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**“HE WHO LEARNS MUST SUFFER...”  
My Sorrowful History of Winter Camping & the Pursuit of Warmth**

*“He who learns must suffer...” —Aeschylus*

Ever since humans shed their fur and felt the warmth of a lightning-caused fire and realized that if they could keep the flame alive, they could avoid the brutal cold forever, we’ve spent a good portion of our time in pursuit of that goal. For those of us who reside in the “modern world,” the effort to stay warm is as challenging as turning the dial on the thermostat. But before gas furnaces and heat pumps and electric radiant heat and solar collectors, staying warm could be a full-time job. If any of you has ever tried, at least for a while, to stay warm with a wood fire and a good cast iron stove, you know

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the challenge. The work never ends. There’s never enough fuel and the fire always dies at three in the morning. But for most Americans, at least, even that chore is only something to be read about---“Honey, turn up the heat,” is all we need to do to stay warm.

But there are a few of us, driven by forces that can’t quite be explained, who possess a willingness to suffer and display an utter lack of common sense that causes us to abandon these comforts and deliberately seek the misery of sub-freezing temperatures. I’ve been doing this for years and still dabble in self-inflicted misery from time to time. It’s called ‘winter camping.’ It started like this...

I became a Boy Scout when I turned eleven, on a cold blustery December day. Two weeks later, my scout troop went camping at a place called Lake Hideway in southern Indiana Our scoutmaster was an ex-Marine with a penchant for torture. On

the long bus ride to our winter camp, before I even had a chance to get cold, I found myself yearning for a urinal. I really had to go but our scoutmaster plowed forward through ice and snow drifts with a single-minded determination I have seldom encountered. I finally staggered to the front of the bus and meekly told my leader of the situation. He looked at me briefly, snarled, “Tie it in a knot and sit down,” and returned his half-addled gaze to the white-out ahead. It took me an hour just to figure out what he meant.

We had the most basic equipment and indeed, during the glorious/miserable pre-recreation boom era, decent camping gear was hard to come by. We slept in army surplus canvas pup tents that had no floors. Indeed, we each carried a tent half and buttoned the damn things together. My sleeping bag was a Sears Roebuck reject—my dad worked at Sears and often brought home defective returned merchandise. But even if he’d bought me a top-of-the-line sleeping bag, I wouldn’t have been able to notice the difference. The big insulator in those days was ‘kapoc,’ a fibrous material that comes from something called the ceiba tree. It offered about as much warmth as the Sunday copy of the Louisville Courier-Journal. So my first experience with winter camping was also my first with near-frostbite. Somehow I survived but I didn’t get any smarter.

A few years later, having discovered the West and yearning to be there whenever I could and regardless of the weather conditions, my buddy Tynes and I set out for Jackson, Wyoming on the 27th of December in an MGB convertible. We were 19. We battled snow and wind across the Great Plains and into Wyoming on I-80. When we exited at Rock Springs, conditions got worse. The road was snowpacked for 180 miles. Near Bondurant, we struggled to put chains on the car but our hands froze after just a few moments outside the car. But the MG provided very little respite—outside it was -37 F; INSIDE our little sports car, my thermometer read -5 F. Downright toasty if you measured things relatively.

*“...And even in our sleep, pain that will not forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart.”*

When we reached Jackson I still wanted to camp, but Tynes insisted on using his father’s Gulf Oil credit card for a motel. A few days later, however, we drove south toward the Grand Canyon. We found

the South Rim campground and were surprised to find it empty . Perfect, I thought. We have the place to ourselves.

We pitched the tent and rolled out our bags, cooked a can of Wolf Brand chili on an open fire (the NPS allowed such things then) and then hung out at Bright Angel Lodge for a while, trying to soak up as much heat as we could from that spectacular fireplace. The guy at the desk thought we were mad. “It’s going below ZERO tonight!” he emphasized. “ZERO.” We were unfazed.

Tynes and I returned to our tent and crawled into our bags. It was about 9 PM.. The temperature began to fall. We’d built a fire just outside the tent flap and I’d pulled off the garbage can lid and placed it behind the blaze to act as a sort of reflector. The fire roared and reflected. We crawled deeper into our kapoc bags. The night wore on.



I felt the toes go first. Or I didn’t feel them. My fingers stiffened and my ears felt like they’d break off if I touched them. Through the night I suffered silently, wondering if my pal Tynes was as near to Death by Ice as I was. How much longer could I endure this misery? Finally, I thought of the approaching dawn and the warmth of that fire at Bright Angel Lodge. We’d become something of a curiosity at the Lodge. The bell boys and the desk clerk were concerned and one of them, who had morning duty, promised to have a roaring fire going when he came on duty at 6 AM. The fire sounded like a godsend.

Finally, I called out to Tynes, “Hey is it 6 AM yet? That guy at Bright Angel said he’d start a fire.” Tynes stirred in his bag and shouted back. “You idiot. It’s nine-thirty.”

We’d been in the tent for less than half an hour. It would be a very long night.

After my first winter ordeal, I swore I’d get better equipment but was still stupid enough to keep pursuing my winter camping fetish. In my defense, one aspect of winter camping that could not be denied was that it was a great way to beat the crowds. I found that having a campground or even a park all to myself was a common occurrence when the ground was frozen. My longing for peace and quiet knew no boundaries, no pain was too much when it came to solitude. I managed the funds for a good goose down mummy bag the next year and for a while I got downright cocky about winter camping. With the additional invention of the self-inflating Thermo-Rest sleeping pad, I was convinced that weather could no longer play a role in my camping habits. I defied winter and thought I had it licked.

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A couple years later, I was living in Utah, had become a park ranger and fancied myself a true outdoorsman...a desert rat. I could survive anywhere, I reckoned. I had the gear and the knowledge. Nature was my friend and if she got a bit feisty from time to time, I could see my way through it.

I had gone back to work early at Arches and was looking forward to the new season. But I got four days off in early March and decided to make the best of them. The weather was clear and dry and warm in the day. I had my bag to stay warm. And I had my dog as well. Muckluk and I decided to travel west a 150 miles to a side canyon of the Escalante River—Middle Moody Canyon.

We left in the late morning and by mid-afternoon we had bounced our way over the Burr Trail and down a side track to the head of Moody Creek. My pack was already locked and loaded, the dog was ready to chase jackrabbits, so we parked the car, slid down an embankment to the sandy wash and headed downstream. I felt excellent and the weather could not have been lovelier. It was so mild and so clear that I decided to forego the extra weight of a tent. Who needs a tent on a glorious day like this? Let the stars be my canopy tonight. We ate our supper beside a gnarled juniper tree on the edge of Moody Creek, I crawled into my mummy bag and Muckluk snuggled up close as she always did. We both feel asleep almost instantly.

It started to rain about midnight.

I had pulled the drawstring on my mummy bag tightly around my face so that only my nose protruded into the air. It soon began to take on water. My nostrils were filling up. The drizzle became a hard rain that became a steady downpour. And the temperature began to plummet.

A down sleeping bag holds up well when it's dry—it's all about 'loft.' But down flattens like a soggy pancake when wet and takes on an enormous amount of weight as it absorbs the moisture. Soon I was soaked to the bone. I thought of making a run for it and maybe find an overhang or a cave but incredibly, at that moment, my flashlight went dead. I could feel the dog pressed against me, drenched and shivering. There was no place to hide.

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A fierce wind came up and the temperature sank, the rain turned to snow, my sleeping bag began to freeze up. Muckluk's wet fur turned hard. It occurred to me that we might just die there along the edge of Middle Moody Creek. Finally the snow stopped but the terrible wind raged on for hour after hour. I was starting to lose the feeling in my finger tips and even my nostrils felt frozen.

But it was the wind that saved us. We were camped under a half dead juniper tree and the howling breeze slowly dried out its dead limbs. I crawled out of my soaked sleeping bag and began to tear the dead branches from the tree—yes, this was surely some kind of natural resource violation according to the Code of Federal Regulations but I didn't care. I clumped the branches into a pile, added a few sheets of toilet paper to the base of it, pulled out a match

(at least I remembered them!) And lit a fire. I added more fuel and the fire grew hotter and hotter.

Nothing ever felt so wonderful. I could feel my parts thawing out. And to make an improving situation even better, at the base of that tree, deep in its hollowed out trunk, I had stuffed the one item that remained dry, an old Eddie Bauer down coat that my pal Jim Conklin had given me the previous winter. Why I'd brought it along, I'll never know. How I resisted putting it on until after the rain stopped is even more surprising. But I pulled on the old coat and sat down in front of my roaring fire, where I fell asleep sitting on my heels for almost an hour.

When dawn came, the storm had passed as quickly as it had arrived. A sun rose clear and bright and what snow had fallen melted rapidly. My sleeping bag, still soaked, must have weighed 20 pounds. I lashed everything together and headed back to the car. It took me almost two hours to walk the four miles. I felt like Death eating a cookie. Yet, even then, I was a documentarian of sorts. As I reached my VW Rabbit, I thought, 'This is the worst I have ever felt in my life.' And somehow, whether it was vanity or the utter lack of it, I sat my camera on the hood of my car and snapped a picture with the timer.



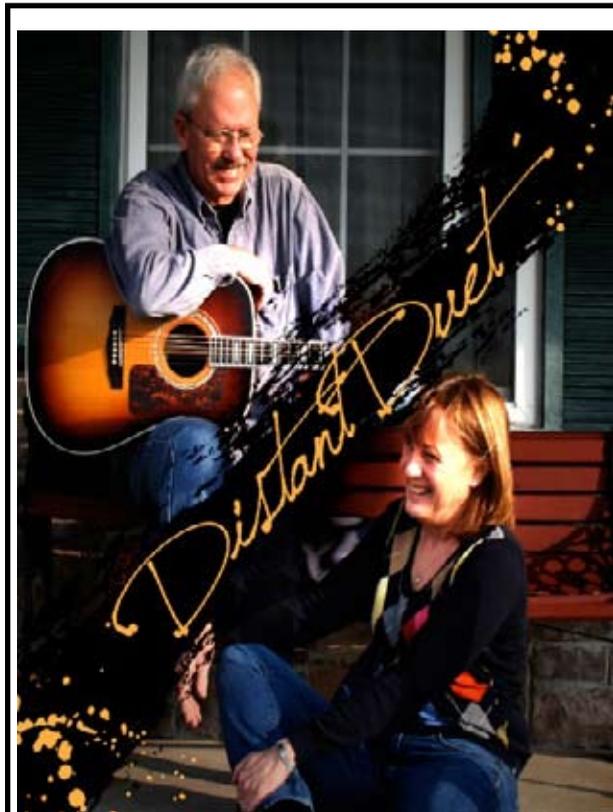
**It took me almost two hours to walk the four miles. I felt like Death eating a cookie.**

But I survived. And I winter camped again and again. For many years. Finally I gave up tent camping but still slept in my car on long winter journeys where I was too tired or broke to get a motel room. Even my bride recently joined in the fun when we were taking a late February trip. Traveling with our two ancient cats, we found ourselves in Walsenberg, Colorado in a blizzard. We wound up sleeping in the hospital parking lot and Fuzzy peed all over Tonya in her sleep.

"Well," Tonya remarked, "At least her urine didn't freeze." My wife—always looking at the bright side. She made me promise I'd never sleep in a hospital parking lot in a blizzard again, with old cats that had bladder control issues and I promised that, under those conditions, I would comply...which leads us to the end of the Aeschylus admonition...

*"...Until in our despair, against our will, comes wisdom by the awful grace of God."*

Now when we winter camp, we leave the cats at home.



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I look across the shore of my western sea, having arrived at last where I am. The circle, almost circled.

But where is what I started for so long ago?

And why is it yet unfound?

*Walt Whitman*