

Stories



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Mottled sunlight glared off the ferns which crowded the edges of the trail. Grant Morrison's pack creaked with each step, adding to the cadence set by his heavy breathing. His friend Brandon ambled along the path ahead of him. Grant watched him slow to a stop and bend forward, hands on his knees. His mop of dreadlocks covered his face, and his stocky frame heaved. When he cocked his head toward him, Grant saw that his face was flushed beneath his beard.

"That last hill was a pain, bro. I'm still trying to catch my breath," Brandon huffed. Grant stopped and wiped sweat from his short, dark hair.

"Tomorrow will be worse, if you remember," said Grant.

"Sure do. The last hill before this loop ends is a monster," Brandon smiled. "Remember the first time my dad took us up here when we were about twelve? It was before we went with Scouts."

"Yeah. That was right after my parents split." Grant looked away. "Your folks took me to a lot of places. I'd never seen the beach before they took me to Myrtle. I always appreciated that," he said. He was always grateful despite the guilt he'd felt at the idea of burdening Brandon's family. His own parents couldn't afford trips like that, much less be civil long enough to plan one. But he'd never said anything about it. Brandon's friendship had been a solace through those difficult times, anyway.

"It was good for me, too. We were practically brothers, man. Brothers from another mother," said Brandon as he stood and leaned backward to stretch. They'd been close since kindergarten when Grant moved to his

neighborhood. “Really good to have you back.” He looked at Grant and nodded slowly. His smile was almost sad.

“Yeah. Good to be back. It was a long few years.” He stared through the trees. The green mountains on either side of the narrow ridge undulated towards the horizon, stacked upon one another like green waves. “I love that view. Nothing beats Seneca Mountain.” He looked past Brandon, nodded his head down the trail. “You catch your breath yet? We should get moving. It’ll be dark soon.”

“I’m good now. Guess I wasted my breath blabbing on about the Phish tour earlier.” He shook his head. “It was pretty epic, bro.”

“Sounded like one big party.” Grant hooked his thumbs under his shoulder-straps.

“Yeah, but that whole experience on the road was life-changing. I got to see another side of the world. Got some perspective,” Brandon said as he began walking. Grant wondered about the ways it changed him other than some added girth and loss of grooming habits.

“Yeah,” Grant muttered, “I certainly know about some life-changing stuff.”

They plodded along in silence for a moment. The sounds of clinking gear and swishing water bottles were interrupted by the occasional scuffs of boots on stones. Grant’s deep breaths filled his nose with the smell of dead leaves warmed by the sun.

“So I bet *you’ve* got some stories. What was it like over there? You never really say much,” Brandon called over his shoulder.

“Well, it was hot. Filthy. Boring. Scary at times.” He shrugged. “Iraq was a weird place. Hard to explain.”

“Did you get to blow a lot of stuff up? That had to have been cool, at least,” said Brandon.

“Something like that. Sometimes.” Grant searched for the next words, unsure of what to say.

“Yeah. From what I saw on the news it must have been hell, too.”

“Not always. Even funny things happened.” Grant smiled as he remembered his squad’s first encounter with a camel spider.

“Really? I mean, I thought you’d be scared most of the time.” Brandon held up a branch blocking the trail. Grant grabbed it and dipped under it.

“Well, take this one time, for instance. We were all sleeping between guard shifts in this room in an outpost in some hell-hole town. A guy woke up screaming and we were all pretty scared, because, who knows, right? Someone flipped on the light and there’s a camel spider on the floor. Ever seen pictures of a camel spider?” He shrugged to shift the weight of his pack.

“No, man, sure haven’t.”

“Looks like a cross between a giant crab and a scorpion. Its body was at least as big as my hand.” Grant smirked.

“Oh, jeez!” Brandon peeked over his shoulder, a look of affected horror on his face.

“Yeah, gnarly looking thing,” Grant chuckled. “So when we all see it we’re standing on our cots yelling like crazy, throwing helmets and stuff at it. Our platoon sergeant comes in, stomps it to death, calls us little girls and tells us to get to sleep.”

“Wow,” said Brandon.

“It was funny now if you think about it, all of us armed to the teeth, standing on cots, scared to death of that thing. Quite a sight,” said Grant.

“I’d imagine so,” said Brandon. Grant saw him begin to turn again, hesitating on the next step, but he kept going. “I bet you saw way, way crazier stuff, though. Like, you know, action.”

“Yeah,” said Grant after a long pause.

Grant’s smile disappeared. Action, he thought. I hate that word. I saw enough. He wants to hear about the violence – most do who don’t know anything about it. I’d imagine he knows very little. His mom tore

into me for bringing over *Apocalypse Now* to watch when we were thirteen, said it was too violent for her son. That's probably why she always wanted me to come to *their* house, always so protective of what he saw and did.

"That was a good war story, though, that spider," said Grant.

"I think this shelter's about a quarter of the way down this side of the hill. Looks like we timed it right," said Brandon, pointing at the sky. While Grant told his story they'd descended down the right side of the crest. The sun had disappeared behind the ridge. A cool breeze blew from the hollow below. It replaced the warm smells of the woods with the musty richness of decay.

"Good. I'm getting hungry," Grant said. Brandon stopped and faced him. A smile crossed his face as he smacked his belly.

"You're telling me, fat boy's gotta eat!" He laughed and continued down the trail. Grant smiled. He believed the road-trip stories of hard drinking and fast food eating with which he'd been regaled all day. It showed, he thought. I guess it's good that he has a sense of humor about it. He's always been light-hearted. I wish I could be light-hearted about the weight I sweated out over there.

When they arrived at the campsite they dropped their packs on the plywood floor of a three-walled lean-to shelter. Next to the shelter sandstones ringed a blackened fire pit. Beside it, the last campers had left a pile of kindling and a few logs. They unpacked sleeping bags and busied themselves with their hiking stoves.

Darkness fell as they ate. They savored a cigarette after their meal, and then built a fire. They made quick work of it. The fire was blazing in no time.

"Well," said Brandon as he brushed off his hands. "Looks like all those years in Scouts finally paid off."

“You mean all that wilderness survival stuff didn’t come in handy out on the Phish lot?” said Grant. There was an edge to his voice.

“It wasn’t that,” Brandon hesitated, trying to find the right word, “extreme.” He gave Grant a wary glance.

Sitting on the edge of the shelter floor, boots off, they relaxed. Then with a mischievous grin, Brandon reached into his pack and retrieved a bottle of Jack Daniels. Grant knew what it was when he heard the liquid sloshing in the bottle.

“Nice. I didn’t know you’d bring anything, and certainly not an entire fifth,” he said, eyes wide. “Definitely wasn’t on the list of gear I wrote up for you. Good call, though.” He’d been anxious about the logistics of the trip and had made a packing list.

“Well, we’re celebrating, dude! Two old friends reunited on the path of life. And sure, it’s a lot, but what’s the Boy Scout motto, ‘be prepared?’” He winked. “So what the hell?”

“Awesome, even though we’ll probably be hurting tomorrow.” Grant shook his head but couldn’t suppress a smile. Brandon un-screwed the cap and held the bottle in reverence before him, taking a breath. He tipped it up.

“Ahhh. Whew!” he said with one eye squinted. “Cheers, dude. Welcome home.”

“Thanks, man.” Eyebrows raised, Grant took the bottle. The smell was overpowering at first. He took a swig. It burned going down, invoking a shiver.

But as they drank more it tasted better. Then they drank faster. Soon their faces were numb. The liquor warmed them and enlivened their conversation. They talked into the night, mining one another’s memories of their early lives: the heartache of high school crushes, funny stories of mutual friends, and anecdotes of pets that had died.

“So, you want to hear a *real* war story?” Grant asked him, glancing over. Brandon was piled in a fleece jacket stroking his beard. His serene grin waned, and his eyes widened.

“What, the last one wasn’t real?” he asked.

“It was real. I mean it really happened – that spider. I meant, well, like a *war* story. I can tell you want to know what it was really like.” The liquor bubbled as Brandon drank.

“Sure.” He smacked his lips and gave his head a shake. “Whew, gonna put this bad lad down for a minute.” Grant nodded and stared into the fire. His jaw tightened.

“One night, I think it was one of the first nights there,” he said before taking a deep breath, “we were on this little outpost. They called over the radio and said there were car bombs all over, some heading our way. So we had to shut down the intersection right outside that outpost, you know, set up roadblocks so no vehicles could come close.” He paused and lit a cigarette.

“Anyway,” he continued, his voice muffled by the smoke in his mouth. He blew it out and picked a piece of tobacco off his tongue. “So, we’re all out there in the intersection behind whatever cover we could find. We waited a little while. Before long we saw headlights down the road I was guarding. So I flashed this flashlight I had on my weapon to signal it to stop. We had rules, you know, couldn’t just start shooting. ‘Shout, signal, shoot warning shots, shoot to disable or kill’ – escalation of force. But it kept coming. It was,” he breathed in deeply, “surreal—scary as hell.” He remembered the fluttering of his heart and lightness in his limbs. He felt it now.

Grant looked at Brandon, who stared. He drew on the cigarette.

“So this vehicle just keeps coming. I shot a couple of shots at it – just warning shots. Usually that stopped them.” He shook his head. “But this one kept coming. Then I aimed for the driver’s side and started popping

off rounds, one after another. A couple other guys joined in and there's just – just a stream of tracers pouring in to this thing. It was crazy looking.” He swallowed hard then puffed his cigarette.

“When it finally stopped, we ceased fire. I probably dumped a magazine in it. Then we had to search it. You know, we had to check it out since we shot it.” He looked up. “Hey, pass that bottle?” Brandon didn't move his eyes as he placed it beside him. He took a long drink and exhaled through pursed lips.

“So I get up to this van, and there's bullet holes all over. And the smell, man—It was like a gutted deer but worse.” The fire popped, and sap sizzled as it dripped onto the coals. “When I opened the sliding door,” he paused and took a deep breath. “There were two guys that were shredded. I mean ripped apart. Dead, obviously. I searched through the van, their bodies and all that. Didn't find anything. They were just Iraqis who didn't follow directions. It was, hell, I don't even know. It was terrible.” Grant felt the revulsion and guilt all over again, vivid and overpowering.

He looked at Brandon and saw his grim, disgusted expression. He leaned over to get the liquor. After a swig, he wiped a sleeve across his beard. His eyes were wide.

“Jesus,” Brandon said as he turned toward the fire. “That's awful.”

Grant flipped his cigarette into the blaze then stood.

“Yeah, but we followed the rules. If a bomb had gotten through?” said Grant. “It would have been way worse. No room for mistakes over there, man. Mistakes got people killed.” He shook his head. “I gotta take a leak.”

He stumbled away from the campsite. He wondered if he'd gone too far and thought he probably had. He knew he didn't like thinking about that van. He also hoped it disturbed Brandon a little. Real war stories were supposed to be disturbing. A sardonic grin came over his face. Oh well, he wanted to know about action, he thought.

Brandon was hushed when he returned. He avoided eye contact with Grant.

“Well, that’s a real war story. Maybe shouldn’t have mentioned that one. It’s just stuck with me,” said Grant. He shrugged.

“Well, I mean, I knew you’d seen some stuff. You can see it on your face sometimes.” Brandon fiddled with his dreadlocks. “I should have written you more. Sorry man, I was just sort of caught up with things.”

“It’s cool. I never knew what to write to people anyway,” said Grant. He took a long pull of the bottle. “Guess we should change the subject.”

“I got a good one for you. It’s pretty hilarious. It was at a Widespread Panic show in Baltimore,” Brandon began. His face lit up with a memory.

Grant resisted rolling his eyes at the prospect of another story about another concert. He fought back a surge of frustration, knowing his loosened tongue might lash out. Instead, he pretended. He smiled when Brandon laughed and interjected an occasional question to seem interested. It was something about a kid on too many drugs who urinated himself in the middle of a crowd. His mind was elsewhere. For a while, he couldn’t stop thinking about the van, but soon he stopped thinking altogether. He didn’t remember going to sleep.

It rained overnight, and a fog draped the hollow. Grant awoke with a headache and a dark mood. Brandon snored beside him. Mugginess made the air feel close. Grant busied himself with packing his damp gear, knowing the commotion would awaken Brandon. It did. When he roused he sat up, dazed, and made a quip about needing a greasy breakfast. Grant policed the campsite for trash as Brandon stowed his gear.

“Hey,” Grant croaked. “We need to refill water before we go. I’ll walk down to that creek. You got the filter?”

“Oh yeah. I forgot it, dude.” Brandon scratched his head.

“What?” Grant stared at him with bleary, puffy eyes.

“Yeah. I meant to tell you yesterday.” Brandon stopped stowing gear and looked at Grant. His calm expression was met with a scowl.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Grant said as he shook his head. He looked up and sighed. His nostrils flared and his jaw tightened. “I even put it on that list.”

“Sorry, dude, it just slipped my mind.” He continued stuffing his sleeping bag into his pack. “We’ll be okay.” He shrugged. Grant scratched at the stubble on his face, feeling the grime of yesterday’s sweat. His breathing quickened.

“It’s *not* okay. It’s going to be hot today. Muggy. It’s the kind of weather that dehydrates you quick, not to mention, never mind. The *water filter*? You thought to bring whiskey, but the *water filter* slipped your mind?” He shook his head again and stomped towards his pack, shouldering it in a quick motion. “Figures. Well, let’s get the hell on the trail. We’ve got five miles.”

“Dude, it’s not that big a deal.” Brandon smiled at him. “It’s just five miles. Worst case scenario we get a little thirsty or have to boil some. And I’ve got like half of my Nalgene left.”

Grant’s lips tightened. The corner of his square jaw bulged as he grinded his teeth. He paced in a small circle with erratic steps. His fists opened and closed.

“Worst case scenario we get stuck out here somehow. Say one of us gets injured. Then the other has to get to the trailhead and get help. Hours. Injured guy lays in the heat. What if it takes a couple days? Drink out of the creek and get some nasty parasite? Then you get *really* dehydrated. Not overheated from dancing too much at one of your damn concerts. I’m talking real, real sick.” He forced the words through gritted teeth. “No. Worst case scenario someone dies. That’s what happens in the real world. I guess you don’t think that way. You’ve never had to.”

Brandon had stopped packing and stared, open-mouthed, as Grant seethed.

“Chill, man. What’s gotten into you?”

“Reality. I got a dose of reality. You, apparently, got one too many doses of acid. We’re talking survival here.”

“What the hell, man?” Brandon threw his arms up. His brow was furrowed, but his voice was higher, exasperated. “Did they program you to be a prick in the Army? You’re all doom and gloom since you got back. For Chrissake, we’ll be fine. I thought coming here would bring you some good vibes.” He stepped off the shelter floor. “And anyway, we can boil it if we have to.”

“That’s not the point.”

Grant’s menacing gaze watched as Brandon hefted the weight of the pack onto his shoulders and adjusted the straps.

“I think the point is you’re being an ass.” Brandon’s eyes narrowed and he shook his head. “You’ve changed, dude.”

“So have you. Then again, maybe you haven’t,” said Grant. His voice was flat. He turned and plodded up the trail. “Let’s just go,” he said over his shoulder.

They walked, Grant glancing behind him to see that his pace wasn’t outstripping Brandon’s. The sodden forest was muted besides their squishing footsteps and the odd drip from the leaves. Soon Grant tromped along faster, as if trying to escape the darkness of their last exchange. When the sun appeared, the woods steamed.

Water, he thought. Of all the things to forget, he forgets the water filter. Why doesn’t he understand why that’s a big deal? Maybe there was a time when we were on the same page. Maybe not. He shook his head. Then he realized he didn’t hear Brandon behind him. He stopped.

It took a moment for Brandon to appear down the trail. Then he saw him shuffling up the slope. His fleece jacket dangled off one side of his

pack. Grant waited for him to approach. He reached into his pack for his water bottle. A quarter of it was left. When Brandon reached him he looked in to his sweating face. Their eyes met for a moment before Brandon looked away. Guilt had softened Grant's glower.

"Take half," said Grant. Brandon looked at him again, his chest heaving. He was squinting through sweat.

"I'm good," he gasped.

"Just take half," he said as he thrust the bottle towards him. Brandon regarded him for a moment before taking the bottle. He took a gulp. Water dribbled down his beard as he handed it back.

Grant stepped out. It was the last of their conversation for the rest of the hike. Grant was glad. There was nothing left to talk about.