

Prologue

*There are some good things to be said about walking.
Not many, but some.*

—Edward Abbey

Every now and then, I find myself confronted by someone who wants to know about the very worst moment that Pete McBride and I endured during the year we spent together inside the Grand Canyon, and I'm forced to explain that addressing this query properly is no simple matter. So many horrible things happened to us down there, I point out, that it's almost impossible to single out just one because, really, any of them could have qualified as the most wretched and intolerable of all.

There was, for example, the afternoon I tripped and fell into a cactus, and the night that I unwittingly unfurled my sleeping bag atop an anthill—which happened to be the very same evening that Pete and I toppled into the Colorado River with our backpacks. Or the morning after the snowstorm when I was trying to thaw out my frozen shoes with our camp stove, and accidentally set them on fire.

And there was also the time the canyon got so bad that we quit and went home, resolving never, ever to come back.

But then, I admit, having given the matter due consideration, Pete and I now agree (and perhaps you will, too) that the moment the wheels completely fell off the bus was probably when the rat burrowed under Pete's skin and started snacking on his intestines.

This happened at a place called Rider Canyon, one of hundreds of minor tributaries that branch off of the main canyon, and it unfolded during a time of day that I had come to despise more than any other, which was the hottest part of the afternoon when the fleeting freshness of early morning was nothing but a distant memory, and evening's reprieve lay too far off in the future to even start dreaming about. A period of such incandescent misery that it felt as if a cackling, fork-tailed demon had flung open the door to the furnace of hell itself.

The sun stood squarely overhead, straddling the canyon's rims, pouring a column of fire directly into the abyss and driving the shadows into the deepest recesses of the rock while causing the cushion of air that hovered just above the surface of the stone to tremble, as if the ground itself were gasping for breath. But the most striking element of all, the detail that could burn a hole in the center of your consciousness, was neither the brilliance nor the ferocity of that heat, but its heft: its thickness and weight as it draped itself over the top of your head and across the blades of your shoulders, as if it were a blanket braided from material that was already in flames when delivered into the hands of its weaver.

It was the kind of heat that would slap you dead if you lingered in its glare for too long, which was why Pete and I were so keen to lower ourselves off the exposed ledge we'd been stumbling across for the past hour and drop into the bottom of Rider to seek some shade. Getting there involved about sixty feet of down-climbing through a steep notch with an overhang, and the first move required Pete to place his palms on the edge of the ledge—ignoring that the surface of the rock was almost too hot to touch—then jackknife his body into the notch while scrabbling blindly for a foothold with his toes.

I was kneeling beside him, peering over the lip to see if I could pick out a place for him to jam one of his feet into, when something on his backpack drew my eye. It was a miniature thermometer clipped to one of the shoulder straps, and as he shifted his body, the device caught the light and twinkled, as if it were saying:

Hey, check me out.

The column read 112°F.

That was somewhat shocking—it was nearly October and the forecast had called for a temperature of only 105°F. But it sort of made sense, too.

Rider's steeply angled walls, which comprise five separate layers of stone spanning a color palette that runs from caramelized honey and braised butterscotch to unfiltered bourbon, are aligned on a direct east-west axis. This meant that Rider's interior had been hammered directly by the sun since the break of dawn, seven hours earlier, long enough to turn the space between those walls into a kind of convection oven.

The narrow patio at the bottom, however, was bathed in shadows and even featured a few small pools of water, each linked to the next by a thin stream penciling between them. The scene looked deliciously cool and inviting, and Pete's progress toward it seemed to be unfolding smoothly—until, without warning, he grunted softly and froze.

We were now at eye level with each other, which meant that I could read the expression on his face: a hazy suspension of shock, bewilderment, and pain. A quivering dollop of sweat the size of a pinto bean glided down the center of his forehead, skidded off the bridge of his nose, and fell onto the front of his shirt, already soaked with perspiration and encrusted in rings of salt, with an audible *plop*.

He held himself in place for a moment before muttering something inaudible, then carefully hitching his body back up onto the ledge, where he leaned on his elbow and stared at me vacantly.

“What’s going on?” I asked, confused.

He swallowed hard and tried to speak, but was unable to push the words past his lips. So instead, he lifted the front of his shirt, exposing his belly and chest. Protruding from the skin directly above the rib cage was a distended lump, and as I watched in horror, the lump began to move.

It wriggled to the opposite side of his chest, then slowly descended toward his abdomen. Then it wormed across his belly before turning again and squirming back up the side of his torso toward his shoulders.

The lump was about the size of a Bushy-Tailed Woodrat, a mammal renowned for its foul temper and a fondness for lining its nest with cactus spines, and it probably stands as a testament to just how poorly

I was dealing with the whole situation that for several long seconds I found myself wondering exactly how an actual rat—a *live rodent*—had managed to tunnel his way beneath Pete’s skin.

This was like nothing I’d ever seen before, a spectacle whose freakishness was intensified by its mystery, and the only thing surpassing my bafflement was an ardent sense of relief that whatever kind of rabidly deranged parasite this might be, it had seen fit to drill its way into Pete instead of me.

Relief, I hasten to add, that was swiftly expunged by a surging backwash of panic laced with deep concern for a person who, yes and true, was often profoundly annoying as well as a titanic pain in the ass—but who also happened to be my closest friend in the entire world.

“*What the hell is wrong with you?*” I screeched.

* * *

As it turned out, there was more than one answer to that question.

Technically, Pete was suffering from a heat-related imbalance of sodium in his bloodstream that is one of the leading triggers for rescue and hospitalization among hikers in the canyon. What appeared to be a rat scurrying beneath his skin was a rolling series of intense muscle cramps. Soon those spasms would subside as tight knots formed in the major muscles along his arms and legs. If these were left unchecked, he would undergo severe cognitive impairment as the tissues in his brain began to swell, inducing a drunken-like stupor. Then sometime in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours, he would succumb to violent convulsions and lapse into a coma from which there would be no recovery.

He clearly needed help. But I was in no position to offer assistance because I was saddled with my own problems, which had started a few days earlier, when I’d noticed several tender areas on my feet where the skin looked like uncooked bacon. Instead of fishing out some moleskin from our med kit, which I was too exhausted to extract from the bottom of my pack, I decided that if I ignored the problem, it would either get better or go away.

By the following morning, the hot spots had turned white and were filling with fluid. Soon blisters were everywhere—along the bottoms of my feet, around the balls of my ankles and the Achilles tendons, plus all ten toes. By the end of that afternoon, the blisters had burst and it looked as if I'd been given a pedicure with a belt sander. At this point, acting on Pete's advice, I elected once again to bypass the med kit and go straight for the duct tape, which, for reasons that now seemed mystifying, I had applied somewhat overzealously, encasing each foot inside a plastic perma-sock whose sticky side, having bonded directly to the open blisters, was impossible to remove.

All the following day, my airtight duct-tape galoshes provided a moist, nurturing habitat for a colony of bacteria to steep in the brine of sweat, dirt, and foot funk. Within hours, both feet were infected and rotting. Now every stride I took felt as if I were stepping into a bucket of broken glass. Before long, I wouldn't be able to walk at all.

Needless to say, we were in far over our heads, a condition stemming not only from our specific medical problems, but also from a deeper and more debilitating disorder. An affliction that could be addressed neither with antibiotics nor bed rest because it was not a physical ailment so much as an impairment of character—an infirmity rooted in the complexion of our personalities as well as the delusions we harbored regarding our competency and prowess in the outdoors.

Ours was a conflation of willful ignorance, shoddy discipline, and outrageous hubris: an array of flaws that we had been denying (perhaps, like the sores on my feet, in the hope that it would simply improve or disappear) ever since the moment Pete had gotten the two of us into this mess by pressing me to join him for what he'd billed, quite literally, as “a walk in the park.”

A misguided odyssey through the heart of perhaps the harshest and least forgiving, but also the most breathtakingly gorgeous, landscape feature on earth. A place filled with so much wonder, replete with so many layers of complexity, that there is nothing else like it, anywhere.