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Wild Man

Scott Montague

The low rumble of the engine died down as we pulled up to the campsite. Two hours ago I was a kid ready for an adventure. Now, I'm a bundle of nerves and anxiety. Five weeks in the woods, no phone or coffee or... Still, the group I'm joining looks kind and welcoming. I can't possibly know that though, as I start this journey on a thing called Earth Phase. No interacting with the group outside my mentor, Rachel. Armed with a journal, a 90-liter pack full of gear, and a plastic spoon, I'm as prepared as I'll ever be to live in the Ochoco National Forest of Oregon.

The first couple of days I spend adjusting to life without constant stimulation. *"Grounding in the present" and journaling, as if that will help me in the future.* On day four, after I've finished writing the story of how I got here, I start the next step called Fire Phase. Step one, meet the group I will be spending the next five weeks with. The life of the wild man is much better when spent with companions. Step two, my plastic spoon is broken. We start with the plastic spoon so we can adjust to life in the woods. After you join the group your plastic spoon is broken, and you eat with sticks until you can carve your own. Step three, join the chore rotation. *Now that I'm a part of the group I guess I need to help cook dinner and to set up camp.* This also includes cleaning up dishes after dinner as well as moving water and food shipments from drop off points back to camp. Step four, hike. It's my first of just over 100 miles of hiking I will complete while I'm out here, and I'm all the better for it. Today, we see wild turkeys, but in the coming weeks we will run across falcons, eagles, elk, jackrabbits, ground squirrels and much more. I miss technology, being connected to the grid, and my family, but it's tough not to be enraptured by the beauty out here. One afternoon at a campsite, the wind through the trees brings the sounds of the ocean to the forest. The leaves ebb and flow with the breeze, gently submerging me in their magnificence. The final step to Fire Phase is therapeutic growth, the whole reason I'm out here. This means weekly counseling sessions. This means emotionally checking-in with the group in a structured manner. This means, after three days in the group, reading impact letters to the

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group. These are letters written by family members that outline the impact my behavior has had on them. In my case, these are written by my mother and father. Nothing helps one gain emotional comfort with others like bawling your eyes out in front of them while your mistakes are laid bare.

For a few weeks life stabilizes in the woods. A routine emerges that starts every day with a breakfast of oatmeal, then either packing up camp and hiking or spending the day journaling and carving my spoon out of juniper wood. After the group comes together to cook a dinner consisting of rice, or quinoa, and various vegetables we pack all our food away in a large canvas sack. This sack is attached to a rope, and we hoist it about 30 feet into the tall ponderosa branches in a process we call "bear hang."

Soon, however, change is afoot. Our group is merging with another group that is down to two people, and a couple of the girls I've been spending this time with are on their way out. *Seeing as much of this process is about getting me out of my comfort zone, this is probably a good opportunity for growth. But right now I'm just upset and anxious at the idea of change.* It's a good thing there's a licensed therapist on staff for precisely this reason.

While it takes some time, I start to accept the fluidity of life out here. The butterscotch scent of the ponderosa pines is inescapable, and it starts to grant a comfortable familiarity to my new home in the woods. As new people come and old friends leave, I sense a palpable shift in my demeanor. Where I used to feel anxiety, I catch myself feeling confident. Where nerves used to

Shadow Forest Michael Carney



eat away at my self-esteem, love now rushes to fill it up. I'm not the only one who notices this internal shift. Two significant changes to my life out here are just around the bend.

The first adjustment is the transfer of the program to the Oregon High Desert. This is done in late August to prepare for the coming fall and winter seasons. While I relish the rare chance to listen to music in the truck on the way, I recognize how much I've come to love these woods. However, soon after we arrive in the desert, I am "promoted" to Water Phase. This is a privilege not every participant will receive. I am granted a "crazy creek" camping chair to use around camp. Additionally, I am allowed more ownership in how the group is run. This includes leading my first hike, charting the course beforehand and navigating with a compass as we go. On this hike, or rather as we finish the hike, I see something I will carry with me forever. The golden rays of the setting sun give way to a pink splash of brilliance behind a cliff seemingly as wide as the earth itself. Overlooking a deep dried

lake bed the night sky opens up with a starlight show that imprints my memory like a tattoo. Streaks of illumination tear the tapestry in two at a rate of unimaginable business. We lay down in the dirt and watch it for hours. Later, I will look back and understand this to be the annual Perseid meteor shower. That night, it was pure magic.

Nine long weeks have passed since I first arrived in the woods of Oregon. It's been almost twice as long as

I expected to be out here. While I appreciate many of the unique things I've experienced here, I'm ready to leave. Before I do, I'm "promoted" once again to Air Phase. This is rare, and it's a privilege of mine to receive this honor. I am granted an air mattress to sleep on, and given the opportunity to request one meal from base camp. Since I came out here, I have craved a Philly cheesesteak. Sloppy as possible, loaded up with mushrooms and onions, it's better than I could have possibly imagined. I don't stop licking my lips for an hour after finishing.

Finally, my time to leave has come. The best 10 weeks of my life I never want to do again has come to a close. I've spent hours preparing for altogether fifteen minutes of time on a satellite phone with my family to plan my next step. For me, this means choosing a sober house in Boulder, Colorado. Oh yeah, did I forget to mention why I went to the wild? I was arrested for DWI, but that's the least important part of this story.

New Day Daphne Babcock

