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My Stint with the Wilderness

□ Day Two

I roll out of my sleeping bag first thing the next morning, stiff, sore and cold. (Luckily the sun was coming up to dispel the chill in a short time. Then, of course, I was too hot. Go figure.)

I eat breakfast, oats with some apple sliced in it and honey over it. Hunter looks over my shoulder as I stir it up.

"That looks good," he says.

I instantly want to give him some - I can get French toast at home - but there's a strict no-food-sharing policy at Red Cliff.

So I just say, "Yeah, it does, doesn't it?" and keep stirring.

I find out that morning I'm not much of a campfire cook. The apples are still crunchy and the oats are soggy before I finally give up and just make myself a Scooby (Red Cliff slang for an ash cake).

How do these kids do this, anyway? I think. I'm a tough girl, and I can't seem to manage.

That was definitely the theme of the day - I wasn't as tough as I thought, and I definitely wasn't as tough as these kids and staff.

Medicine Owl, or "Doc Owl" as the boys call him, came out to camp a few hours after breakfast. A tall, lanky man with a cowboy hat and a dog in tow, he's a registered EMT and he comes out every week, rain or shine, to take the students' height and weight and review any accidents or incidents from the week. He also asks them detailed questions about their bowel movements and whether they've had any problem with "gut bomb," a nickname for any and every intestinal order in the field.

"I've been with RCA about 11 years," he says, stretching his long legs in the shade of a cedar tree. "They just plunked me into it, cold turkey."

He says he mostly treats gut bomb and foot problems in the field, anything from athlete's foot to blisters to ankle soreness.

The boys love getting weighed. They watch any excess flab harden into muscle, and when Doc Owl comes out, they swap their stats with pride.

Hunter's up in weight, thanks to a protein shakes he drinks every night. Joel and Charles have lost about 20 pounds between the two of them.

"Were you guys fat when you came out here?" I ask, trying to picture them with any extra chub

and failing miserably.

They just laugh at me. I take that as a no.

Later we go "spindle shopping." One of the tasks the students at RCA learn how to do is make fire with a bow drill set, a cord-and-bow contraption that's a step up from the old "rubbing two sticks together" trick. The student takes a spindle and a small round stick, and bores a hole into another flat piece of wood with a bow drill. The friction creates a coal tat, when put into a nest of finely shredded cedar bark, makes fire. When your spindle wears out, you need a new one from an obliging sage bush. It needs to be kind of long (it wears down with each use) and round. Titanium Elk gives the boys the go-ahead, and they spread out over the shrubby fields, "shopping" for the perfect spindle.

Joel gets frustrated in looking for a new spindle and instead mutters under his breath as he drags his water bottle through the tops of the sage bushes.

We get back to camp, Joel still muttering.

"Joel, why are you being so negative?" Aurora asks with characteristic honesty. "When you go down, you drag the group down."

I decide to open my big mouth.

"Yeah, Joel," I say, "if you had a superhero name, it would be Negator."

Everyone busts up laughing, Joel included.

The nickname sticks. Joel is now officially "Negator," or "Negatron," as Elk calls him. I just hope I haven't offended Joel with the nickname.

After "spindle shopping," I decided that I wanted to take a crack at making a fire with a bow drill. In no time flat, the sweat was making a tickly trickle down my back as I hunched over the bow drill set, threading the spindle in the bow for what seems like the millionth time. My fingers were aching and rubbed raw, my neck ached, and my nose itched. I can't scratch it because I'm holding onto this spindle for dear life, and if I let go, it's curtains for that attempt. I finally get the spindle to stay upright, grinding one end in the board and the other in the rock in my palm, before it shoots out and nearly makes hash of Charles's glasses. "You have to put more downward pressure," he said.

I snorted in frustration and set the drill down, rubbing the back of my neck.

"Yeah," Charles said. "It took me, like, 15 days to make fire."

Suddenly I feel sheepish. I only lasted a half hour before calling it quits, but Charles put it into perspective - making fire takes a really long time.

Suddenly, Hunter yelled, "FLAME!" and started jumping up and down. This is Hunter's fourth fire this week, which means he gets a bottle of honey in the next food drop.

"WOO HOO!" he yelled, and threw the still-smoldering nest under some dried cedar. The little

nest almost ignites the entire tree, and Cedar Hawk hustles over there to stamp it out.

"Hey, watch where you're throwing that, Hunter," is all he said.

Hawk is happy for him, too.

A cloud passed over the sun and we relished the shade for a while ... until the lightning starts striking. We evacuated camp and walked a little farther down the hillside, the rain pelting us as we sit in a semicircle, ten feet apart.

During this rainstorm is the first time I met Justin Strum, or Long Shadow. He's the therapist for Charles, Hunter, Brian, Andrew and the pollywog (RCA for "the new kid) Jacob.

We later met around the spluttering campfire for group therapy and I saw Long Shadow in action for the first time. He pointed out that Brian wasn't participating - he was standing sullenly at the outskirts of the circle - and asked him if he wants to share his feelings.

Brian just shook his head.

Long Shadow agreed to talk to me for a while about the boys. We sat under a cedar tree and I pulled out my notebook.

Frankly, I couldn't believe the things the kids were there for.

Anger, I wrote in my notepad. *Manipulation*. *Violence in the home*. *Divorce aftermath*. *Physical abuse*. *Sexual abuse*. *Drug dependency*. I scribbled down these notes, only half-listening as my mind spun with my mental picture of the boy in question.

"Yeah, he's been holding out," Long Shadow said of one of the boys. "I told him, 'It's not just going through the motions. You have to experience a change in your heart and in your brain. And if you don't meet those objectives of therapy, I won't sanction you going home.' He started crying." I shifted my weight and flipped over yet another page. I couldn't imagine this boy crying about anything, and the thought kind of makes me get a tickle in my own throat.

I was still chewing on this food for thought as we gathered around the campfire that night. It's mail drop time, and Elk hands Brian a stack of letters.

He opened the first one, and promptly burst into tears.

"Hey, Brian," Titanium Elk said. "You can take a minute if you want," and gestured out to a small grove of cedars.

Brian didn't acknowledge Elk's comment. He just sat, arms wrapped around his knees, and sobbed into his left bicep to stifle the sound.

I can't take this, something inside me said. I have to ... oh, I don't know, I have to give him a hug or something.

I moved closer to Steve, who's standing on the other side of Brian.

Steve looked at me out of the corner of his eye. Somehow he understood what I was going through. "The staff aren't ignoring Brian right now," he said. "They're aware of what's going on."

I nod.

He leaned over and whispered, "You can't take it, can you?"

"No," I said, a little sheepishly. "I can't. I want to help him. I want to throw my arms around him and tell him it's OK."

"You can't," Steve said, gently. "He has to feel what he's feeling right now, and you can't come between that. He needs to feel that hurt before he can change."

I nodded again. But this time I saw the wisdom in letting someone feel what they need to feel, rather than trying to buffer the hurt for them.

I snapped out of my reverie. It's dinnertime, and I need to get my pot on the boil.

To my left, Hunter was making the usual - rice and lentils - but tonight he made dumplings out of wheat flour and floated them in the chicken broth. It looked good to me.

"Is it good?" I asked.

Hunter thought for a second.

"No," he said.

I laughed.

"But it's good 'cause I'm hungry," Hunter said, and promptly starts to shovel it down.

Man, I thought, I can't believe how much that kid can eat.

I grinned, thinking about his antics. He's absolutely black with dirt, but he's loving life out on the trail ... Hunter, the kid whose dad wired him enough petty cash per month to put a sizeable dent in my semesterly tuition. Hunter, the kid who never poured a bowl of cereal for himself in his life, sitting around the fire, stirring his pot of rice and lentils with a piece of stick.

I watched his brows furrow in concentration as he ate the pot clean. He feels me looking at him, and he looked up.

"Are you Jewish?" he asked me.

"Uh, no," I said, confused at this absolute bolt from the blue. "Why do you ask?"

"I dunno," he said, and takes a final swipe at the bowl with his finger. "You look Jewish."

"Hunter," I said, laughing, "I don't know where that came from, but I thank you for the compliment." He grinned back, that crooked grin, and his black eyes twinkled at me.

"You're welcome," he said.

When I crawled into my sleeping bag that night, I wiggled my toes in my socks. They're gritty, probably because I haven't taken them off for a couple days now. My bright blue shirt was fading with the sun and dirt and my jeans - which are rolled up under my head for a pillow - smelled of smoke. I had a clean shirt and pair of socks in my pack, but I realize that I don't really care to get them out.

It's so much more comfortable when you're dirty, I thought.

I wiggled my gritty toes once more, and smiled.