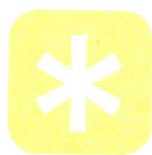




My F*cking Family!



Backpacking with relatives can present emotional challenges, particularly for the philosophically inclined camper. I am such a camper, and I encountered some dif-

ficult moments on a recent trip into the backcountry. During the lightning storm on the way in, for example, when I found myself shivering and huddling under a tree while allegedly loving family members chortled at my distress; at 3 a.m. on our first night, at which point I woke with a splitting headache, upset stomach, and a glum suspicion that my older brother had intentionally poisoned me with giardia-infested hot chocolate; the slightly awkward instant earlier, during the otherwise peaceful and happy circle around the campfire, when—after I had recounted to my niece and nephews how Comanches had perfected torture to an art form in this very country, *maybe even at this very campsite*, and how that particular tribe of Native Americans could strip off a man's skin, layer by layer,

Camping is known to bring loved ones closer together, but what happens when your relations include a treacherous sister, murderous brother, and their savage offspring? **Steve Friedman** leads his clan into the Rockies to resolve five decades' worth of sibling rivalry and simmering resentment.

vein by vein, until all that was left were eyeballs and nerve endings—my younger sister hollered from her tent to knock it off and if the kids had nightmares, she was throwing them into my tent and what the hell was wrong with me, anyway?

Those were challenging experiences by the standards of any camper, even those not as philosophically inclined as me. But they weren't as challenging as the moments when I was betrayed by the two people I *thought* I could depend on.

First, the terrible and urgent scream from thigh level.

"*You promised us s'mores!*"

It was Iris, my seven-year-old niece, my sister's child. Iris stands 3 foot 9 inches, weighs 44 pounds, has oceanic blue eyes, hair so blonde it's almost white, and a sparkling, toothy smile that makes strangers gasp with reflexive delight. She has freckles and a pug nose, too. She has a face that compels people to pinch it and liken it to an angel's. If only they knew.

"I know, Iris," I said, "but Uncle Stevie needs some time to get settled and he's not sure where the marshmallows are..."

"You! Promised! S'mores!!!" she shrieked again. It was a heinous sound, a primitive howl of rage and pure animal need.

"Please, Iris," I said. "Uncle Stevie also promised relaxing, carefree family fun. I need your help. Have a little patience. You know how your mommy always says patience is something that will make you happier when you grow up, if you had more of it. Well, now is a good time to practice and..."

"*S'mores! S'mores! S'mores!*"

I rubbed my temples.

"Just give her a piece of chocolate, Uncle Stevie. She's hungry and tired. And this is how she gets."

The soothing voice belonged to Isaac, Iris's 10-year-old brother, also towheaded, also blue-eyed. But Isaac is calm where Iris is stormy, quiet where she's loud, steady where she is occasionally psychotic and possibly (though the family hopes not) criminally insane. I have been cultivating Isaac's loyalty since he was a toddler, when I had taught him to say "Mommy doesn't need to know we had ice cream for lunch" and "Bedtime is stupid." Isaac had been a key ally in my efforts to organize the first Friedman backpacking trip.

I offered Iris a bar of chocolate, which she tore from my grasp and fell upon, much as a blonde, blue-eyed, pug-nosed hyena might fall upon the tender and defenseless neck flesh of a hapless gazelle. She gnashed and tore and chewed. The wind picked up. The temperature dropped.

"Uncle Stevie," Isaac said. He would turn 11 the next morning. It was one reason we'd all gathered for this trip (there were other, darker reasons, too, and I'll get to those in a minute).

"Yes, I-dog?"

And then, the second, even more injurious betrayal. A very challenging moment for me.

"Uncle Stevie," Isaac repeated, "this trip really sucks."



THINGS WOULD BE DIFFERENT IF I HAD GOTTEN MY way, if we had been camping at one of south-western Colorado's Ice Lakes, which sit in a glacial basin. We would have left a day earlier, as I had planned,

ahead of the storm. I might not have misplaced the marshmallows. The kids would not have turned on me. But, of course, I hadn't gotten my way. With this group, I—the middle child—had never gotten my way. My older brother got his way for many years, because he was bigger. So it didn't matter that I preferred suburban St. Louis's Velvet Freeze ice cream, which served a simple but proud vanilla, over Baskin Robbins, which specialized in flavors like Bubble Gum and Apple Pie that even a five-year-old could tell were cheap, whorish abominations; or that given my druthers (which I wasn't), I would have rather raked the leaves than helped our father push the lawn mower. But no! I was the little brother, so when it came to ice cream emporiums and chores, my big brother, Don, got to decide. (Is it a coincidence that he grew up to marry, bear a son, and, as CEO, command a large financial services corporation while I have hopped, philosophically, from writing gig to writing gig and girlfriend to girlfriend? I think not.)

Then, just as I was ready to start asserting my will and needs, when I was six years old and my brother was eight, my little sister was born, and suddenly "the baby" had to be catered to. That left me, the middle one. The comic relief. The diplomat. *The forgotten child*. (There was a brief, embarrassing period in my ostensibly adult life when I haunted the self-help aisles of bookstores to better understand my underemployment and general malaise; some of the phrases I learned have stayed with me.)

I'm 54 now, marshmallow-less, chilly, induced to despair by a savage seven-year-old and her once-dependable brother. I'm having a challenging moment. The trip is not turning out quite as I had planned.



"FAMILY RESENTMENTS WILL DRIFT AWAY LIKE dandelion seeds on the summer wind," I had emailed my siblings last spring, lobbying for a family backpacking trip. "Ancient enmities will melt like the morning dew in a sun-kissed glade."

"Whatever," my sister had emailed back. "But you had better not scare the kids with your stupid ghost stories." (Isaac, I learned later, had crept into the living room after my last Colorado visit—at midnight, wide-eyed, refusing to return to his bedroom. Under interrogation, Isaac admitted that he was afraid that The Fingernail Mutant was going to get him and that yeah, Uncle Stevie had told him about the monster.)

"You write pretty," my brother had replied, "but that doesn't mean you're not insane. No one has forgotten the giant ham you bought Grandpa for Hanukkah."

Why did my sister not trust me? Why couldn't children keep secrets? Why was my brother forever bringing up painful episodes from the past? Also, for the record, at the time of the Hanukkah Ham, I had been seeking a better understanding of my place in the world. I had been seeking to understand other holiday traditions and to bridge generational gaps. I had been seeking to expand my family's consciousness, and while it's true that I had also been smoking lots of marijuana, my shrink assures me that I have always been a seeker, and that I should

honor that part of my emotional life, because it is sacred.

I had promised my sister—again—that I would not mention The Fingernail Mutant or stolen livers. I told my brother that I would not steal the chocolate when everyone else was sleeping, as I'd been accused of doing on previous family gatherings. Why couldn't my relatives let go of the past?

What I didn't say but what I thought was that a bonding experience together under the stars might help us through the transitional phases we had recently found ourselves in—my brother suffering from acid reflux and lower-back pain brought on, I felt, by overwork, impending global economic apocalypse, and the imminent departure of his only son, Eddie, to college; my sister, a single mother of two, living with her kids and her boyfriend, the couple pondering the attractions and perils of marriage; and I, girlfriendless, underemployed, overweight, battling gout, and wondering if lying about my age by approximately 13 years in my online dating profile was “pathetic and sick,” as a disturbed, angry, and distressingly hostile woman whose name I won't mention suggested, or merely cagey and forward-looking marketing. It wasn't just the grown-ups whom I was thinking of helping. The trip would be good for the youngsters, too. It would help with the I-dog's capacious sense of awe and curiosity regarding the natural world. Camping out would be good for Eddie, who earns straight As, throws the javelin, plays guitar, paints, is president of his school, and generally acts like the kind of boy who will never find himself shuffling along self-help book aisles. I thought some pine-scented, campfire-smoked wisdom from Uncle Stevie might help prepare Eddie for his freshman year of college.

But Iris? Would a backpacking trip help Iris? Iris is somewhat of a mystery. On one hand, she is already fairly hardy. When she was five, in the dead of a frigid mountain winter, she spent the better part of three months in a grass skirt and a coconut bra and flip-flops. A year earlier, when she was four, she had been informed by her older brother during

I told my brother that I would not steal the chocolate when everyone else was sleeping, as I'd been accused of doing on previous family gatherings. Why couldn't my relatives let go of the past?

lunchtime that “Hey, Irie, you know where that hamburger comes from? It comes from a cow. That's right, you're eating a dead cow right now. Ha ha. Moo. Ha ha.”

“You're stupid,” Iris had said, calm as a giant toad, then she returned to her lunch, working over her burger, tearing at it as the wild African spotted dog tears at the baby wildebeest.

“Mmmmm,” she said, smacking her lips, “cow meat!”

Recently, she has adopted some new favorite phrases. One is “Seriously!” The other is “I'm very angry!” Uttered together, the words have made adults weep. They are uttered together now, after my sister has told me to shut up about the Comanches, after Isaac has turned on me, after the blue-eyed mountain beast has swallowed an entire chocolate bar, considered her surroundings, and delivered her *crie d'estomac*.

“S'mores!” the tiny omnivore howls. “I'm very angry! Seriously!”



A MONTH BEFORE THE TRIP, I TELEPHONE MY SISTER to get her in line with my plans for camping above treeline.

“Mr. Comfort is going to push for something wimpy,” I tell her. Mr. Comfort is my brother's nickname, which he earned over the years by, whenever backpacking, lugging two pillows, fresh tomatoes, hammocks, a reclining chair, one or two hardback books, salt and pepper shakers, and an extra-long, inflatable air mattress. Mr. Comfort is a complicated man. In his professional life, he is demanding and hyper-focused. But he also finds a way to take a short nap every afternoon, no matter his location or social obligations, or the value of the stock market. He is implacable about this, but never overly confrontational. He is like a combination of Rupert Murdoch, Gandhi, and Yoda—but lazier. Lately, he has been lobbying for hiking trips on which no hiking actually takes place, on horses. “Or at least some llamas that could carry our stuff.”

“And Mr. Comfort is going to want to camp for only one night. So you have to promise to stick with me on the plans, OK? Two nights, Ice Lakes Basin. No horses or anything.”

“I'll back you, but no 'I Want My Liver' story for the kids.”

“That's not just a story; it's a parable. It's a powerful narrative and...”

“No promise, no deal.”

Mr. Comfort and Eddie (Mrs. Comfort stays home) and I all arrive at my sister's in Durango, Colorado, on a Monday afternoon in early August. Over dinner, I review the plans for the next day. I extol the wonders of the Ice Lakes Basin, the lunar splendor of the tundra-y landscape, its spongy beauty and stark, annihilating isolation.

“I can hike up any mountain!” screams Iris, who has just finished assaulting a brick-sized piece of lasagna. “I'm like a mountain goat! Seriously!”

After dinner, while everyone else drives to a hot springs for a prehike soak, I recline on the couch to read more about Ice Lakes, which I have never technically visited. When the group returns, I encourage everyone to get a good night's sleep, because we have an adventurous three days ahead.

“Um, Steve,” my brother says, “actually, we're not going in

tomorrow. And we're not going to Ice Berg Lake..."

"Ice Lakes Basin. Not Ice Berg Lake! *Ice Lakes Basin!*"

"Yeah, whatever. We're going to hike to Highland Mary Lake and stay one night. It's six not-too-steep miles, and it's got some nice, hilly campsites."

"What?" I glare at my sister, who won't meet my eyes.

"It was her idea," my brother says. He has never shied from delivering unpleasant truths.

"Iris doesn't want to go tomorrow," my sister says. "She's been on the go for the past two weeks, and I don't want to fight with her in the morning."

"She's a seven-year-old!" is what I want to say. "Make her go!" is what I want to say. "That's what mothers do. They make their kids do things! You think I wanted to walk to school on rainy days when the worms were crawling all over the sidewalks? You think I wanted to eat mom's tuna casserole just because you liked it, or mow the lawn, because Don was hogging

the rake? You think I liked that disgusting bubble gum swill they called ice cream at Baskin Robbins? You think I liked it when mom brought you in for my first-grade show-and-tell, when I told her very clearly that I really would have rather presented the giant, dead caterpillar I had found in the backyard? You think I liked that?"

But I say none of it. I think it, though, I think it hard.

"So we're only going for one night?" I ask. "And we're camping in the woods?"

What I mean is, "So the middle child gets screwed again? So number two son is ignored one more time, in a lifetime of getting ignored? So good old Uncle Stevie takes another one for the fucking team?"

"I suspected you would be the one to turn," I say to Mr. Comfort the next day, as we load up on trail mix, graham crackers, and chocolate at a local grocery store. "I didn't think our sister was going to stab me in the back."

"Yeah, well," Mr. Comfort says. (Over-sharing is not one of my brother's sins.

When our mother asked what kind of cake he was going to serve at his 50th birthday party, he replied, "Why do you want to know?" When, a few years ago, at my shrink's urging, I delivered a 10-minute soliloquy over the telephone to Mr. Comfort, which I had written out in advance, regarding the decades of jealousy, resentment, admiration, and love I had felt for him, and admitted that sometimes I hadn't expressed those feelings in a way that demonstrated ownership for my actions, and after I had vowed to be more emotionally transparent and kind as we moved into middle age, he replied, "So noted.")

"I can't believe she lets Iris hold her emotionally hostage," I tell my brother.

"Mmmm-hmm," Mr. Comfort replies.

"Children want boundaries," I say, tossing a bag of chips into the cart, then steering toward the dairy section, where I plan to get some whipped cream, in case anyone needs a hot fudge sundae to build strength on the night before we hike in. "They *need* boundaries."

"Uh-huh."



1-2 person stove system

80% fuel efficient

2.5 minute boil time for 1.0 Liter

360° integrated windscreen

Bowl & dish included and nest compactly

Colander / strainer lid

Jon Kampen

FAST! EASY!

Traveling light and fast never was so easy. With the Primus EtaPackLite™, you have a compact, fuel-efficient stove that comes with everything you need. Arrive in camp, set up your Primus, and in minutes you have hot water and a hot meal. Don't waste your time fiddling with a finicky stove when the reason you are out is to enjoy the scenery, travel the trails, and get away from it all.



BRUNTON OUTDOOR GROUP 307-857-4700 • www.bruntongroup.com

"You know," I say, "I was talking to my shrink last week about the plight of the forgotten child and..."

"Hey, Steve," my brother says, "if you're planning to sneak the chocolate, why don't you just buy a few extra bars this time? Save some drama."



THE TRAILHEAD IS A HAPPY place, filled with the promise of adventure and the soothing properties of nature. I am filled with optimism, as I usually am at trailheads. I'm so filled with optimism that I mention, yet again, how this would be a beautiful day for a real hike—to a glacial basin—and I reflect on the spongy beauty of the tundra we will not be climbing to.

"Give it a rest," my sister says.

"It's sad that your mom has no sense of adventure," I say to Isaac, who I still think of as my ally, even though he squealed about The Fingernail Mutant. I consider forgiveness and generosity of spirit to be two of my greatest strengths.

"You mean the kind of adventure

sense that inspired the Hanukkah Ham?" Mr. Comfort asks.

"Is that like fancy holiday pig meat?" Iris wants to know.

"Your Uncle Stevie is silly sometimes," my sister says to her daughter.

"I'm a *seeker*," I say. "Seekers *seek*. When will everyone understand that?"

"How about seeking your backpack and putting it on," my sister says. "I want to get in before dark. And it looks like it might rain."

Mr. Comfort triple-checks to make sure all the chocolate bars are accounted for, and then my sister's boyfriend announces that it's time to go.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" I ask.

"What," my sister says, "do you want to complain some more?"

"Don't you think we need to agree on our trail names?"

"Why do we have to have trail names?" Isaac asks.

"We have to have trail names because of safety concerns, mostly," I explain. "Say we're up at our Highland

Mary campsite, which is dangerous to start with because of the hidden perils lurking everywhere in the surrounding forest, unlike at a campsite in a glacial basin, where you can see everything. Then a bear, or a mountain lion, or a plague-carrying marmot attacks, and someone cries for help. And say, for example, I-dog, it's you, so you yell, 'Hey, Steve!' or 'Mom!'"

"Yeah?" Isaac asks. Attacks by wild animals continue to captivate him. I love my young nephew and our sacred teaching moments. Sometimes I suspect he might be a seeker, too.

"Well, who knows if there might be other campsites near where we are, and maybe there will be someone named Steve there, and another mom, and none of the adults will be absolutely positive if it's he or she who is being screamed to, or someone else, and that split second hesitation could spell the difference between life and death."

"And it would not be fun to find yourself between the gaping jaws of a grizzly!" says Eddie, who has already

DOES TOILET PAPER GROW ON TREES?

NOT OURS

Most big tissue brands are made by cutting down more trees, which destroys natural habitats. Our small company's products are made from paper that you recycle at home or office - paper like junk mail or printer overruns. Thanks for making a real difference!

Join the Marcal® Movement and
Help Us Save 1,000,000 Trees
Visit marcalsmallsteps.com to learn more.
You can also find us on  



benefited from some sacred teaching moments. "Not fun at all!"

"Seriously!" Iris says.

"That makes sense," Isaac says. "It really does. Mom, I think Uncle Stevie is right on this."

"Great," my sister snarls. "Friggin' awesome. Trail names. OK, let's have 'em. Give us our goddamn trail names."

Iris is, of course, Jaws. Mr. Comfort, at Isaac's insistence, will henceforth be known as Dr. Comfort "because it sounds cooler." My sister's boyfriend, a weirdly calm and sweet-natured guy, is a captain of the Durango Fire Department, and hyper-efficient with power tools. He is The Captain, obviously.

Eddie, at Isaac's behest, will be addressed as Hulk because his forearms are the approximate size of well-fed anacondas. I suggest The Professor for Isaac, but he says he'd rather be Ice, "because it sounds cooler." I ignore my sister's proffering of "Piggy," "Infant," and "SlowMo," and accept Ice's suggestion: Java Junkie. (In efforts to self-medicate my inclination to stillness and

over-philosophizing, I recently upped my caffeine intake to nine cups a day.)

"What's mom's trail name?" Jaws asks.

"I think we'll call your mom Quisling," I say.

"Quis what?" Ice asks.

"Well, children," I tell them, as the three of us share another sacred teaching moment and, at my urging, a giant bar of milk chocolate. "A long time ago, when the Nazis were going to invade Norway, one of the head Norwegians kept promising all the nice people there that he would fight the Nazis, and the Norwegians believed him, because they were nice, and they trusted people when they made promises, because that's what nice, kind, decent people do, but in secret the head Norwegian, whose name was Quisling, was plotting to give away the country to the Nazis, who were really, really bad. So when someone promises something, like your mom promised Uncle Stevie, but then betrays the person..."

"Fine," my sister snaps. "I'm friggin' Quisling. Now can we please get going,

because I'd like to have our camp set up before dark. And I see clouds."

At a mile and a half, I feel drizzle. I had packed a lightweight water-resistant jacket rather than a heavier waterproof one because, as I explained to Isaac during a sacred teaching moment, "An experienced camper has to make decisions every second, and it's more important to travel light than to burden oneself, especially considering that we're not traveling to monsoon country." After two miles, the drizzle has turned to a steady downpour. Then the downpour turns to hail, with thunder.

Then I, who happen to be about 20 yards ahead of everyone, reflecting on the hard and lonely path of the seeker, am almost struck by a jagged bolt of lightning. It's later alleged by some in the group that I jumped in the air and turned 180 degrees in one move. I might have screamed, too. I scurry back to the group. To my great displeasure, the children are laughing.

"You jumped really high," Jaws says.

We gather under a tree and discuss

Now, Another Great Way To Fight Poison Plant Itch



◀ For cleaning

You'll never know when a stroll in the outdoors will expose you to poison ivy or other problem plants... with Ivarest, you can always be prepared. Ivarest Poison Ivy Cleansing Foam allows you to take action before the rash emerges, if you think you've come in contact with poisonous plants. Its gentle foam is easy to use without scrubbing (which could spread the rash). If a reaction has already begun, its medicated, cooling formula cleans effectively and feels great.

OR for treating ▶

Ivarest Medicated Cream has a double-relief formula (a maximum-strength antihistamine plus an active analgesic) - to help stop the reaction and soothe the itch. Plus, calamine dries the rash.

Poison Ivy • Oak & Sumac • Insect Bites • Minor Skin Irritations



Andrew Burr

Pads & Tents

Quality Sleeping Bags,

The Mother of Comfort!
877.554.8975
www.bigagnes.com

whether that's such a good idea in a lightning storm. But at least we're protected from the downpour, so we stand, huddled into a tight group, not talking, watching the lightning, listening to the thunder. It's cold, and at least one of us is soaked. We crouch so closely together that we're touching.

When the rain stops, we resume our trek, ending up an hour later at the third of the Highland Mary Lakes, a half-mile-long, 300-yard-wide smear of shimmering blue. Ice and Hulk pitch their tent in a protected spot with good views of the lake, Quisling and the Captain claim an area a little closer to the rocky shore, and I suggest to my brother that we spread our gear on a nearby hilltop, because it seems the safest spot around.

"Isn't this where lightning will most likely strike?" Dr. Comfort asks.

I explain to him that we'll be able to see any approaching predators, that camping is all about tradeoffs and risk-assessment. The CEO grunts. He's even quieter than usual. I know that he's worked the last 10 weekends, and that his acid reflux and back pain have been worsening, and that the college applications piling up on the dining room table provide bittersweet reminders that Eddie will soon be leaving home. I suggest to Dr. Comfort that he might be going through an important transitional phase in his life, and perhaps if he opened up a bit about his feelings, he would feel better. He grunts again.

I look upward at what are now angry, swollen clouds. I feel my eyes moisten. I identify with the obese clouds. (My nickname as a toddler was "butterball.")

The dark clouds continue to gather.



AFTER OUR TENTS ARE SET up, hammocks situated, a kitchen area built, and general campsite preparation taken care of, the rain returns, so we all retire to our tents. While Dr. Comfort sleeps, I listen to the tapping of rain. A few minutes after the tapping stops, Isaac opens the tent zipper and sticks his head in.

"Java Junkie?" he says.

"Yes, Ice."

"I think I heard a feral dog pack down by the lake. I think they might be

getting ready to attack the camp!"

And so it comes to pass that Ice and I "secure the perimeter," which involves peering toward the lake and throwing rocks at bushes and, after making Ice promise not to tell, splitting a chocolate bar I steal from the group food bag. After that we stroll down to the lake's edge, where we sit on a slab, stare into the crepuscular gloom, and skip rocks.

"Junkie," my nephew asks, between throws, "do all criminals smoke?"

"I don't think so."

"In the movies, they seem to."

"Good point, Ice. Maybe later, we'll try to make a list of history's worst criminals who didn't smoke. I think Attila the Hun didn't smoke, for example. And Jack the Ripper."

"Oh, yeah, I remember when you told me about him."

"And Hitler. Don't forget Hitler."

"Cool," he says. Then, "Junkie?"

"Yes, Ice."

"What are the approximate chances an asteroid will hit our campsite tonight?" I skip a rock. I regard my philosophizing nephew. My fellow seeker.

I tell him I consulted some cosmological websites and took some sextant readings from New York City while I was planning the trip, and that we're definitely safe here for the next day or so, and then we skip some more rocks.

We throw stones in silence for a while, and an hour later, the rain stops, and we gather for dinner. Everyone but Quisling, who, the Captain informs us, is not feeling well. She's suffering from a headache and upset stomach.

The Captain heads out over the soaked landscape on a doomed mission to gather wood, and Dr. Comfort starts to work on dinner. That leaves the children and me. I glance toward the tent, estimate the distance, and decide Quisling is likely out of earshot.

"Now, kids, you need to be really quiet, and promise not to tell Mommy the secrets I'm going to tell you tonight. Do you know which tribe of Indians was renowned for making torture an art form, for how the tribe's warriors could strip a man's flesh until all that was left were nerve endings and eyeballs?"

"I think they're called Native Americans, Stevie," Ice says.

"His name is Java Junkie!" Jaws says. "And you're stupid! And I am very angry. Very Angry!"

"Both of you are right," I say. "They are called Native Americans, and because we're in the wilderness, it's better to stick with our trail names."

Then I tell them the terrible secrets of the mighty Comanches, and my sister threatens to throw the kids in my tent if they have nightmares, and I tell the kids that Mom is a little cranky sometimes.

"Dinner!" Dr. Comfort yells, and after Jaws runs to her mother's tent (where she will also be sleeping), and reports that Quisling will not be getting out of the tent anytime soon, the rest of us gather to eat Dr. Comfort's noodles with salami. Then Dr. Comfort boils water for hot chocolate and distributes it to the kids. I go off in search of s'mores ingredients, and after conducting my first futile hunt for marshmallows, I tell Dr. Comfort that I would like some hot chocolate, too, so he prepares me a cup. Only after I take a gulp do I notice that the water he has used for my hot chocolate is heating, but not bubbling.

"Has this water boiled?" I ask.

"I think so," Dr. Comfort says.

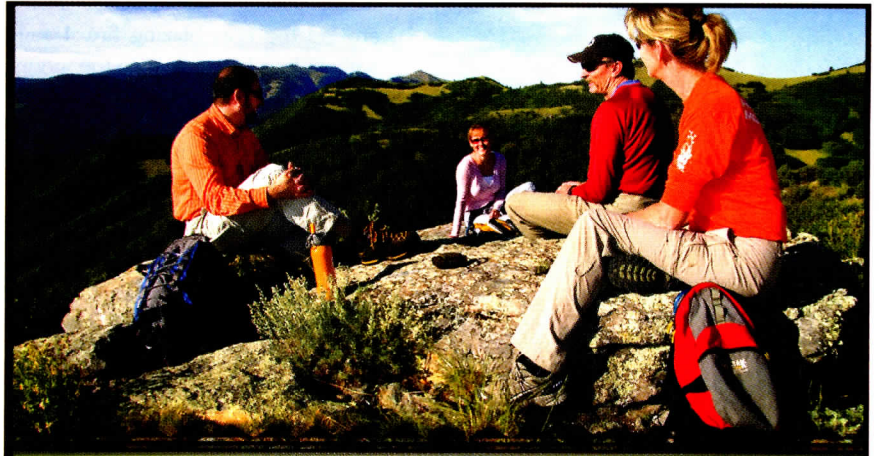
I take a seat and spend a few moments envisioning the giardia and other invisible but virulent bugs currently backstroking through my digestive system. Then I notice the moonlight is no longer so light. Clouds are massing over our campsite again. The Captain returns with a huge armful of wood, which should make me feel grateful, but instead sparks envy and anger that he found wood in this misty hell.

I seek. I seek hard. Why do I so seldom find?

My hands are shaking and I notice myself stumbling and gasping more than usual. Altitude? The cold? Jet lag? Or the fastest case of water poisoning ever? I still can't remember where I stuck the marshmallows. Will the kids notice if we have marshmallow-less dessert? Maybe the kids won't remem...

"I WANT S'MORES!" Jaws screams. "YOU PROMISED S'MORES!!!"

Finally, after Jaws feeds on some chocolate, and screams some more, and I find the marshmallows, we all settle



JOIN THE SMILE HIGH CLUB.

With over a million acres of wilderness and national forest, and a mix of one hundred miles of high desert/cool-pine mountain trails to 9,000 ft., Ruidoso is a rich destination for backpacking, mountain biking, fishing and horseback riding. Hike the historic landscape of Billy the Kid and the Mescalero Apache.

CASINOS • SKIING
GOLF • HERITAGE
OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

Ruidoso

BILLY THE KID COUNTRY, LINCOLN COUNTY, NEW MEXICO

www.ruidosoattractions.com • 1-877-784-3676

CAMP MOR

OUTFITTING YOUR DREAMS

WWW.CAMP MOR.COM
FOR OUR FREE CATALOG CALL
1.800.CAMP MOR (800.226.7667)
OR WRITE US AT: PO BOX 680-6BP
MAHWAH, NJ 07430



Hike like an Egyptian

When you adventure on the frontier of the mind, body and spirit, it's a good idea to have a reliable guide. Adventure.Travel — the hub of physical, cultural and nature-based adventure travel — is your guide to finding high quality, trusted tour operators from around the globe.

Get there with confidence — start at www.adventure.travel



www.adventure.travel
inside the outside

Sponsored by ExOfficio
Adventure.Travel is an initiative of the
Adventure Travel Trade Association

around the now-blazing fire. I suggest we join hands and pray to the mountain gods to keep rain and predators away tonight, because I think it's good for children to grow up with faith in some sort of divine power. Then I get back to the bloodthirsty Comanches.

As I settle into the story, the moon rises across the lake and the wind dies and the only sounds are the crackling of the fire and the lapping of water on the rocks. The moment feels sacred.

"Children," I say, "I'm not sure I should bring this up, because there are grown-ups around who don't think you're old enough to hear this story."

"Sweet!" the Hulk says. "Is it time for I Want My Liver?"

"I'm old enough, Uncle Stevie," Iris says. "Really, I am. *Seriously!*"

"OK, Jaws, but before I start the story, everyone's got to promise not to tell Mom, OK?"

They agree and I reflect silently on the subtle and varied types of trust one encounters in life, and how my sister might regard the telling of the "I Want My Liver" tale as a technical violation of the trust she has placed in me. I worry about this for a second or two, then I share the story of the well-meaning but mischievous little Billy, his dead and suddenly liver-less grandmother, the bloody Swiss Army knife gripped in little Billy's sweaty fingers, and the lessons we can all take from the tale.

Then we visit Quisling in her tent, where Jaws mentions to her mom that some Native Americans used to strip flesh from their victims and maybe the Native Americans used to camp *right here* and my sister cuts me a nasty look, and then we all retire for the evening. A few hours later, I wake with a splitting headache, an urge to puke, and a suspicion that Dr. Comfort has poisoned me.



DAWN BREAKS CLEAR AND chilly and damp. When I stumble to the campfire, the others are already finishing their granola. We wish Ice happy 11th birthday and then Quisling, who is feeling better, tells her son's birth story, which involves a yurt, a midwife, horrified grandparents, and a lot of burning sage.

I sit on a rock, drinking coffee, next

to my brother and sister, watching their offspring break camp.

"God," my sister says, looking at Hulk as he expertly disassembles a tent, then shows Ice how it should be packed. "I remember when Eddie was a baby, just a mushy, smiling little lump."

"Yep," Dr. Comfort says. Is he remembering the infancy of his strapping son? Is he musing on the glory of growing up, the tragedy of growing old? Is he, I allow myself to wonder, wishing he would have granted his sensitive younger brother one measly little trip to Velvet Freeze when we were young? With Dr. Comfort, it's hard to know. But his face looks more slack up here, more relaxed.

Iris sprints over the hills in her flip-flops, chasing a butterfly. I wonder if she'll try to swallow it. Isaac's and Eddie's heads touch as they roll the tent.

"I wonder what the boys are plotting," my sister says, and suddenly I remember being Ice's age, rolling up sleeping bags and shooting marbles and riding bikes to Kranson's drug store with Dr. Comfort, when he was still called "Donnie," both of us dispatched there by our mother to buy her packages of Kent cigarettes. She was pregnant with Baby Quisling at the time, and at the drugstore, my big brother and I would drink grape soda and read *Hawkman* and *Green Lantern* comic books. I remember hearing grown-ups call us "the boys" and my eyes suddenly start leaking.

"Are you OK?" Dr. Comfort asks.

The sun is shining but my view is watery, soft-focus. Due to some back-country miracle, I feel optimistic and emotionally shattered at the same time.

My sister peers at my contorted face.

"Maybe he's just overcome with terrible guilt," Quisling says, "because I'll be paying shrink bills for the next 20 years while my children are having nightmares about eyeball-eating Apaches."

"Comanches," I correct her, through my tears, "and they didn't eat the eyeballs. They just stripped the fles..."

"Jesus Christ, Steve!" my sister shouts. "You can be such..."

"What?" I ask.

"I mean, really, don't you reali..."

"WHAT?"

She sighs. Her shoulders sag. But she knows. Seekers seek.

"I mean, Jesus Christ, Java Junkie."

"Thank you, Quisling," I say, and then it's time to hike out.



HULK AND ICE LEAD THE WAY, followed by a skipping, trilling Jaws, then, holding hands, Quisling and The Captain. Dr. Comfort comes next, and I follow, regarding the group, thinking about family camping trips in general, this trip in particular, and my future. I wonder if I might be happier if I moved to Durango, living closer to women who spend more time outside and less time hunched over cell phones. I might be able to contribute more to society's general good if I were intimately involved in the day-to-day lives of Jaws and Ice. I ponder the positive ways I might help mold their characters. With painstaking training, I believe Jaws could be turned into an elite athlete, or a highly paid professional assassin. With enough sacred teaching moments,

I might help shape Ice into a critically acclaimed novelist, or a cult leader.

My eyes start leaking again. I feel a philosophical urge coming.

"Hey, Ann?" Ann is Quisling's given name. "Sorry I told the kids the 'I Want My Liver' story. I know I promised."

"Uh-huh."

"You know, you were a pretty cute baby," I say. "I actually was glad Mom brought you for show-and-tell that one time. I know it wasn't your fault I never got to bring in my dead caterpillar."

"Really? You forgive me for using my two-month-old telepathic powers to make Mom ruin your big first-grade moment with your friggin' dead caterpillar? Jesus, Steve, do you ever think maybe you should fire your shrink?"

I know she doesn't mean it. I know that she's a good sister, her shocking treachery regarding the Ice Lakes Basin notwithstanding, and a good mother, even though she needs to crack down more, especially on Iris.

By now I have caught up to Dr. Comfort. "So," I ask my brother, "what

was your absolute favorite moment of the trip? The campfire? The s'mores?"

"When we were under the trees, in the thunderstorm," Dr. Comfort says, which surprises me.

"Really?"

"It was a reminder of how powerless we are in the face of nature," he says, "and how we just have to surrender to it, and when we do, everything is all right. It's a reminder that we don't have to struggle so much." It's the longest speech I have heard my brother make in approximately three decades. It's also somewhat prophetic. After the trip, he starts practicing yoga, stops fretting over balance sheets on weekends, and once, when my mother asks him what they'll be having for dinner on a night when she is joining his family, he actually tells her.

We have been picking up our pace, until we're all hiking together.

"Quis?" I ask my sister. "How about you? What was your favorite moment of the trip?"

"Under the trees. Intimate, all



REWARDING LIKE A MARATHON *except you end up* SPEAKING GREEK.

When people train for a marathon, they get stronger, increase endurance, and find mental clarity. What they discover along the way is that what looks like work is actually fun. It's not surprising, actually, because that's how people learn and grow. They rise to the challenge and discover that the process of self-improvement results in a rewarding, enjoyable journey.

Rosetta Stone understands that effective language learning requires a sense of accomplishment. In our immersion environment, you're presented with just the right level of challenge. Using Intelligent Sequencing™, Rosetta Stone® solutions combines language you already know with powerful visual clues. This allows you to discover new language meaning intuitively, without translation. And our sophisticated speech technologies get you speaking from the start – in Greek or any of our 31 languages.

RosettaStone® 

**SAVE 10%
TODAY WHEN YOU ORDER**
Version 3 Personal Edition
CD-ROM products.



WIN/MAC compatible.

Six-Month, No-Risk, Money-Back Guarantee*.

Level 1	Reg. \$229	\$206
Level 1,2,&3	Reg. \$539	\$485
Level 1,2,3,4,&5	Reg. \$699	\$629

**Call or go online
(866) 817-9513**

RosettaStone.com/zps100

Use promo code zps100 when ordering.

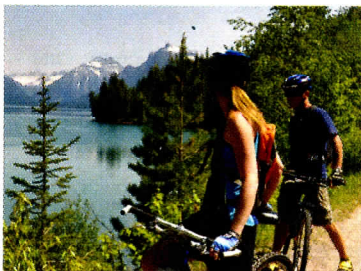
©2010 Rosetta Stone Ltd. All rights reserved. Offer limited to Version 3 Personal Edition CD-ROM products purchased directly from Rosetta Stone, and cannot be combined with any other offer. Prices subject to change without notice. Offer expires January 31, 2011. *Six-Month, No-Risk, Money-Back Guarantee is limited to Version 3 CD-ROM product purchases made directly from Rosetta Stone and does not include return shipping. Guarantee does not apply to any online subscription, or to Audio Companion® CDs purchased separately from the CD-ROM product. All materials included with the product at time of purchase must be returned together and undamaged to be eligible for any exchange or refund.

WIN A MONTANA NATIONAL PARK TRIP FOR TWO

Montana. Nothing but Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks. And between them epic landscapes alive with wildlife, clear trout streams and genuine souls appreciating every square mile.

Unearth the details of a Montana backpacking experience at backpacker.com/Montana.

MONTANA



HELPING KIDS DISCOVER NATURE'S PLAYGROUND

The North Face Explore Fund is a grant-giving program committed to supporting nonprofit, community organizations that break down the barriers to getting youth outdoors.

ADVENTURE IS EVERYWHERE. NEVER STOP EXPLORING.™

ExploreFund.org

EXPLORE THE CROWN OF THE CONTINENT

This lush realm of grizzlies, goats, wolves and wildflowers stretches like a mantle from Montana into Alberta and British Columbia. Towering peaks, ancient forests, glacier-fed waters and an abundance of wildlife and rare native plants bedazzle North America's scenic crown.

Plan your trip at crownofthecontinent.net

CROWN OF THE CONTINENT



ENTER TO WIN GREAT PRIZES!

Visit backpacker.com/entertowin for your chance to win tents, packs, sleeping bags and other great prizes for your next outdoor adventure!

CHECK OUT BACKPACKER.COM FOR THE LATEST PROMOTIONS AND EVENTS.

together, and no one was complaining." (The outdoors and, I like to think, our lightning-storm bonding work their magic on Quisling, too. A few months later, she and The Captain announce plans to marry. I think I should get more credit for the nuptials because I proposed the camping expedition, but that doesn't happen. I'm working with my shrink to let go of that resentment.)

"Ice?"

"Skipping rocks with you, learning about Attila the Hun and Hit..."

I cough loudly.

"I mean, skipping rocks with you."

"Hulk?"

"It was all cool."

"Jaws?"

"S'mores!" cries the flesh-eating cherub.

Me? Has a camping trip with my closest kin transformed me? I philosophize about this when we arrive back in Durango, at the house The Captain and Quisling and the kids share. Inspired by Dr. Comfort, who does the same, I pad into an empty room and I lie down and stare at the ceiling. What I see is our cozy little campsite. What I hear is the soft lapping of the mountain lake.

In the interest of efficient philosophizing, I insert the earplugs I always carry with me to family gatherings.

I stare at the ceiling some more. Philosophizing with great intent, I return to our campsite. It is the same place, but it is different. Great, fat marshmallows spill from easily accessible pouches. The clouds are thin and wispy, not overweight, and the children are well-behaved, and everyone—even the adults—clamors for the "I Want My Liver" tale. We recline on spongy grass, happy and filled with love, safe from predators, and the ground is soft and we are in a glacial basin.

I hear a door slam, and the boys shout. Then Iris screams that she's hungry. *Seriously!* I stuff my earplugs in a little deeper and I put a pillow over my eyes. I return to the magical campsite. I seek the crackling fire, the family love, the moonlit circle where marshmallows are plentiful and forgotten children are found, the hushed place where philosophizers are exalted. I seek really hard. 🍌

Writer at Large Steve Friedman lives all by himself in New York City.