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Looking for Shelter

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Dr. Nutter

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Looking for Shelter

I was drinking coffee, and I never drink coffee, but this was an especially dreadful Monday. I had come into work exhausted, sore, and slightly demoralized, so for once I took part in the traditional office-wide coffee boost to start the day. My co-worker Adam was especially inquisitive about my groggy voice and the rings under my eyes. Some fifteen years my senior, he was bright eyed and chipper that morning, and he laughed as I regaled him with the tale of the weekend I shared with some of my best friends from high school. I was obliged to assume he was laughing at the misfortunes in the story, but I later realized he was amused mostly by my youthfulness and naïvety. Once I was done explaining why I was so tired, he told me to Google something and turned around to go back to his desk. On the way out the door he said, “You should research these places before you go there.” I knew what he said was true when I did the search and found something that, if I had known about it, would have taken all the pain and misery out of my weekend.

The plan was hatched at the lake on Saturday afternoon by my friend Louie – the mastermind behind most of the outrageous ideas in our ragtag group. He was home on Spring Break, and had been busy attaining a reputation for orchestrating pranks at Berry College where he was a freshman. He never could stand idly by and watch a get-together grow stagnant, but I suspected his success as a college prankster had fueled his blood lust for shenanigans, and this Spring Break he came home to up the ante. Danny and Jonathan were also on Spring Break from

Young Harris College and Southern Polytechnic State University, respectively. Oliver was one of our old friends. His family moved about an hour away from where we all grew up, but we kept in touch, and it was at his grandparents' house that we all met. Doug and I were the only ones who still lived in the area. Doug was going part time to a community college and I was working until I went to college myself in the fall. This was a gathering that did not happen very often any more. Not all of our friends were there, but this weekend was turning out to be the perfect storm.

After swimming for a couple hours we sat on the dock discussing our plans for the rest of the day and into the night, as most of our hangouts ended pretty late. Even though the water was still chilly from the winter, it was beautiful outside. The sun was shining, the sky was filled with white puffy clouds, and a gentle breeze carried the aroma of the lake and the pines. It seemed like the perfect day. Unable to agree on something to do, we sat quietly and looked out over the water.

“Let’s go camping on that island sometime,” Louie suggested out of nowhere. We laughed, but he stared at us with a straight face.

“And how would we get over there? Swim?” Danny asked.

“We could get somebody to drive us over on Oliver’s granddad’s boat,” Louie replied with growing excitement.

Oliver said, “I mean, my dad could do that but I don’t know when we will all be together again.”

“Then let’s go tonight!” Louie shouted, jumping to his feet. We laughed again, thinking there was no way we could organize a whole camping trip in time.

“No, think about it,” he went on. “It’s 4 o’clock now. It should take less than an hour for us all to go home, get our camping gear, a couple hours to buy food and anything else we need, and then we get on the boat and we could be there before sunset!”

We came up with a thousand reasons not to go. Would our parents even let us? What about the camping gear? What if it rained? Yet the more we questioned Louie’s plan, the more we started to like it. Before long, we scattered in all directions to call parents, gather sleeping bags and flashlights, and buy hot dogs and marshmallows. In less than ten minutes our evening went from ordering in and renting a movie to exploring the uncharted wild. In our minds this was spontaneity at its finest.

I met back up with the guys at the store with my camping gear in tow, and by camping gear I mean any household item I could find that could be repurposed for outdoor use. Browsing through the deli, Oliver told me his dad would not be able to drive the boat – the first warning sign.

“So, are we going to drive it?” I asked.

“No, my granddad is too much of a safety nut,” Oliver explained.

“So how are we going to get over there?” I asked, thinking that our plan was foiled.

Oliver just smiled and shook his head.

Louie walked over and said, “I know this sounds crazy, but we’re going to take the big inflatable tube Oliver’s grandparents pull behind their boat, put all of our stuff in it, and push it across the lake to the island.”

I skeptically looked at him and asked, “How is that safer than us driving the boat?”

“We’ll have flashlights so oncoming boats don’t see us,” he answered.

I shrugged my shoulders and said, “Well we’re through the looking glass now!”

Because of the hiccup, we were already behind schedule when we got back to the dock – the second warning sign. The sun was starting to set when we pulled out the air compressor and began inflating the tube. Then we neatly and tightly packaged and waterproofed all the stuff we wanted to take. When the tube was inflated, we loaded it down in the garage to make sure it would hold everything, and it looked fantastic. Our cunning plan was really starting to come together. As final preparations, we changed into swimming clothes and grabbed our flashlights. I was the last one to get to the garage to help carry everything down to the lake. Walking up to the garage, I realized that something did not feel right: the guys were just standing around the tube. After getting a closer look, my heart sank with disappointment upon seeing the third warning sign – the tube had a leak, and it would not hold the weight of the gear all the way across the lake. We tried in vain to patch the hole with staples and duct tape, but it was no use. The fabric was too thick and the air pressure in the tube was too high so it broke every patch we tried. We were sure the spontaneous camping trip had now finally failed, and our night was once again looking like fast food and movies. Jonathan, looking defeated, lay engulfed in the half-inflated tube, while the rest of us sat on the gear or on the ground with our heads propped up on our hands. However, Louie had one more contingent plan up his sleeve.

“Hey, we already have everything ready; let’s just take it to another camping spot. Like the top of Blood Mountain!”

“But there’s like a forty-five minute hike just to get up there,” Doug grumbled. At this point we were all set on going camping, so Doug’s complaint was quickly overruled, and we packed up into Danny’s mom’s SUV and struck off for the mountain.

Despite taking a dramatic turn, our little camping party was in good spirits as we set off on the trail near the top of the mountain. Loaded down with food, blankets, and using hiking

sticks we found along the way, we felt like the Fellowship of the Ring departing on a quest. By this time the moon had long risen in the sky, and the temperature had dropped about fifteen degrees on the drive from the valley where our hometown sits to the mountains that overlook it. The higher the trail winded, the less foliage there was to protect us from the wind. We could hear it eerily howling in the treetops as we stomped along the trail. I noticed that my feet were crunching more and more dead leaves until we were ankle deep in them. In the darkness we had strayed from the beaten path. On our way back to find where we had left the trail, we gave some good natured grief to Danny who was leading up in front. Once again on the actual path, we tried again, more carefully this time, and still lost the path, which was perhaps another warning sign. Facing the prospect of never reaching our campsite or, worse, getting lost on the mountain in the middle of the night, our predicament became less funny. It must have taken us twenty minutes, but we finally found the path leading narrowly between a boulder and the limb of a tree.

Eventually, we arrived at the bald rock face summit of Blood Mountain, forty-five hundred feet above sea level. For all the times that I made that hike growing up, this was the first time I saw the view at night. The dotted city lights from the nearby towns lit up the landscape as far as the eye could see. It was like a sea of orange and yellow stars stretching out to the horizon. Louie threw his arms in the air and exclaimed, "This is why we do this!"

Turning our gaze from the amazing view to the matter at hand, we were met by the most unfriendly of findings. The wind that was howling above our heads in the treetops on the way up was now blowing directly in our faces, rapidly lowering the already dropping temperature. Even though we were on Spring Break, that campsite apparently thought it was still winter. I do not know how, but Jonathan and Danny managed to build a fire in a hole in the ground slightly sheltered from the wind. Meanwhile Louie, Oliver, and Doug set up the tent. The best tent we

could come up with on short notice was meant to hold four people, and, as we later found out, it provided very little protection from the wind. It was my job to collect firewood. I would walk up the trail past the campsite a few yards, and turn into the woods to look for fallen limbs. Each time I went back for more, I went up the trail a little further. When we had enough wood, I put the trail out of my mind, but I later wished that I had gone back just a few more times.

Tired, freezing, and hungry, we put our minds to food. The small fire harassed by the incessant wind provided little more than light. After a few botched attempts to warm up some hotdogs, we gloomily abandoned the notion of a hot meal and turned to granola bars and beef jerky. Opening the plastic packages without the benefit of feeling in my fingertips was like opening a box of cereal using my elbows. Once we were settled in and not moving around so much it became even harder to stay warm. The wind was blowing in from all sides, and it was difficult to huddle up on the stone cold mountain face. At one point I went to sit in some bushes just to be shielded from the piercing cold. Around midnight, we decided to try to get some sleep. The tent was small, but we thought, “At least the body heat will keep us warm.” That was true for everyone except me. The tent was on a slight slope and I was on the downhill end, so after a couple hours of tossing and turning everyone in the tent slid down the slope, pressing me up against the side. Being cozied up to the paper-thin nylon meant that when the wind hit the tent I was the first line of defense – not to mention the fact that the weight of five other guys sandwiching me made it impossible to get comfortable.

Finally I gave up on the tent and took my sleeping bag outside. I looked around to admire the view, the one good part about the trip so far, and I noticed something strange. The lights did not seem to stretch as far as they did when we first got there. Hazy and confused, I did not think too much about it and lay back down. I tossed and turned on what seemed like frozen tundra for

another hour before I gave up on the idea of sleeping altogether. I decided just to sit and admire the view but when I did, I saw that there were even fewer lights than before. I rubbed my eyes and walked over to the edge of the face to get a better look, and that is when I realized what was going on. There was a huge dark storm moving in quickly from the south.

We tried looking at the weather forecast on our phones, but there was no reception. If the clouds hit us, we did not think it would snow, but if it rained all of our unpacked gear would get wet and we would have to repack it wet, possibly while it was still raining. Frantically, we deliberated over what to do, and all the time the clouds were getting closer. Finally we came to a consensus: to get out of there dry while we still could. Around 3:00 a. m. we began hurriedly packing up the site in the pitch black and with our flashlight batteries dying. Every time I looked up, the ominous dark clouds grew closer. With a far less coordinated system than when we started the hike, we began scuttling down the steep and winding trail as fast as we could. Around the part of the trail we kept losing on the way up we started to feel chilling raindrops.

“Hurry, the SUV is only about twenty minutes away!” Danny shouted. Inevitably, we lost the trail in the same place. With no time to find it we ran down the side of the mountain scattered and disoriented until someone picked it up at a lower point. By the time we made it back to the SUV and hurled the disheveled gear anywhere it would fit, we had just enough time to take a picture before the rain started to come down. In the end the downfall was not that heavy and dramatic, but when the heater came on in the car no one was complaining about the decision to leave. We made it back to my house after 4:00 a.m. and collapsed.

On Sunday, we woke up mid-afternoon and discussed the debacle. “We’re not really outdoorsmen; we probably shouldn’t have tried that,” Louie remarked.

“Our parents tried to tell us that was a little much,” Oliver added.

I said, “At least we got a good story out of it, right?”

Collectively the group went, “Ehh.”

The next day at work, coffee in hand, I was still trying to recover. My embarrassment at the failed camping trip was doubled when Adam told me to look up “Blood Mountain shelter.” My jaw dropped as I saw pictures of a solitary log cabin-like structure nestled in a nook of the mountain that hikers used for shelter from the wind and the rain. If I had gone up the trail just a little farther looking for firewood, I would have stumbled upon it. Instead, we unwittingly set up our miserable frozen camp a mere stone’s throw away from a place of warmth and safety.

Looking back on “The Night Hike Disaster of 2013” as we call it, I chuckle at our hardship. On the rare occasion that the entire group reunites, we share this memory fondly. Remembering the poor decisions of our youth, and from the comfort of being warm and dry, the tale is recalled with laughter all around. Because of the humor involved, we can say that the pain was worth it in the end. Even so, with age I have come to realize that the trip could have been unforgettable without being uncomfortable. At the time we all believed, in spite of what our parents told us, that cautious planning was the enemy of excitement, and rash decisions bore minimal negative consequence. However, so many of our problems on that trip could have been easily avoided with a small amount of preparation, and it still would have felt like an adventure. That weekend I learned an important lesson: daring spontaneity works best when balanced with a measure of due diligence.