

A Wilderness Site

I've never really liked camping, but Dean was home from the army, and I had grown tired of school after the first week, so, Mom wrote the school a note, and I agreed to go.

Dean had been away for almost three years, stationed for two years in Turkey and then for a year in California where he met and became involved with a woman who delivered packages to the base. When that fell through, he jumped on the bus and came home to Indiana for a few weeks. At the time, I didn't know if he was supposed to be home or if he had just left for a while, but either way, it was good to see him. I was only thirteen when he left, and when he came back I wanted him to know that I was no longer a kid. I had not had my first beer until he had been gone for almost a year, and I wanted Dean to know that now I was like him, that I was someone with whom he could be frank, someone with whom he could be real--that I was a man. And in some ways I was, only it was Dean who would force me to accept adulthood on a level I had not known I was ready for: It was Dean who ultimately knew from way before the moment he stepped out of Aunt Janice's car, wrapped his hand around mine, and pulled me in toward him, that I was going to have to grow up over the next couple of days, that I was going to be stretched, and that he was going to be the reason. I remember that embrace, and I remember Dean then hugging Mom for a long time-- his face buried in her shoulder, his limbs, too long for her small body, reached completely around her back, his hands touching the outsides of her arms. That that impoverished greeting on that cool October eve was significant only became apparent to me afterwards. At the time, I was so eager for Dean to see who I had become that I could not see Dean, I could not realize that maybe there was more to his sudden return than the opportunity for me to demonstrate my manhood, that maybe everything was not all right with him.

I looked rough in those days--the way I thought I was supposed to look. I had long stringy hair that I wore in a ponytail and a black leather biker jacket that Mom had bought me at a pawn shop for my birthday. Usually I wore old jeans and black T-shirts and my jacket. That was my standard look--a style that gave me an identity at a time when I believed that a person's style defined who he was. Maybe that's why I never figured Dean was not alright, because, like most people, he had mastered the facade of cool stoicism, a facade behind which lurked a hundred emotions which would never be allowed to surface. He had all his gear packed in a duffel bag, and he was wearing a blue canvas jacket with the sleeves cut off and these beat-up boots that he bought in California. His hair was military length but still somewhat unkempt and wild like he washed it but never combed it. It sort of made him look like a rock singer, a look furthered by his disdainful expression and his pale face. He smoked cigarettes mostly with no hands, the thin cylinder riding between his lips as he exhaled out of the corner of his mouth. Often the ash, perilously long, would simply break off and fall into his lap or down his shirt front. When he noticed, he'd casually brush the ash off his clothing as if the action were a tedious necessity. Dean had begun lifting weights in the military, and besides developing a muscular upper body, the exercise had caused his muscles to tense and the veins on his forearms to pop up and run over them like buried pipes forced up and out of frozen ground. Partly hidden by the sleeve of his T-shirt was a black and red tattoo of a killer whale and the words Moby Dick written in ornate letters. Neither of us had ever read the book, but Dean knew this guy in Turkey who was always comparing life situations with scenes from the novel. One night, on a whim, the two got the tattoos, and Dean swore he would read the book to authenticate the art, but as far as I know, he never did.

Whenever we stopped to get gas, I jumped out and checked the air in the tires so people would see us together--the cool kid with long hair and the disheveled guy with a tattoo of a whale on his arm. At the time I thought whoever saw us must have

thought we were real serious men who knew the meaning of cool, who really had their stuff together. Yesterday I saw two guys at the gas station looking like a modern version of how I imagined Dean and I looked. One of them was leaning against the car waiting for the pump to finish while the other one, sitting in the front passenger seat, was rocking his head to the loud bass of their music. Something inside me wanted to go up to them and reassure them that everything was alright, but that would not have done any good; besides, there was also something about looking at those guys that made me feel embarrassed, like looking at myself in a home movie.

It was more than ten hours northwest to a spot north of Duluth where there was a campground on Lake Superior that Dean had heard about from an Army friend, and the afternoon sun sat in our laps most of the way. Sitting behind sunglasses and the car's visors, we really didn't say much to each other as we sped across the heart of the country. The foliage beside the empty road where Dean pulled off to take a rest from driving was in full splendor--purple, maroon, orange, red, and yellow. The wind was blowing strong enough to keep the boughs gently rocking and the leaves mixing together like the tumbling hues in a kaleidoscope.

Back in the car, in between cassette tapes of old rock songs, I asked some questions about Turkey, but Dean was not interested in telling stories. He just wanted to listen to loud music, drink beer and drive. At the first gas station, he had picked up two twelve packs of beer and was already on his third can before I even got through half of my first. Back then I pretended to like beer, but truthfully it tasted sour to me. I never told people that though, and usually I could drink as much as anyone I knew. But Dean had acquired the taste for beer and drank it like water. In the car, aside from the heavy drinking, Dean also smoked continuously. He went through cigarettes one right after another and would have never thought to vent the smoke out the window if I hadn't opened mine. He smoked American cigarettes and told me that European cigarettes tasted like crap and that Mexican cigarettes were made out of donkey dung.

I remember thinking how cool it was to be in a car with someone who knew that, that I wanted desperately to know that too, that I urgently wanted to use that line on someone. That was about all he really said for the whole twelve hours. He would not let me drive, though.

When we arrived at the campground, it was growing dark and what little warmth the autumn sun had provided that day was quickly changing into the cool dry air of a late fall night. The ranger station was closed, and Dean self-registered us on a wilderness site. He took a bag of ice from the unlocked freezer beside the station, and we drove back to select a lot. There were no water spigots or electrical outlets on the wilderness sites, but Dean said nobody hassled you there so it was worth the trade-off. I was glad he had chosen a secluded site. The few times I had gone camping with Mom and Aunt Janice, it had always seemed bizarre to me to drive hundreds of miles from home to sleep in a tent twenty feet from other people who were doing the same thing you were, only usually with better equipment. Back then, we mostly tended to stake our tents next to big trailers and motorhomes and lie in our nylon shells listening to air conditioners and watching the soft blue glow of portable televisions illuminating the trailer windows as we walked to the toilets. When we set up beside someone like that, with the whole outfit, I always felt like I was a refugee in someone's backyard. At least the wilderness site moved us away from all that.

We had borrowed a two-person tent from Aunt Janice, and while Dean set that up, I rummaged through the single bag of food we had brought with us. Dean drew his hunting knife from a leather scabbard hooked to his belt, cut open the bag of ice, and dumped it in the cooler over the remaining cans of beer. I remember thinking that Dean loved to use that knife. He always wore it on his belt. It had a six-inch blade which was hooked on the end and a row of jagged saw teeth on the top side. The blade was flat black and the handle was oak with ivory inlays and grooves for easy handling. When unfolded and locked into position, the knife simply looked dangerous. I had no

idea what a person would do with the hook and saw features, but Dean was adept at handling the tool and used it whenever he could.

I ate a powdered donut and then went looking for some kindling with which to start a fire while Dean finished arranging everything. When I got back to the site with an armload of twigs and small branches, Dean and his fishing gear were gone. On the face of the hatchet, Dean had left some stick matches with which to start the fire. The day was growing dark and cooling off, and I arranged the kindling over some newspaper and lit the paper with one of the matches. We had stopped outside the park and picked up a bundle of firewood from someone who had had it stacked in parcels in his front yard beside a little box in which to deposit money. I remember thinking about that box of money sitting there unattended and wondering why no one took it. I would have taken it myself, but something about the set-up prevented me from doing it, almost like instead of just stealing a few dollars from an unattended till, taking this money would be dishonorable, almost shameful. If the honor is in the hunt, this system, by eliminating the hunt, eliminated the honor. It even created the opposite effect. Instead of stealing the money, it felt good to do the right thing and pay for the bundle. I remember liking the fact that whoever had stacked that wood was trusting me.

It was good dry wood we had purchased, and I started a decent fire without much trouble. To build a fire like that felt good, like I was a pioneer living off the land or something. The flames warmed the air around the fire, and the heat brushed against the skin of my face. I sat on the ground and looked at the fire for a long time. The orange and red flames danced around the crackling wood and every so often a small ember would shoot out of the rusty metal ring like the last act of an old circus performer, its red tail quickly evaporating behind its arced path, its intensity quickly fading into darkness. I sat there and watched that fire for a long time, and when I eventually looked up at the sky, I saw the millions of stars which only seem to shine

way out away from the city, away from the houses, and like the embers which popped and arched out of the fire on that night, I watched a meteor shower with hundreds of streaking particles burning blue into the atmosphere.

The memory of that fire, those stars, and the meteors seems strangely magnetic to me now, and, on cool fall nights, I often long to go back to that site and light another fire and look at those same stars, and watch the particles of dust and rock incinerate as they try to break into our sky, but I know I will never go back. Perfect moments can not be fabricated--they just appear and then they are gone. The real trick is to recognize them when they are happening, and what I most regret is that back then, I hadn't, and that now I long for that moment that has grown to become better than I knew it to be.

Eventually the fire burned down to mostly the hot red glow of coals and the meteor shower subsided, and I decided to go find Dean. I wasn't sure exactly where on the shore he would be, but I figured since the park was mostly empty that I'd probably see his lantern. I carried a small flashlight to light the trail from the site to the shore, but once I made it out of the woods, the waxing moon, which was now lighting the sky and reflecting off the water, made seeing relatively easy. The lake was calm and glassy and along the shore I could see five or six lantern lights spaced intermittently. The closest one was Dean's, and I approached it without difficulty.

Dean hadn't caught any fish worth keeping, yet he seemed uninterested in returning to the camp. He said that he too had seen the meteors, but that he was glad they were over. He said that they were bad for fishing, that the streaking lights had strange effects on the fish and kept them away from the surface. He said now that the moon was full, the fish would stay down even lower. Fishermen always seem to know weird stuff like that. After several more casts, Dean put his rod down and lay back on the big rock on which he was sitting. He had a couple cans of beer soaking in the water to make them cold, and he told me to reach in and grab two. I did and Dean sat back

up and took one. I opened the other can and took a sip. "I got some pot if you want some." I had been carrying it with me for several days with the hope of impressing Dean. I really never smoked much pot, but I knew Dean did, and so I figured he would be impressed that I had some for us. But as soon the words left my mouth, I knew it wasn't the way I had wanted to tell him. I had wanted to be smooth about it, like pull a joint out of my pocket and hit him with some awesome line, but instead, I sounded like a kid, and he smirked. He set down his beer and reached his hand toward me. I pulled the plastic bag out of my pocket and handed it to him. He held it close to the lantern, opened the bag and sniffed it. Then he smirked again. "Hell, this is Mexican shit. I hope you didn't give noth'n' but pesos for it. It ain't even all pot." He reached into his tackle box and lifted out a bag. "Now look at this. This stuff's for real." He grinned and opened his bag. Fast and skillfully, he rolled a joint. I wanted to ask him to show me how he did it, but I was already embarrassed, and I figured I'd better wait a bit before asking a question like that.

He was right though, about my pot being weak, because when I took a few hits of his joint, everything started spinning, and I wasn't exactly sure where I was, I mean I was not used to being around Dean, and the camp was new to me too. Still, I knew I was really high, and I knew I didn't want Dean to think I couldn't handle it, so I focused all my concentration on thinking about the fire and the stars and the meteors, but the more I focused my attention, the more I forgot to focus my attention: the more I tried not to be disoriented, the more disoriented I became. The cycle spiraled down with the pot holding me tight, and I began to imagine that I could not breath, that a clamp was around my chest and that with every breath, it tightened, and that all I could do was suck in tiny amounts of air and pant. I even forgot about looking cool and started a paranoid struggle for survival. I must have hyperventilated at that point because my panting became so bad that I eventually couldn't breath at all, and Dean had to cup his hands around my mouth and talk me down. I don't know how long that

lasted, but eventually I blacked out, and the next thing I knew, Dean was standing knee-deep in the water pulling me to the shore, and I was coughing and all mixed-up. I think Dean probably threw me in the water to revive me, but I never had a chance to ask him.

I woke up on top of the picnic table where Dean had laid me out like a corpse. I looked straight up into an endless azure uninterrupted by clouds or sun, and for a few moments I just gazed and enjoyed the freedom from focusing, the sight of nothingness. I could smell algae from the lake water in my hair and on my clothes and that drew my vision down to the objects around me. The sun was warming the sky, and Dean had stoked the fire and brought some flames back to help chase the autumn chill away. As my senses began to return, I recognized that I was freezing and that my throat was raw from the pot and the lake water and sleeping out like that. Dean, however, looked cool and was drinking coffee that he somehow knew how to make over an open fire. I remember thinking as I lay there looking like a bum on a park bench, that the remarkable thing about Dean was that he never seemed scruffy or slovenly. It could be five in the morning and he could have been up all night chain-smoking cigarettes and drinking beer, and yet he could remain as articulate and balanced, as cool and smooth, as if he'd just stepped out of a shower and was ready to go for the day. Even his disheveled appearance seemed somehow always right and almost intended. He was as natural as the sky or the flames in the fire. Life and Dean were blended to such an extent that living, experiencing, was all Dean was. I envied that about him. To be in life was what I desired, instead, lying there on top of that picnic table, I felt the first pangs of my lot.

Dean walked over to me and held out a tin cup of black coffee. I sat up, hung my legs off the end of the table, and carefully took the cup. I sipped the coffee and worked some of the sleep out of my head. On top of the picnic table, Dean sat down beside me. He lit a cigarette and looked at me. I felt ashamed sitting there beside him like that

after what had happened the night before. I almost felt like I should thank Dean or something for pulling me out of the water. But instead of gratitude, the fact that I felt obliged to Dean irked me. I had wanted "to prove Dean's equal, his peer, instead I proved to be nothing but a struggling kid. The feelings of obligatory appreciation and of disappointment coupled with sleeping in wet clothes in the cold air urged me away from Dean at that moment. Dean had control, he was directing the script, and it occurred to me that as long as I was with Dean, it would be this way. Dean needed it thus. I stood up, set my cup on the table, retrieved my bag from the car, and started the long walk to the regular campsites where there was a shower house.

It felt good to get away from Dean then, to regroup under a hot shower. I had no idea what time it was, but the shower house was empty. I could tell by the musky stale air that others had already been and gone. A bar of soap had been left in the shower stall by some camper. I lathered my body and face while standing with my back to the water. I wanted to be covered in the suds before rinsing them off. I have always done this, I don't know why, but there is something I like about being under the soap lather, the cleanness of it all. When I left the shower house I felt better. The sun was out in full and the dry air was quickly warming up. I still wasn't ready to face Dean though, so I walked around the regular campgrounds for a bit. There were not many campers there at that time of year, and the few who were set up were mostly senior citizens on permanent lots, or guys in tents who had risen much earlier and were already out on their fishing boats. A few people still sat around morning campfires sipping coffee or reading newspapers that they had bought at the ranger station. The only people from that morning walk that I can remember in detail are a group who were camping in tents around a trailer. There were ten or twelve people in all, including the children, and I remember thinking that they looked happy. The couple, who I imagined to be the grandparents, seemed to own the trailer, and the tents seemed to belong to the grown children and their children. I have no basis for

these assumptions, perhaps the people were not even related, but all in some kind of church group or something; yet, I like to think they were a big family. Scattered throughout the treed site were coolers and vinyl clothing bags and cooking equipment. There were four bikes, all laying on their sides, haphazardly dropped wherever the last rider's attention shifted to something else. Between two trees, a clothesline hung and towels and shirts and shorts and rags of all sizes were pinned to it. I carried my dingy clothes under my arm in a ball, their dampness soaking into the side of my T-shirt. For a moment I thought maybe I could just walk over and hang my stuff on their line and sit down around their fire and just slip into their history, like I had always been there, like I was part of them. They all stopped talking for a moment as they noticed me no longer walking but just standing there in front of their site, just standing there with wet stringy hair and dirty laundry under my arm, and they looked at me. I didn't say anything, I just stood there and peered in for another moment, then I lowered my eyes, turned, and walked back to the wilderness sites.

At our camp, I ate a powdered donut, and Dean poured me another cup of coffee. I was still a little disoriented from everything, but I could feel myself pulling it together and re-establishing my identity. Dean must have sensed this also, because he stood in front of me at the picnic table and said that he wanted to talk. I didn't really want to talk right then, but I was reluctant to further an image of my incompetence by looking like a pouting kid.

Dean wanted to talk about our father. Neither of us had seen nor heard from him in twelve years, and whenever someone asked about him, I became somewhat unnerved. I really did not like talking about him. I guess back then I felt rather conflicted about my father. I knew I wanted him around, yet I also knew I hated him for leaving us. So I learned how not to think about it, and like most people I became reasonably good at avoiding the things that upset me. Dean had the same feelings that I did, only he liked to talk about them, and he never let me get away with remaining

silent about the subject. Like two familiar opponents, the strategic dynamics of our conversation was almost intuitively present. Dean, the aggressor, would push: I, the defender, knowing silence to be ineffective in equalizing the onslaught, would say only enough to pacify Dean, to allow him to realize that my defenses were too strong for his attack. The game had been played enough times between us that I knew what I couldn't get away with, so when he would push me to talk about our father, I would express some smart-ass comment about how the man was a no good son-of-a-bitch or something. And Dean, being as familiar with the dance as I, expected my derogatory comments and usually let it stop there. But this time something was different-- Dean's attack seemed more abstract, more conflicted. "Yeah, I guess he is an asshole. You know though, sometimes I think I can understand what he did. I mean, he was only fifteen when I was born and nineteen when you came. Hell, I couldn't've done it either. I couldn't even be nobody's father now. Look at me." Using the table top as a seat and resting his feet on the seat board, Dean was sitting beside me. We both looked out into the grove of trees which separated us from the cold water of the lake. The tops of the cedar and hemlock trees waved in the breeze from off the water, and the blue sky of the open space over the lake peeked between the boughs and the thin upper branches. Ever since that day, I have always preferred looking at trees when I talk about something important. There is something soothing and safe in sitting beside someone and not looking at them when you talk. Dean wanted to look at me though. I could feel his eyes gazing at me. And even though I know now how desperately he must have wanted me to look at him, I continued looking at the trees. "I mean a guy wants to be somebody or to do something with his life before he gets saddled with kids. We all got to look out for ourselves, don't we? When a man gets himself stuck, he either has got to find a way out, or he's as good as dead."

"I hope the bastard is dead."

“But maybe he’s got a good family now. Maybe he’s got more kids now, and he really loves them. Maybe he goes to their pee wee baseball games and coaches their youth basketball teams. Maybe he reads them stories at night and tells them he loves them, and maybe he really does. Maybe he really did want to come back and be with us some day, but as time went on and things happened, it just got to be too big to patch up. You know, at first he probably just couldn’t take it and he took off, but in his mind he always thought he would come back when the time seemed right, only the time never seemed right.”

“The time's been right for a long time.”

“But people got to do stuff sometimes. I mean sometimes when your life just ain’t right, and you know it, you got to do something about it or you just collapse.”

I stood up, tossed the dregs from the bottom of my cup onto the smoldering embers of the fire and walked away from Dean and a little ways into the woods. I knew I was conceding defeat, that this desertion was another sign of my immaturity, that I was not ready to be Dean’s fellow man, and even though I wanted none of that to be exposed, I could not remain sitting there listening to Dean’s compassionate lines about a person I hated and longed for with such equal passion. Maybe maturity is sitting through things like that. I guess that that was the line drawn between Dean and me.

There was a big spruce tree not too far into the grove that I walked behind, placing its large trunk between me and Dean. I remember the tree because it had a lovers’ heart carved into it. The carving was almost grown out, and I really couldn’t read the initials inside anymore, but I could tell that way back when, some guy had brought a girl out here, and afterwards had taken out his knife and, while she watched, he carved the heart in the tree’s trunk. They probably figured it meant something special, and at the time it probably did. I started to wonder what had happened to them, those two lovers whose names were in the tree. Did they begin a

new life out here by this tree, did they form some sort of union? That seemed somehow strange to think about, like suddenly I was standing in a church or on sacred ground. I guess in my mind I still believe those two people whose initials are carved in that tree are together and happy and that their children are happy, and I guess in my mind I still believe there exists a place where people are all happy and where fathers read stories to their children before tucking them into bed.

Regardless, I was happy to be looking at that heart instead of at Dean. I didn't know why he wanted to delve so empathetically into the topic of our father, but I definitely wasn't interested in defending against this new maneuver. I much preferred standing by that tree trying to read the initials and the date inside the carved heart.

When I walked back to the campsite, Dean was shirtless and barefoot. His tattoo and his fatigues were the only unnatural things on his body. "I'm going down to the lake. There's some beer in the cooler and food in the trunk." I did not recognize the message behind Dean's words: I only heard what I wanted to hear, and so often in my life I have come to think back on that nurturing comment as the beginning of Dean's final monologue--as Dean's way of tying up the loose ends. For Dean, I am convinced, truly believed what he was going to do was the best solution, that his disappearing would save everybody from suffering. His look right then before he left--he had a cigarette in his mouth and he looked real solemn--was unusual, barely contained, like his whole persona could collapse at any minute and like he might actually cry. I averted my eyes and looked back at the trees. "Hey, Sid..." I did not look at him. "People do stuff that doesn't make sense sometimes to anybody but themselves. Eventually you got to forgive them for it."

I did not know until about six months later what had really happened with Dean and the army and that girl in California, but when the ranger woke me up and started asking questions about Dean and a missing boat, I somehow already knew--just like I knew Dean had been trying to tell me things, important things,

before he disappeared over the water, and just like I knew Dean was just like our father, and just like I knew I was too.

I saw my father years later at Mom's funeral. Somehow he had found out about it and showed up out of the blue. Dean was wrong about him though. He never did have a new wife and more kids or anything. He showed up old and alone and looked kind of sad and awkward, and, as a favor to Dean, I put my arm around my father's shoulder and told him it was all alright.