

I'm Hiking with Stupid

a buddy story



Story by **Steve Friedman** +

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Yogi laughed at me when I strapped the giant French press coffee maker onto my bulging pack.

He'd also snickered when I crammed the three-legged aluminum Backpacker's Stool inside my extra-long inflatable air mattress, which was nestled just above the secret stash of Frosted Blueberry Pop-Tarts.

"But who's laughing now?" I demanded. "Huh, Yogi, who's laughing now?"

Yogi is what I call my friend, because he tends in certain areas of his life toward sloth, lumbers when he's grouchy, and possesses a prodigious appetite. (The night before our trip, he actually said "Let's have another dinner" before we tucked into a gigantic pizza at 11 p.m., then followed it with a double order of chocolate mousse with whipped cream.) Yogi, like a Kodiak bear who gorges on moose meat to the point of grunting, insensate immobility, is a creature who inclines toward immediate and often debilitating gratification. So, honesty compels me to mention, am I.

Yogi said nothing, but glared at me through slitted eyes. He slumped on the ground, in a damp bed of leaves he had scraped together. For some reason, he seemed resentful. I lounged on my Backpacker's Stool, holding my French press in one hand while with the other I nudged a pot of water that was boiling on my shiny new camp stove. It was early morning, and we were beneath a tarp I had rigged the night before while Yogi had hunkered next to the fire, shoveling smoked duck breast and barbecue potato chips into his gaping maw. But I wasn't complaining. We were friends, had been for 30 years—except for a 10-month period of hostile silence 12 years earlier, brought on by the one and only other time we had ever tried camping together. "That time you tried to kill me," is how Yogi still described the event. Yogi's gross misinterpretation of that summer weekend of 1996 had motivated me to plan the trip that had landed us here, under the tarp. This outing was going to provide us the opportunity to put that terrible expedition from long ago to

rest forever—and to bond as guy friends seldom do.

And what an opportunity for guy bonding this was! It was early morning in the wilderness, in a clearing in the woods, on a towering ledge in New York's Catskills State Park. We were miles and hours from deadlines and obligations, traffic and mortgages and rent and all the other superficially pressing but ultimately meaningless nuisances that will sap the joy from a guy's life and force him into unwise choices, like working for a living.

Yogi and I had started our careers together as cub reporters. I had been best man at Yogi's wedding, and at my sister's wedding reception Yogi had helped cook burgers. And now here we were in the great outdoors, together again, putting the Colorado catastrophe behind us. We were healing. It was like a really cool beer commercial.

Except for the swarms of black flies, and the massing black clouds, and the not-so-distant rumble of thunder, and the fact that the night before I had pitched our tent right on top of a very pointy tree root, and except for Yogi's snoring, and his complaints that I had the "good side" (his side sloped a little), I thought things were going well. I had already poured us granola with powdered milk, which we would tuck into once I had our coffee ready, which would be soon. To my eye, from my vantage point on my Backpacker's Stool, life looked very sweet indeed. This is what I was trying to convey to my friend when I said, in the playfully joshing manner that man friends tend to use with one another, "You mocked the French press and the Backpacker's Stool, and now you're stuck in a wet pile of leaves, jonesing for some java. How's that for irony?"

Yogi continued to look at me through slitted eyes. Was he meditating on smoked duck breast? Did he resent the nickname? (His real name is Jeff.) Was he inwardly gloating over the fact that since our last trip he had lost 40 pounds,

while I had gained 30? Was he still holding on to that time 12 years ago, in Colorado's San Juan Mountains, when, after he had puked the first night and twisted his ankle the second, I had gently suggested that he should "man up and keep walking"? Why did he insist on holding on to the past? I had let go. Why couldn't he?

He continued to look at me through slitted eyes.

"What's your problem?" I demanded. "Just say what's on your mind."

"Something's melting," Yogi said.

"Look, Yogi, just because you wish *you* had a Backpacker's Stool is no reason to try to bring me down."

"No, really, something's melting."

He was right. I had neglected to remove the orange plastic cover from the bottom of the cook-stove pot. (And what was the cover doing on the bottom of the pot anyway? Wouldn't it make more sense to fasten it on top of the kit? I made a mental note to write a letter of complaint to the manufacturer when I returned to civilization.)

Strings of orange plastic dripped onto the ground. Yogi smirked. The wind seemed to pick up a little. That could have been the low point of the trip. But it wasn't, because at that moment, the downpour started and I made a couple of distressing discoveries. First, a flat tarp horizontal to the ground doesn't stop rain from blowing in sideways. Second, the 15-year-old nylon ski pants I had rescued from a box in the back of my closet at home—and was at the moment wearing—weren't rainproof.

The rain came down harder, and the air temperature

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dropped, and I was wet and cold but still committed to strengthening our friendship, which had been challenged once in the crucible of an alpine meadow. So I poured our coffee. I handed Yogi his cup. I prepared to eat.

"Here," he said, "why don't you wear these." With that, he thrust a pair of rain pants into my lap, which made me spill my granola onto my already soaked legs. Which made me scream. Which made me inform Jeff that he could have the Backpacker's Stool for a while. Which

made me retreat to the tent, where I listened to the rain fall, and the wind blow, and where I curled on my extra-long air mattress and wondered what had made me think that Jeff and I could ever have fun camping together.

I had come up with the idea a year earlier. I was living in New York, having recently gone through a breakup and been evicted from my illegally sublet rent-stabilized apartment. Jeff lived in Annapolis, where he had a fancy newspaper job.

Since our last trip, in addition to slimming down, Jeff had married, bought a house, and won seven Pulitzer Prizes. I had developed gout and always carried around a bottle of elephant-strength anti-inflammatories to pop whenever my left big toe started tingling. Some fresh air and a return to exercise would be good for me. Also, I needed to get out of the city. Also, I had always considered myself an outdoorsman, and even though I had only been backpacking once since my disastrous trip with Jeff in the Rockies in 1996, I was sure that two nights under the stars might help me regain my emotional bearings. Also, I hoped to unravel the mystery of how a guy like Yogi, who ate as gluttonously as I did, could have lost so much weight. Most important, though, I sought to exorcise the ghosts of Colorado.

"Why would I ever want to go on a hiking trip with you again?" Jeff said when I called him last October to inform him of my plan.

"C'mon, it'll be fun," I said.

"You almost killed me in Colorado," Jeff said. "You enjoyed watching me suffer."

"I didn't enjoy it," I said. "I was just trying to get you to exceed your self-imposed limitations."

"Bullshit," Jeff said. He had always had a way with words. Maybe that explained the Pulitzers.

I tried a different tack.

"You're the one in shape this time. I'm the fat hog."

"That's a good point," Jeff said. "But I still don't see why I would want to spend two nights lying on the ground next to you, and two days dying of thirst." (I had dropped one of our two water bottles in a river on the way up the mountain on our last trip. And the water filter I had borrowed was broken and pumped only a liter every 30 minutes. And I had selected a campsite that was a 30-minute-walk from the nearest water source, which sat in the middle of a thicket of vegetation that was home to the largest colony of mosquitoes west of the Mississippi. Also, I had forgotten insect repellent.)

"Do you want to get soft?" I asked. "Just because you're married and won a few contests, you just want to slide into middle age?" (Jeff had just turned 51. I was 52.)

"I'm not sliding anywhere," Jeff said. "And didn't you just admit that you're the hog?"

I told him that I'd been working out some personal demons 12 years ago, that I had changed, that I was sorry for making him walk after he puked. I promised I'd bring insect repellent.

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The hike up to the Giant Ledge, which the guidebook said was

1.5 miles, took us two and a half hours. I attribute this to the steepness of the trail, which the book ranked as moderate but I would describe as dangerous; Jeff's complaining about the steepness of the hike; Jeff's asking about 15 times, "How come I have to carry the 80-pound pack?"; my accusing Jeff of lying when he claimed he was an Eagle Scout; our

discussions of women, especially our utter befuddlement over the fact that the women in our lives had historically felt perfectly comfortable instructing us "to act like a man, for God's sake," while we felt constrained by societal pressure to refrain from telling any female we knew to "act like a woman"; and our stopping and filtering five gallons of water into the collapsible jug I had carried, since I knew there was no water near any campsites on the Giant Ledge. Also, I took a few minutes to accuse Jeff of being an idiot for buying smoked duck breast and a giant bag of barbecue potato chips for the trip, and he spent a few minutes informing me that I was the one who had gout, not him, and I spent a few minutes asking if he actually owned documentation on his alleged Eagle Scout badge, and he spent a few minutes inquiring as to why I hadn't mentioned that I had been planning all along to make him risk the permanent health of his bad ankle and possibly die, "just like that last trip."

"Jeff," I said, "I swear I didn't know it was going to be this steep. The guidebook said 'moderate.' Besides, there will be great views."

"Right," Jeff said, "You say 'great views' and what I hear is 'death march.'"

I reminded Jeff that I'd chosen this hike primarily because it's in Catskills State Park, which is close to the town of Phoenicia, which is the home of Sweet Sue's restaurant, which is famous for its pancakes. Jeff nodded sagely at the mention of nearby pancakes, as men like us are wont to do. Then he reminded me that he'd only agreed to this trip because "you promised it would be different this time." Then he sat down to work over his bag of barbecue potato chips. We arrived at the top of the Giant Ledge at 6 p.m., and after thrashing through the woods cursing each other for not having found a good spot to pitch our tent, and after Jeff reminded me how I had brought only avocados and cheese on the Trip of Doom 12 years earlier and he sure hoped I had planned our meals better this time, and after I asked

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if he didn't think he might be doing himself a favor by rehabbing his supposedly injured ankle, rather than babying it, we came to a clearing. In it was a fire ring, with wood that previous campers had left and what looked like a flat, grassy plot for the tent and a tree where food might be hung.

Except for the swarms of ravenous black flies, it was ideal. I flung down my pack, reached into the top flap, then exclaimed, "Tell me, Yogi,

who's the Eagle Scout now!?" And I whipped out two black mesh mosquito-netting face-gear contraptions that I, in a fit of prescient genius, had purchased at a fancy camping store.

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After dinner (avocado-and-cheese sandwiches and chocolate bars), we relaxed by the fire and looked out at the dimming world through mosquito netting.

"This is the life, huh, Yoge?" I said.

"You didn't tell me we'd have to climb so much," he replied, sullenly crunching on his chips.

"I already said I didn't know it would be so steep. And, come on, aren't you happy I brought the mosquito nets?"

Silence, except for some bird twittering and fire crackling and other melodious day-is-done-gone-the-sun-beginning-of-evening sounds that you'd think would warm the soul of any Eagle Scout.

"Come on, Yogi," I said. "You have to admit, this is incredibly nice."

"If you like nature, I guess it is," he grunted.

We sat in silence for a while, and stared at the flames, and listened to the crackle of the wood.

"Let's burn it all," Yogi said.

"Huh?" I said.

"Let's burn all of our wood. Let's make a bonfire."

"But if we burn all the wood now, then we won't have fire for tomorrow night."

"The forecast said it's going to rain tomorrow anyway, and if it rains, we're not going to want to stick around, so who cares?"

I remembered our last trip, when Jeff had suggested the same thing on the first night, and I had resentfully complied, and we had a raging fire, then no wood for two days. I didn't want to run out of wood. On the other hand, if it rained tomorrow, I could only imagine the barbecue-potato-chip-fueled bitching and moaning I'd have to endure.

Could we at that point in our journey of healing have gathered more wood? Sure, and we also could have been young, slim, and optimistic, regular and enthusiastic fixtures at the soup kitchens and homeless shelters in our respective neighborhoods, lending a friendly hand to the people who needed it most, bestowing heartfelt and dazzling smiles designed to lift the spirits of those whose spirits were low. But we weren't those people. There would be no wood gathering at the moment.

We fed the fire. We listened to the crackling. We munched on chocolate and pineapple, and discussed life and serial killers and women and the greatest war movies of all time and who would win in an Ultimate Fighting match between Genghis Khan and Attila the Hun, and then we argued about whether it was pronounced Genghis with a hard G or a soft G, and then we talked for a little while about who was hotter, Ginger or Mary Ann, and then we debated the appeal of thin- versus thick-crust pizza, and then we brushed our teeth and climbed into the tent, where I discovered the root, and Jeff complained that I had the good side, and then we drifted to sleep, and woke to more flies and rumbling clouds, and things were looking bad—until I got on the Backpacker's

Stool. And then things were looking good, and then I made the coffee and granola, and then things were looking great as they can only on a backpacking trip, and I was filled with the joy of the wild and our friendship was finally almost fully healed, and then Yogi spilled granola on me and I wanted to kill him but instead I laid down in the tent and wondered how long it would take to hike out, and what time Sweet Sue's closed.

Half an hour later, a miracle.

"Hey," Jeff yelled. "I just did the dishes. Let's go for a hike."

"What are you talking about," I yelled back. "It's raining. It's going to rain all day." I was so tired. I couldn't even summon the energy to unzip the tent and walk to the food bag to sneak one of my secret Pop-Tarts. What I didn't say but what I thought was, "If I get out of this tent, the only place I'm hiking is straight toward pancakes."

"Nah," Jeff said. "It's letting up. Besides, we've got to do something today. We might as well hike."

"I'm tired," I said. "I don't want to risk hypothermia."

"Quit moping," Yogi said. "You're like Achilles sulking in the tent."

Was it Yogi's knowledge of Greek mythology that explained the multiple Pulitzers? Did he feel guilty for spilling granola and coffee on me? Had he, while I was sulking, gotten into his stash of barbecue potato chips and been sent swooning into soporific bliss, much as a grouchy bear turns happy and docile after getting into a dumpster and eating its fill of rotten fish? I decided that these were unanswerable questions. So I got out of the tent, packed lunch (avocado-and-cheese sandwiches and chocolate), and we started tromping north, toward Panther Mountain.

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It was a pleasant walk, except for Jeff's constant belching, which I told him was disgusting and he told me was a sign of health and I told him was probably a result of the five pounds of barbecue potato chips he'd swallowed.

"Yeah," he said, as we paused to admire the view of fog rising over green hills, toward more green hills and the distant horizon. "My wife never would have let me buy those."

"What do you mean?" I said. "How would she have stopped you?"

"She would have seen me grab them in the grocery store, and she would have looked at me and she would have said, 'You are *not* buying those. Put those back.'"



I turned to look at him. Through the double layer of mosquito netting, it was difficult to ascertain sincerity, but I was pretty sure he was telling me something important.

"So that's how you lost all that weight?"

"Of course it is," he said. "She's my regulator."

"So every time you come to New York, we go out to eat pizza and ice cream and we see war movies and go to steak houses, and you go back home and you have a regulator and I keep spinning out of control. And now I have gout and you're kind of slim? That's not fair!"

"Hey, I'm not the one going out with a different little chippy every few months," Jeff said.

"I need a woman who's a regulator," I said.

"Of course you do," Jeff said. "We all do. It's the natural way."

"I need to find a woman who's a regulator," I said.

"They're all regulators," Jeff said.

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We hiked some more, and we stopped for lunch, and I apologized for telling Jeff to man up 12 years ago, and he apologized for calling some of my former girlfriends chippies, and he admitted that he actually kind of liked

Matt Segal, British Columbia backcountry, Canada. Orbit lantern.
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avocado-and-cheese sandwiches, and then we grunted and cursed and lugged our middle-aged bodies upward as we discussed Hemingway and Fitzgerald and theorized about why women weren't as constitutionally honest, or as brave, or as spiritually inclined as men, and just then a trio of women came around a bend from the direction of our campsite and passed us, heading uphill.

We both said hello and the women said hello back, and when they had marched away toward Panther Mountain, Jeff and I looked at each other.

"I wonder if they heard us," I said.

We exchanged meaningful looks through our mosquito netting.

"They move like panthers," Jeff said.

"What's wrong with us?" I said.

When we returned to our campsite (we stopped halfway to Panther Mountain; I was kind of hungry but, more important, didn't want to risk our newly healed and still fragile friendship), Jeff said he was exhausted and needed to rest, so I said sure, go ahead and rest. I was grateful to him for getting me out of my funk and onto the trail earlier, and grateful to him for accompanying me here, and for doing the dishes and giving me the rainpants, and grateful to him for telling me the secret of women and regulators and health. So I decided I would man up and gather some firewood (we had indeed burnt our entire supply the night before). After arranging the pile of new wood under the tarp, along with the Backpacker's Stool and the French press and all of our dry clothes and the water filter and iodine pills (when it comes to waterborne gastrointestinal illness, I'm a big believer in redundancy), I snuck a secret Frosted Blueberry Pop-Tart. At my first bite, I had a distinct and intense feeling of not only happiness, but a sense that this was *pure* happiness, that I had never in my life been happier, that my friend Jeff was resting in the tent, and that I had just manned up and gathered a bunch of firewood and arranged our stuff underneath the extra tarp that I had the foresight to pack in, along with extra rope, and that I'd arranged a rope-and-pulley system that created our little shelter, that all my needs—shelter, food, human companionship—were at the moment taken care of, that all the needs I thought were so pressing—fame, fortune, a girlfriend, a better apartment—weren't so pressing at all, and that now that I understood the secret links between women and health and regulators and appetite, I might be able to get rid of the elephant-strength tranquilizers and be cured of gout. Everything would be okay.

It was late afternoon, about 3:30, when I had this epiphany. I was wearing my mosquito netting, and rain pants and a raincoat with my sweater underneath, and the woods were quiet. I decided I would take a little rest myself.

Five minutes later, we heard the rain. And then the wind. And then the thunder. We could see flashes of lightning through the tent walls. We were warm, and safe, and now we both knew the secret to life, and I remembered how much I loved being in a tent in a rainstorm. I fell asleep to thunder

and rain, and when I woke, it was quiet, and still light, and I knew I had just had the best hour-and-a-half nap of my life.

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We climbed out of the tent. Everything under the tarp was soaked, including the formerly dry clothes and all of the wood. (Note to self: Next time, construct a lean-to-type arrangement.) We tore the pages we had read from our books, and built a pyramid of small kindling over it.

"We'll have dinner, and then in a couple of hours we'll see if we can start a fire," I said.

"Let's light it now," Jeff said.

"Why? So we can have a fire for two hours of daylight?"

"C'mon. I want a fire now. It'll take our minds off of how you got everything soaked."

"Hey, I manned up while you passed out in the tent."

"I admire you for your effort. You failed completely, but you saw the storm coming and you made a great effort and that's what counts."

"Oh, like you made a great effort to give me the rain pants this morning but you failed and soaked me in granola?"

"Stop blaming me for the spilled granola."

"Look, Yogi, I'm not going to let your fire greed destroy us. We're not building a fire till it gets dark."

We had dinner (avocado-and-cheese sandwiches and chocolate; I decided not to cook the dried beef stroganoff I'd packed because it seemed too labor intensive and I'd already manned up enough this day), and discussed the Rocky movies, and mutual friends, and the high points of the trip so far (Jeff liked the view of rising fog on our hike; I still marveled at the sublimity of my Pop-Tart moment, though I couldn't admit the existence of the secret treats, so I said something about the gentle whisper of the wind). Then we tried to get a fire started, and even though we demonstrated great effort, failed miserably, even after we tore up a lot of book pages and I tried to soak them in butane from my lighter.

We turned in early on our second night in the wilderness, and we both slept well, and in the morning we packed up, and we left the wood for the lucky campers who would find this campsite next, and we skipped breakfast and hiked down the 1.5 miles to our car, and then we drove to Sweet Sue's, where we each had a plate of blueberry-banana pancakes with real maple syrup, and it was good. It was very, very good. It was the best plate of blueberry-banana pancakes I had ever eaten in my life.

I thought of how lucky we were, and of how I would brag to my friends about how I had hiked with Jeff into the wilderness to repair our already strong, now incredibly strong bond, and how doing so had made even a humble Pop-Tart into something magical. I knew that within hours—if not minutes—I would start worrying about things like deadlines and traffic and why I hadn't yet managed to snare an

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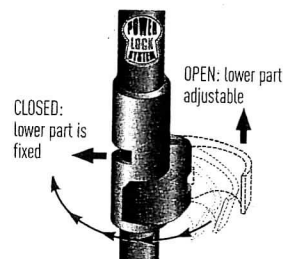


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attractive, big-hearted regulator. But if there's one thing a couple of nights in the backcountry will teach a man (other than the necessity and absolute joy of manning up), it's this: You can regret the past and worry about the future all you want, but there's really only now. Right now. Right now, bug-bitten and slightly damp and tired and smelling of rain and a fire from two nights ago, and sitting with your good friend Yogi at Sweet Sue's, off the Giant Ledge, but still filled with memories of it. Still somehow on the Giant Ledge forever, carrying around a great big chunk of the Giant Ledge for the rest of my days on earth.

"This is living, Yogi," I said to my friend as I swallowed a forkful of blueberry-banana pancakes.

"This *is* living," my friend replied with great but manfully restrained emotion. Then Yogi looked at me. There was something in his eyes. It was peace, and it wasn't just the peace of the satiated-bear-who-just-ate-at-the-garbage-dump. I was positive about this. It was something more profound. Yogi had also felt the mystery and the magic of the Giant Ledge, and he too was carrying around a big chunk of the Ledge and he would carry it until his dying day and it would not be heavy. It would not be a burden. It would be a blessing. That's what I was seeing in his eyes.

I was so moved that I almost stopped eating my blueberry-banana pancakes. ☘

Writer at large Steve Friedman's third book, The Agony of Victory, will be available in paperback in November. He is still looking for a regulator.

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