Lighting the Desert

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The Idaho desert looks dirty. It’s not painted with the golden swaths of sand or decorated by the pretty shapes of saguaro cactuses that populate the romanticized deserts of Hollywood. Instead, the Idaho wind snakes over patches of rough, scarred land, too emotionless to display any real color. Every landscape is much the same, starting with one empty shade of gray. The dirt creates the base palette, and wind whips it up to coat everything, the sage, the rocks, and even the open sky. Light gray, lighter gray, lightest.

On any given day, a drive up past Milner, down towards Malta, or anywhere across the south-eastern corner of Idaho, presents the same gray scene, the same gray sky. Hills will vary in height, and angles will differ, but it’s all painted with the same bland theme: Idaho. The outsider can glory in a sunrise or smile at purple springtime flowers, but this isn’t the change I’m talking about.

I’ve seen the desert light up. I’ve seen it explode into colors: oranges, blacks, and yellows. I hope I never see it again.

It was July 26th, 2011, my seventeenth birthday. I didn’t want the cake and cards, I wanted, instead, to go to the desert. My mom had
hoped for family time, but I was young and wanted to run free with my friends. So I planned it all out: I’d take my two friends, the twins, to see the Oakley caves. We weren’t even old enough to rent a hotel room, but at seventeen, the twins—two indoor types—and me, had hit that age where we could face the great outdoors on our own.

It was their cooler, their car, and their carrots. I packed a log of ground beef, the lost knowledge of wind caves, and the punk rock playlist for the road trip. We combined all of these supplies and more for a composite of everything we would need for the first camping trip that I was to lead. I liked being in charge. Whether it was a predisposition, or if I just lacked that sort of control in my childhood, there was something to be said about the respect my friends afforded me as I introduced them to the outdoors.

We set out around noon and traveled through the midday heat wave. Their old, battered sedan trudged its way across highways and through the next town over. From my perch in the passenger seat, I navigated the twins towards the hills and along old, broken roads. We went from pavement to gravel, to dirt, and to ruts, until finally we made our last turn. The battered sedan pulled up on a patch of bare gray soil, glittered exotic with patches of dried and dying pigeongrass and strangletop that was always swaying in the warm Idaho winds.

“We’re here,” I announced. The twins sat and marveled at this, their first non-manicured campsite. I let them have their moment—they hadn’t seen the gray as often as I had.

They came to terms with their surroundings while I waited at the trunk, as the glaring sun slowly burned my fair skin.

“Grab your sleeping bags, we’ll go set up in the first cave.”

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“Where’s it at?” one of the twins asked.

“Just up around the curve of this hill.” They marveled again at how I could know that. I kept my smug smile to myself as I led them towards the cave.

Carrying our gear, we passed the fire pit—which sat halfway between our makeshift parking lot and the mouth of the first cave. This might have been a letdown for the twins. I’d described caves, the focal point of our entire trip, but sadly the Oakley wind tunnels are just a series of decommissioned irrigation tubes, blasted straight through entire mountains with the help of high-power dynamite. Though they are something new, their relative smallness hardly provides a break in the scenery. I led them down into the entrance of the first tunnel, which is low and thin. So thin, that any explorers who want access to the cave are forced to crawl on their stomachs over bits of broken rock to gain entrance.

The initial descent into the mouth of this hill always shoots adrenaline into my limbs, but just a few yards in, the cave opens up into its true form—jagged rock walls that open up, tall enough to stand in. No twists, no turns, no emotion all the way through until it opens up on the other side into the dry, gray desert again. After crawling in, we dropped our sleeping bags, lanterns, and backpacks.

Leading my friends around this landscape gave me something. It wasn’t just the acrid smell of sweat on my brow, there was something more cerebral that this leadership position provided. Maybe it was the opportunity to see the desert through new eyes, but I felt new again on those dusty paths that took us to all of the caves and cliffs.
that I had hoped to show them. It also provided me with a level of responsibility. I planned out the meals and I dictated when we would cook, tin foil dinners, to be wrapped and cooked straight in the coals.

The sun was still high in the sky at six o’clock as we walked around sharing carefree summertime laughs, but coals take time. We headed back to camp in order to refine the blocks of wood into exquisite neon orange coals—the perfect glow for a perfect meal.

“So let’s get that fire burning, we won’t want to be cooking in the dark.”

We headed back through the caves to that old fire pit. It sat alone in the open, a primitive ring of loose rocks piled together. It would serve its function adequately, but with no extra flare or appeal. A scattered cornucopia of grasses, stemmed weeds, and thistles had grown up to the ring and then promptly died. It must have been a year or two since anyone had last camped here; it would have taken at least a season for the desert to thoroughly remove any water that remained trapped in those dried-out, dead stalks.

“We won’t be able to start the fire until we clear out some of these weeds,” I grumbled to my friends. So we began working at the mess of weeds around us.

Idaho’s a dusty place. Stomping through the desert, one’s foot will carry a thin layer of dirt up into a cloud that follows them. This had always led me to believe that Idaho soil was soft and loose. It’s not. As we tried to yank these golden grasses out of the ground, we found it held tight, like trying to rip hair from its scalp. We yanked and pulled and ripped at the stalks of grasses and grains. The grasses came easily, but the stalks of other weeds refused to rip either inside or outside the soil. In addition to the heat working against us,
the Russian thistle also left barbs in our hands. We exhausted our strength in the harvest; the July sun will do that. We were dripping and dehydrated, our hands started to callous, we couldn’t possibly continue on.

Sitting down and catching our breath, I said, “You know, we could probably just stomp down the rest of this. That should be good enough.”

The twins spoke in turn.

“Yeah man!”

“That’s a great idea!”

“It will save us so much time.”

They couldn’t help but agree with me: I was in charge.

I had displayed my mastery again. I had found the solution. My head dropped to hide my smug smile in the fire pit as I stacked sticks in the form of a log cabin, stuffed full of paper towel tinder.

I huddled in close, hoping to shield the unripe flame from the wind—no small task on the Idaho plains. A spark leaped from the match and moved onto the first balled up paper. The first piece ignited the next, and I watched the fire grow. I lifted my head and let the twins revel under my smug smile-turned-grin.

Then the wind picked up.

An ember was lifted out of the fire pit. My heart stopped and my blood grew still as I watched this little piece of flame lifted by pressures great and incomprehensible to me. It landed on a thick patch of weeds, stamped together for optimal conduction. A flame spread across this bed of weeds as quickly as the wind could carry it. My heart exploded back into life and I screamed the twins into...
action. We were all stomping at the fire as we felt the flames caress our calves and melt away our budding leg hair.

The flame was dying. We were so close. We just had to keep stomping.

Then another gust came. It lifted the fire off the scorched earth and set it back down in an even larger patch of shrubs and weeds.

“GO GO GO. You go grab our stuff from the cave. You go start the car,” I made the split-second assignments.

I ran with one twin to clear out the cave. We had to get everything we wanted all in one trip. The next thing I remember, I had jumped into the backseat of their car with all of our supplies still in hand. I remember untangling myself from unrolled sleeping bags, a lantern still gripped by white bloodless knuckles, the fire still growing behind us.

There was a numbness, I remember. It grew up from my groin and spread across my torso. My hands tingled as my friends asked me what to do.

“We’ve got to report it,” I said, bouncing down those same dirt roads, the fire still growing behind us.

So we did, but I can’t recall who dialed or what was said. I simply remember a numb feeling as I was jostled around the back seat of the car. What little I can piece together is the emergency responder telling the twins to drive a safe distance away and to wait; they’d have an investigator out to talk with us shortly. A few minutes went by until we found what felt like a “safe distance” from the inferno behind us. We got out of the car and I turned and looked at the hillside we’d just escaped from. The sun was setting now, but the orange-yellow flames kept the mountains bright. Only the clouds of black ash,
rising over the valley could blunt the flames’s gaudy rays. That sky, marked by those ominous colors, was the only time I’ve ever seen that desert change. No longer would it sit a still, lifeless, pale gray.

I didn’t cry until my parents arrived. I didn’t cry until I could hand over the reins and release my title as leader.

The investigators came and went. Six hundred and sixty acres were erased over the course of five days, painted black. But it was ruled an accident—a misfortunate culmination of circumstances. Still, I knew that I hadn’t gotten off scot-free. I watched that entire night as countless emergency vehicles rushed past our little spot on the road and for five days, I watched smoke rise from the unquenchable fire. It was thick and dark enough to see from my home two towns over.

A few years later, me and each of the twins were served with individual letters from the USDA. The return address was somewhere in Arizona. Apparently it was their helicopters and their fire crews that had finally doused the goliath.

They had a grace period of three years during which they were allowed to collect their compensation, and they did after waiting until we were all finally eighteen years old. Our families decided to split the lump sum down the middle, a solution that worked well for me, as my family had some obscure clause in our insurance policy that covered our half—a cool $28,500. My friends weren’t as lucky or as affluent. I never found out how they paid the USDA. I’ve never worked up the nerve to ask.