we gathered firewood. Now this: a young woman our age, her worn trail shoes and lightweight pack indicating plenty of backcountry chops, her voice barely hiding panic.

“Are you guys camping here tonight? I know people come up here for solitude but do you mind if I set up next door? I was gonna camp at Wanless, the lower lake, but there’s a grizzly down there. I walked right up on him.”

The bear, at least four hundred pounds by her estimate, was browsing through huckleberries, just like us that afternoon. Entirely preoccupied with his buffet, he was oblivious to Kristina’s arrival on his turf, even when she marched into a campsite fifty feet away and froze. She had backed away slowly, spray in hand, still seemingly unnoticed, doing everything right.

But then she looked around at the campsite. A half-pitched tent. A thin nylon jacket left hanging on a tree limb. A discarded Dasani bottle, empty bags of Chex Mix and gummi bears and beef jerky. Someone had left Dodge in a hurry. With the safety off her bear spray, she started

picking up the garbage, her eyes darting from the trashed site to the grizzly, in easy earshot and still munching berries without any recognition of her. After stuffing the worst of the debris in her pockets, she decided she'd tested fate long enough. She backed away shuddering until well out of sight, then half-ran the mile up to our camp.

"I came out here to get away from people, but boy am I happy to see you," she concluded, her breath finally slowing.

And that was it. She retreated to her tent and was gone with a quick wave early the next morning, back the way we had come, the opposite way of Wanless Lake.

Our itinerary, meanwhile, included hiking past Wanless the following day. We didn't labor over the decision. I'd been on plenty of hikes in grizzly country over the last year, and the pairing of travel partners and steady talk had worked. I'd trust luck and attentiveness again. We'd have our wits about us, but we weren't going to let Kristina's story derail our plans. In a remote range in a remote state, there was room, I hoped, for us and the bear.

When Sam and I aren't skiing or hiking, we can usually be found with a guitar or a mandolin nearby. As we hiked to Wanless Lake, we ran through our greatest hits a cappella.

"You know that grizzer bear wants to hear 'The Weight!'" I called out, and soon we were belting to the winds, *I pulled into Nazareth, was feeling 'bout half past dead...*

When we pulled into Wanless, there was no sign of him. The ditched tent and jacket remained, but no tracks penetrated the hard dirt, not even a telltale scat pile to verify his visit. The day was calm and warm and I began to think about swimming. I exhaled, mostly in relief, but with a nagging crust of disappointment. I couldn't deny that I'd wanted to see him. From afar, of course. As he gorged on berries and ignored us completely. But I'd wanted to finally witness the goal: a grizzly, in perfect habitat, undisturbed. I knew it was madness, knew that a

quick change in the wind could turn majesty into a nightmare of musky fur and four-inch claws. I should have been grateful only, content that somewhere out there, the bear endured. But some insecure corner of me said—and still says—that I can't call myself a Montanan without a good grizzly story.

Of course, when I did see one later that month, the story wasn't good enough to make a B-list documentary. A friend and I were running in the Rattlesnake Recreation Area, a ten-minute drive from downtown Missoula. Half a mile from our car, on a gravel corridor we'd traveled countless times, a middle-aged hiker waved us to a stop.

"There's a bear with cubs just ahead," she said flatly. "You might want to turn around like I am."

Oh. Okay. And then, yep, there she is. We looked down the path a hundred feet and saw the sow's dark bulk behind a willow thicket, two pairs of smaller brown ears following close behind. We thanked the hiker and jogged the other way, barely breaking stride.

Reality never matches the myths we forge in idle moments. I still can't claim with conviction that the sow and cubs in the Rattlesnake were even grizzlies. The cubs' rounded ears sure looked like it. We knew that griz sometimes come down this close to town in late summer, once the berry season passes and backyard apple trees ripen. But black bears do the same, and if they'd been grizzlies, they'd been awfully unfazed by all the bipeds zipping by. Maybe they were just too hungry to consider us. They'd rounded a bend in the internal calendar and winter now loomed on the edge of the frame. Get calories, nothing else. On another run two weeks later, someone asked me if I'd seen the bear and cubs. We were just past the junction and I'd turned the other way, avoiding their willow thicket. If the bears were back, I'd leave them room.

In his essay “Grizzly,” Bill Kittredge tells of a night spent in a fire lookout with Doug Peacock and his wife, Lisa. The men, unsurprisingly, pass a bottle of scotch back and forth, and Peacock tells a few bear stories. “You got to come back when the bears are around,” he tells Kittredge, “and hear them sons-a-bitches when they are coming at one another. ...It’ll do you more good than anything. That roaring will chill your piss. On a warm night.”

What Peacock has done up here is break down the barrier between myth and reality, between my imagined horse-spooker of boyhood and the fact of Philmont’s haggard black bears. Living intentionally close to the bears, often alone, “courting fear,” as Kittredge calls it, Peacock has witnessed and photographed the terrestrial monarchs of the Lower 48. He’s known he could end up lunch on the whim of a few muscular lunges. He’s been bluff-charged scores of times and never touched. His practice of moving slowly and attentively in bear country, talking to bears in a deep and steady voice when face-to-face—and never, never, turning his back on them—has worked so far. But he has no delusions of guaranteed safety. “Some old sow may eat me out from the asshole up,” he tells Kittredge. “But they got a right. It’s their country.”

I’m no Peacock wannabe. I may never venture deep into known grizzly country alone. But I’m inspired by his boldness. To know that a man has continued through decades of close shaves with nothing but greater love and respect for the bears is to know that humble coexistence is not a foolish goal. We can honor the grizzlies with enough space to survive in health, and whether we meet them or not, we can feel our lives charged with belonging, with inclusion in a greater network of things, thanks to their abiding power.

North of Missoula, on Flathead Reservation land, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes established the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness, a first of its kind in North American land management. From July through September each year, the tribes close ten

thousand acres of it from human access. It's the time when the highest concentrations of army cutworm moths gather there, the time when grizzlies load up on a valuable food source, as the moths weigh in with as much as seventy-two percent body fat. But from New Mexico to Montana, the cutworms only migrate up to the high country for its cooler summer temperatures. As snowfields shrink, will they keep returning to the Missions?

It's more than modern science that fuels the tribes' management practices. "Grizzly bears were here before human beings and we respect them that way," said Salish elder Johnny Arlee in a recent interview with *Native News Online*. In his tradition, the bears give their gifts to humans by choice, whether it's pelt or meat or, for that matter, a photograph. "A spiritual gift from a grizzly can be used in a good or bad way," Arlee says. "You can use that gift to help people, or to be greedy, and hurt others with that power. The more you help, the more knowledge you gain."

Bears gave Doug Peacock the gift of identity after the gore of Vietnam scarred him profoundly. Through his conservation work as a writer and photographer, he's been paying off his debt to them since. I think of his reckless reciprocity often, whether I'm writing grant applications or strapping bear spray to the hip belt of my pack. And I think back to Philmont, hot days and quiet nights and the beginnings of my own avocation, the chance to pass on a land and life ethic.

The future, down there and up here, looks like skinny bears and an increasingly hard coexistence. For it to work, compassion must serve as the bedrock for diligence. For me at least, inspiration still comes in the image of a hungry sow in dry ponderosas, her attentive cub, and their gift of a few moments' peace, of membership in a place. I wonder what their chances are, and then I get to work.

The Next Storm

I awoke in the night to thunder and the hardpan rattle of rain on a metal roof. It was 4:27 in the morning, and the vibrating phone pushed like a dull knife through my tangled watery dreams.

“Major flooding in North Country,” my boss said through the speaker. “We’re beginning 10-70 procedures. We have missing Scouts.”

I fumbled for my watch, took the first gulp from a Nalgene bottle. I started shuffling through the motions, pulling on work pants and boots. I filled a large daypack: extra food, extra layers, extra water. I had to hurry. I had to be ready for anything. Seven minutes after the wake-up call, I was out the door.

I’d spent seven summers in the Ranger Department at Philmont Scout Ranch, the Boy Scouts of America’s huge camping preserve in northern New Mexico. I’d taught teenagers how to backpack in the dry Mountain West. I knew bear bags and heat exhaustion and Leave No Trace, but flash floods were hypothetical. They lived only in print on the training checklist each Ranger completed. I had never seen one.

Philmont is 140,000 acres of wild and diverse land. It is the lush subalpine, green from snowmelt at eleven thousand feet, and it is the tan high desert, dotted with silver sage and juniper five thousand feet beneath the peaks. In between run fast-dropping watersheds, creeks that squirm from the high country in a springtime rush, joining and plunging through steep-walled drainages. As a Ranger, I did what I could to prepare Scouts for the land’s variance and power.

Now, as an assistant manager, I oversaw the training and support that prepared Rangers for the job. It is not a light one: after three days of teaching a crew, a Ranger returns to Base Camp and the crew presses farther into the mountains on their own, backpacking for another week, the two or three volunteer adults in the group charged with ensuring diligence and safety.

The Ponil Watershed houses much of the ranch's northern country, a five-pronged star of waterways named in Spanish after the five-petaled flower also called Apache plume. In 2002, a record-setting wildfire had shredded the area, left the land barren, devoid of life for vast stretches, opened like a wound to the risk of flood.

It had rained hard overnight. A big thunderhead rolled in from the northwest, dumping water on dry soil. Then it plowed east onto the plains and found something unexpected: another stormcell climbing up from the south. The two met like rude demigods and the northern cell backtracked from the fight. It settled over Philmont for a second dousing as I tossed in my sleep.

We weren't just teachers in the Ranger Department. With a staff of two hundred trained in safe backcountry travel, we comprised the primary Search and Rescue resource for all northeast New Mexico. My years in management had accustomed me to calls at odd hours: broken legs five miles from road access, lost and panicking hikers, old fishermen who hadn't made it home the night before. In afternoon heat one August, I struggled to hold my spot on the litter as our carry team hustled down rocky switchbacks, bearing a groaning 250-pound father with a shattered kneecap, bladed yucca jabbing at our Carhartts. I'd led search teams up hillsides and through willow thickets. Three years ago, helping a state recovery, we carried a corpse out of the nearby Wheeler Peak Wilderness, a middle-aged heart attack victim who died before he hit the ground. I thought of his family mourning in Mississippi while the body-bag jostled in our stretcher. I tried to focus on my footing as we curved down a narrow trail.

This call was different. This could become anything.

I took long strides across the wet lawns of Base Camp, past stucco cabins and the L-shaped Dining Hall. In an hour, I might be pulling Scouts from chest-high water. I might be resetting a thirteen-year old's femur, shattered by a tree trunk that hurtled downstream. Or I might be cooped in the Logistics Office, coordinating the response while others drove into the fray. I'd learned the Scout motto fifteen years earlier: *Be Prepared*. I swallowed and hoped I would be.

Mark would decide my role. He was our program director, and I trusted him near-comprehensively. He was sixty, a career Scout, and he still spent his summers chain-drinking coffee, sleeping four hours a night, and worrying from behind his quick smile about everything happening across the ranch. On any night from June through August, two or three thousand Scouts occupied our backcountry, and Mark oversaw it all. He'd be there when I reached the office: the thought gave me a small seed of comfort.

Mark, after all, explained to us managers at the beginning of every summer what 10-70 meant. "It's the all-hands-on-deck code," he'd say at the start of the meeting, before he laid out the hypothetical duties of every department. During my time at the ranch, 10-70 had meant one thing—wildfire. There had been scares: smoke plumes rising from the forest that we put out quickly, large fires to the south that nearly reached us. But we hadn't had a Big One since the Ponil Complex Fire in 2002, before my time. If it happened now, it would shut down the ranch. Across much of the property, our forest had seasoned into a tinderbox, the popularity of our program mandating that we douse every blaze and let the deadfall accumulate. Amid the heat-record summers of the early twenty-first century, our backcountry crisped. The cycle was trashed: much of our forest hadn't burned for a century when it should have been burning once a

decade. Armed with thick armor-like bark, the ponderosa pines that cover Philmont have evolved to survive small, periodic fires, a tonic that clears out room for new growth. Our suppression of those blazes changed everything. Now, with so much stacked deadfall, any fire ran the risk of becoming a monster. It would feast on the extra fuel and climb too high, up into the trees' needle crowns. A gust of hot wind would send it from treetop to treetop, leaping like a mad dancer.

Ninety-two thousand acres had burned in 2002, 28,000 of them on Philmont property. Anything worse and we would have to stop the show, canceling trips and costing the Boy Scouts of America a great deal of money. Scouts now cleared deadfall as service projects, but these were short stints of work that only edged into our big blocks of forest. Across the West, the vicious plot played out: in Colorado and New Mexico, the largest and most destructive fires in recorded history had all come in the last fifteen years.

Now we were seeing an unexpected face of the beast. The Ponil Complex Fire had left behind a dystopia of matchstick trunks and scorched earth, and now that landscape was underwater. I'd hiked in and out of the burn zone that summer: charred pines still littered mesas, tough tan bunchgrass and gray scrub oak the only new vegetation finding foothold. The ponderosas and their butterscotch trunks, many of us feared, would never return.

Soil scientists describe the phenomenon as hydrophobia: literally, fear of water. The earth, having been exposed to extreme heat, encrusts itself, no longer permitting water to percolate down to its tender layers. A protective shell, formed by trauma.

Philmont's main headquarters complex includes a large new program office, and, across a red-roofed breezeway, the smaller logistics building. The radio room lies most of the way back, a detailed map of the ranch spread across a ten-foot square of wall, staring down at a long desk

typically littered with receivers, transmitters, computers and telephones. A sterile situation room waits behind it, cheap plastic tables and whiteboards crouched under fluorescent lights.

I walked in out of the rain and the place was buzzing with urgency. Thoughts of hydrophobia and drought vanished in the tense air. Mark and a dozen other managers were already mapping evacuations and organizing rendezvous points. Breathless staff in the backcountry called in damage figures over the radio: eight inches on the rain gauge in one canyon, ten in the next one north. All of it had fallen in the last twelve hours. At the junction of South and Middle Ponil creeks, a main outpost building had ripped from its foundation. The staff member sleeping inside had broken out the back window and leapt for dry ground as his bunk and belongings washed away. The North Ponil, typically flowing a foot wide and two deep, had morphed into a torrent, a hundred feet wide and fifteen feet deep.

In the pre-dawn rain, staff dispatched from the three closest outpost camps, policing the trails and campsites in their area for Scouts. They moved fast—we prepared them for such sweeps—and nearly all groups were now accounted for. But up the North Ponil, where the flood ripped hardest, four Scouts remained missing from a crew. That danger, and the fear that followed lethal possibility—that was not something we could prepare anyone for.

We began managerial triage: Logistics staff directing and recording radio traffic, Conservation staff mapping trail closures and possible re-routes, our Ranger management team planning search loops for the last remote crews, recovery sweeps for the tents and backpacks and boots that had flown downstream in the flash. We also started gathering help. While I scoured maps in the radio room, two other managers swung by the dining hall and the grid of canvas platform tents where most staff lived in Base. They grabbed any Ranger not on assignment and told them to prepare for a long and wet day.

In the heart of it all was Mark, the biggest man in the room by stature and responsibility. This was a rare time when our tall and tireless boss wasn't grinning beneath his thin rectangular glasses. He'd made the hard calls before: he'd been running the show for fifteen years and there had been accidents. During one of my summers, two campers died of heart failures within the same week. One was fifty and the other fourteen. The tragedies had been singular and nearly unstoppable. I couldn't guess what he was feeling now, but I marveled at his poise as he praised our work. Soon we were sending our first team out into the gray morning, experienced staff headed for the North Ponil, many of them trained first responders. Mark briefed them with clear eyes and handshakes. I saw out the window as he pulled them all into a tight huddle, arms around shoulders, then sent them off into fog.

I was still in the radio room, tallying lists of available staff, huddling over maps with team leaders who would be in those wet three-dimensional places soon. And then came news: three of the missing North Ponil Scouts had found their crew. Meanwhile, staff elsewhere in the backcountry reported that all the crews they'd reached were intact. A few groups remained unaccounted for, but those itineraries had them in higher, more remote places within the watershed. Nothing was certain, but their odds were safer. We dispatched Rangers on the long muddy hikes needed to reach them, but our fears centered on the North Ponil, where one Scout remained missing.

My thoughts drifted for the first time that morning. I could picture it: North Ponil Canyon at the start of last summer, the first half-wet summer after three years of drought. I'd spent a night high up the canyon on a staff training hike. We camped outside the burn zone and I rose early the next morning, sitting alone in gentle sun under a ponderosa, watching three elk cross the canyon below. They were still in night's shadow, a cow and two calves, and they paused to

drink from the calm creek, lifting dark mahogany muzzles to test the air. They disappeared into the pine shroud silently, but their presence hung on the place like low fog.

Now an hour had passed since Mark's huddle. The team of veterans had sloshed their Suburban up the muddy road as far as they could, and were nearing the missing Scout's crew on foot. The search was on. I had been on them before, had led them. You spread out in a long chain, the searchers close enough together that no ground goes unseen, far enough apart that you scan the maximum area possible. You march slowly forward, stopping every few minutes to blast a whistle and call your subject's name. If you find tracks or trash or discarded gear, you stop and log it. You sweep a stretch of land in one direction, then rotate the chain ninety degrees and sweep it again. I'd never been on a grid search that didn't end successfully.

But I was not on this one, and I shuddered at its stakes. The irony of a 10-70, I was learning, is that when the fieldwork is most urgent, some of the most experienced leaders must stay behind, must sit under fluorescent lights and coordinate the thing. I had always been boots moving on the ground, and now the office was stifling. I was prepared to lead a sweep, haul a patient out on a litter. Was I ready to manage human resources with the same resolve?

I'd been in the room for four hours, and it was time to send a backup search team to join the veterans. If they found a hurt Scout in a sticky location, they'd need fresh bodies to help with evacuation. If they found nothing, they'd need to widen the search area. Mark was busy in his office and it was my turn to brief the new searchers. Nine Rangers stood solemn-faced by the vehicle, none of them older than twenty-two. I tried to think of what Mark might say. I heard myself telling them that we were behind them, that given what we knew about the flood, and how long the Scout had been separated, yes, there was a real chance they'd be involved in a

recovery, and that if that made them uncomfortable, there was no shame in it. We'd find another way for them to help.

Recovery was the term used for the fallout of a fatality. We were careful with our words. They could make the difference between courage and dread, between focus and breakdown. The team blinked back at me, cross-armed and serious. They were as ready as they could be. I pulled them into a knot of bodies, thanked them, and we broke. They loaded the Suburban and roared away, none looking back. I took a deep breath in the parking lot. It was nine in the morning and the sky was clearing. Sometime during my speech, the rain had petered out. Sun was burning through thin clouds and rare humid air hung over Base Camp.

I walked back into the radio room and heard the call five minutes later. One of the veterans was calling Mark. "Unit Ten to Unit Two, will you switch to the admin channel?"

I swallowed hard, fully understanding the request to use a protected frequency. Mark would take this call in his office. I felt compelled, more out of love for my boss than rank in the pecking order, to be there when he did. I walked the thirty steps across the breezeway, into the program office, and down to Mark's doorway. Regina, a logistics manager, was standing on the threshold. A friend and cool hand during many a ranch crisis, I imagined that she felt a compulsion like mine. We stood at the mouth to Mark's office and watched his khaki-uniformed back hunch over the radio. I'd arrived a second late to hear the full call, but Mark's response told me what I already knew.

"Ten-four," he said quietly. "I copy all of that. Thank you, Unit Ten. Unit Two clear."

I glanced down at Regina and we shared a grim moment of knowing. The once-missing Scout was dead. I would soon learn his name, Owen, and his age, thirteen, and his hometown,

Sacramento. I would learn that the search team had found his body ragdolloed in the willows, about a mile downstream from his crew's campsite. But all I could think about now was Mark. Selfishly it felt right, poetic even, that Regina and I were there, two of his long-tenured young managers, two who knew up-close how love of this place fueled him like manna. Slowly he turned his chair and uncoiled his wide back. I found myself glance preposterously at my favorite sign in his office, gray with black needlepoint, a gag gift surely. "Don't just sit there," it read, "worry about something!" Then I met his eyes as he turned to face us. His mouth spread into a thin smile, the kind made in wonder, not in joy. He took off his glasses.

"Is there anything we can do for you right now, Mark?" Regina asked softly.

"No," he said. "No, thank you. I'll be back next door in a few minutes."

Taking our cue, we turned to go. Suddenly, the office felt like uncharted territory. I put my arm around Regina's shoulders for balance as we walked down the hallway. With fragility hanging around us, touch held depth that words could not.

The clouds and the brief humidity were gone and the sun was hot as we crossed the breezeway back into the radio room. Other reports trickled in: our teams had reached the most remote crews and all were intact. Gear had been lost, and we would have to drive the hardest-hit groups back to Base for resupply. When they arrived hours later, their stories opened in me a new crevice of awe. One Ranger had woken to her crew shouting and water streaming into her tent. She burst through its zippered door, the water rising fast, and scrambled onto a boulder moments before a pine trunk roared like a missile into the tent.

"I woke up with water beginning to fill my tent," another told me. "I wanted to yell for help until I realized, *I am the help.*"

They had been terrified, but they had not been petrified. They had stayed in motion, calling their crews together—nobody missing—keeping them as calm as possible as the flood raged by. Back in Base, none of the Scouts were mad at losing gear. The loss of Owen had dealt us all a gut-punch of perspective. Now it was time to mend what we could.

I ate some lunch, the chicken sandwich soggy and lukewarm. I returned to the radio room tired and sober and fiercely proud of our staff, resolving to stay there until every Ranger team was back in Base. There would be much to discuss with our staff: how it had started, what camps were damaged, and the tough one—how they might talk about it with Scouts. But for now, I just wanted them all home safe. The fallout would be hard, but it would also be a chance for us to grow, to remember that we walked in a world savage and awesome with wildness, and that membership carried its risks.

What I couldn't have planned was the second call. It came in the late afternoon, from the opposite side of the ranch. Beneath the summit of Mt. Phillips, a Scout had skipped ahead of his crew, missed a switchback and disappeared. Two staff members had been hiking from the outpost camp 1,500 feet below, and now stood with the missing boy's crew, ensuring them that help was on the way from Base Camp. This was no day for the predictable—we were the help.

Eleven thousand feet above sea level, beards of lime-green Spanish moss hang from the thin gray trunks of blue spruce and subalpine fir. Northwest to southeast, the contours of Mt. Phillips are gentle, giving the mountain a broad, gradually-rising shape. But the drainages fall steeply from its mellow ridgeline, and they are clogged with dense stockpiles of vegetation. With darkness approaching, sweeping them for a lost Scout would quickly turn dangerous. Ankles have broken and kneecaps shattered on far gentler terrain.

We cobbled together a search team that included some of the same staff I'd pep-talked that morning. I stayed by the radio with Regina and Mark as another Suburban set off from Base, on a ninety-minute drive up muddy forest roads, then another three miles of hiking to the shuddering crew. They made it, then broke into teams of three and began combing the drainages. It was dark and the temperature dropping.

A few hours earlier, Mark had hunched over the radio once again, addressing every staff member who might be listening. "You fed cold Scouts, you calmed them down, you showed true bravery amid great danger." He swallowed hard, voice choking. He'd never been afraid of sentiment. "I always tell people there's something special about this place. Well, I remembered today what it is—it's you."

I thought of his words now as I thought of our searchers. There was no telling the duration or outcome of their mission. They knew that, but I trusted that exhaustion had numbed them into tunnel vision and nothing but scanning the ground at their feet mattered right now. It was 1:34 a.m. when the giddy voice of the team leader broke through the speakers.

"Thirty-Nine Bravo to Base, we're here with the subject and he's doing all right."

There would be no worst-case scenario, no doubling of despair. The boy was cold and disoriented but fully alive. He had trudged up to a high point between drainages and hunkered down, a mile and a half from the nearest trail. It was no day for celebration, but we were out of the darkest woods. I dropped my head to a table in relief, ready to sleep right there, while Regina crossed the breezeway to tell Mark, whose office lights were still on.

A month later, I hiked into the flood's remains. I was leading my last crew of Scouts, a rare break from management work. It was my last summer at Philmont. A thousand miles north,

graduate school awaited, but there was a future here too. It was under my feet as I walked. The washes were still crammed with sediment, a jungle of dropped rocks and flipped trees. The cabin that the staffer had leapt from that wild morning stood cockeyed against a big cottonwood fifty yards from its foundation. But there poking through the wreckage were little clusters of cream-pale asters, blue harebells and mustard-yellow Mexican hats. Life persisted, discordant and stubbornly beautiful.

Hiking slowly at the back of my crew, I looked up at the boys. They were fourteen- and fifteen-year olds, fresh from suburban Denver. This was new to them, this quiet practice of waking and walking, and they still talked incessantly about the video games they had left behind. I hadn't been much different at their age, and I could not script their paths now, but I could give them a start, a few shreds of the place's knowledge. It might be enough to bring one of them back, as I had come back at seventeen and nearly every year since. Each season still surprised, this last one especially. I thought about Owen often, about how much worse it could have been, and in dark moments I knew that it might be the next time. And there would be a next time—that was certain. Across the ranch, the forest still crisped. But tomorrow would come for these boys too, and with some timely mentorship, they might yet make it bright. It was the promise that kept us going, that pulled Mark out of bed each day. There was nothing to do but work and hope.

We reached camp just outside the burn zone, and a light rain began as we hung bear bags between broad pines and pitched tents on a mellow slope above the creek. The water smacked against my raingear, not seeping in yet, but I couldn't deny my nervousness. I didn't know what this storm might become. We cooked dinner and the rain faded. The evening turned lush and gentle, the sun peeking late beneath the western cloudbanks to cast the tents, the scattered trees and the wet meadowgrass all in fleeting shades of gold. Then the stars emerged as the clouds

dissolved, Polaris blazing over the dark hump of mountains miles away. I sat in the cool air for a while then climbed into my sleeping bag and zipped the tent shut. It was a clear night after all.