

Christmas in the Desert
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It was December 23rd, 2010. Another Christmas without family. The kids were grown with plans and obligations that would take them away from home for the holidays. I considered curling up on the couch with a box of Queen Ann's and a bottle of CAPIZIMO from Uncle David's winery, and wallowing in self-pity through an entire marathon of classic Christmas cartoons. Instead, I chose to make the best of the long holiday weekend and head for the desert. It rarely snows more than a skiff in the Owyhee's and my horse and mule could use the packing experience.

I loaded Jack and Annie into a three horse slant hitched to an F250 diesel nick-named "The Blue Beast." It might not be pretty, but the old Ford can pull the gates off of Hell. Shade jumped in the back and settled in around boxes of camping gear, Dutch ovens and a large cooler of food.

I was especially excited about trying out my new Alaknak tent. I had wanted one for years and finally snagged one off Craig's List. I answered the ad mere moments before a stubby little man in drab-olive shorts and a blue bolo-necktie arrived for the same tent. We looked at each other, then at the tent and back to the other, squinting into each other's eyes with cold, spaghetti western determination. Slowly the chubby kneed leader of scouts reached



in his pocket for his wallet. It was no use. I was fast and I was tough. After all, at the age of 8, I spent two weeks as a Junior Brownie before being thrown out for un-Brownie like conduct. This "boy" Scout didn't stand a chance. With lightening fast reflexes, I thrust a fistful of cash at the man who placed the ad, tossed my tent in the back of the truck and sped off into the sunset. Brownies 1- Boy Scouts – 0.



It was a beautifully crisp winter day as I drove into Succor Creek canyon. Once I had arrived at my favorite camp-site along Succor Creek, I high-lined the horse and mule and set about making camp. It took me forty-five minutes to an hour to set up the Alaknak for the first time. Apparently, a troop of boy scouts can do it in less than ten minutes. Whatever. The tent came with a small wood burning stove that quickly warmed the interior. A cot on one side and a tote for an end table on the other completed the furnishing for my winter housing. It was cozy. I stood back and smiled as I examined this home-away-from-home.

Evening found me snuggled deep within the lofty comfort of a sleeping bag reading the Kindle version of “Wildfire” by Zane Grey. Shade lay at the foot of my cot. Two chapters later and the words of a favorite author were replaced by the drones of slumber. I slept well... I always sleep well in the desert.

The smell of fried potatoes and bacon flavored Spam mingled with camp-fire smoke to fill the brisk morning air. A pot of tea gently boiled over an open flame. After breakfast, I saddled Jack in preparation for a morning ride. I didn't expect to be gone more than two or three hours and for this reason, packed light. Two bottles of water and a can of Beanie Weenies ought to be sufficient. A girl can go all day long on one can of Beanie Weenies.

Morning was clear and brisk. I reined Jack toward a small canyon I had yet to explore. I picked this trail for its gently rolling terrain, a contrast to most in this area. I wanted an easy ride so that Jack and Annie would not break into a sweat. I read somewhere that if you ride in the winter, you should take care that your horses do not get too hot. I also was not sure how Jack would do towing Annie. Jack liked Annie alright, but he was not entirely thrilled about the rope touching his butt. He danced around at first, but eventually fell into a steady pace with Annie following quietly alongside.



Our small caravan plodded easily along the trail. Jack and I in the lead, Annie following close behind and Shade bringing up the rear... when she was not off chasing rock-chucks. I no more finished telling Shade that she would never catch one when she snagged her prey by the back of the neck, gave it a quick, violent shake and dropped it in the trail. Shade sat on her haunches with the dead varmint between her front paws looking very pleased with herself. “I killed it, you cook it.” Shade’s intentions were good, but there was no way I was going to eat a giant rat. I appreciated knowing that we would never starve with that dog in our tribe and praised her accordingly. With a quick prayer of thanks to the spirit of the sacrificed rock-chuck, our little band of explorers continued down the trail.



It is not uncommon for me to lose track of time when riding or hiking. Especially when exploring a new area. This day was no exception. The weather could not have been more conducive to a winter ride in the desert. It was cold early in the morning, but as the clouds began to blanket the blue sky, the temperature began to rise slightly. I was particularly pleased with the way Jack and Annie worked as a true pack team. Annie had obviously been towed before and moved with experience. Jack had long since gotten use to the

rope and seemed not to mind at all.

The trail wound through the canyon at a gradual ascent, forking numerous times. Each fork provided new and exciting opportunity for exploration. The thought crossed my mind that maybe I should mark these forks in the trail with my GPS, if nothing else, so I could find the area again should I want to come back – and I always want to come back. Nah – it’s the desert, how lost can I get?

The first flakes landed on Jack’s black-tipped ears about 4 hours into the ride; a few seconds later, another...then another. Cool, I didn’t mind riding in a little snow. After all, I had worn a knit hat, gloves, and long underwear underneath a layer of cotton clothing and an oilskin vest. Cotton...what did I read about wearing cotton clothing in the wilderness? Was it good? Was it bad? I don’t remember – but I was about to find the answer.



Fog settled in with the increasing snow, covering the trail with a thin skiff of white. I turned around and began to head back following faint tracks barely visible through the dense fog and snow. Within minutes, the trail was completely veiled in white. I could scarcely make out the canyon walls at the first fork. Which one do I take? I couldn’t base my decision entirely on down-hill or up-hill. I had ascended and descended numerous times in the last few hours. I opted to let Jack lead the way and he began to descend. I doubted we were on the actual trail any longer, but surely, downhill would eventually lead to home. As the snow piled deeper, Jack and Annie skidded down embankments made slick with the deepening snow. I pulled my feet from the stirrups to prevent being drug in the event Jack fell. It was well past noon and I began to sweat. I realized then that I had not eaten since breakfast and my blood sugar was taking a dive. The cotton clothing I wore offered no protection from the elements and acted like a wick, holding moisture from sweat and snow against my skin.

I needed to eat something. I fumbled for the saddle bags and retrieved the one can of Beanie Weenies I had brought. My gloved fingers were numb and I had the shakes from the cold and hypoglycemic induced drop in blood sugar. I could not engage the tab on the pull-top can with gloved fingers so I removed them. Not able to control the shaking and unable to feel anything, I could not hold on to the can - the Beanie Weenies fell to the ground and rolled out of site. Visibility was somewhere between zero and a gnats ass. I slid off Jack in an attempt to retrieve the can of Beanie Weenies. Ice cold feet landed with a painful thud against the unforgiving ground. On hands and knees, I searched for the only sustenance I had on me. I felt my way around to a rock outcropping a few feet from where I dismounted. Shade began to whine. I’ve seen Lassie enough to know when a dog is trying to tell me something. “What is it girl?” I said in my best Timmy voice. Shade whined again and began to back away from the rock pile. I stood, holding tight to the boulder and stared down into oblivion. The pile of rock marked the end of solid ground for who knows how far. I picked up a fist sized rock and tossed it over the cliff...nothing. Six to eight seconds later, the dull thud of a rock hit solid ground. We were standing at

the edge of a sheer drop-off. Somewhere, down there beyond reach...laid a perfectly good can of Beanie Weenies.

Mounting was difficult at best. I was grateful I'd taught Jack to stand until I was in the saddle; lifting my leg to put a foot in the stirrup was about all I could manage. If he would have moved, I would still be sitting on the edge of that cliff. I was freezing, sweaty and weak. Once aboard, I turned Jack away from the cliff and began to ascend. Blinded by the desert blizzard, I had no idea which way to go – but I knew I had to get to shelter before hypothermia set in.

Visibility was worsening, and after the Beanie Weenie episode, I was afraid I'd ride off a cliff. I held fast to the hope that my horse would not walk off a cliff and kept going. As if the snow and the fog were not enough, the wind began to blow. It felt like being surrounded in an ocean of strange, white plankton. The wind muffled the sounds of everything but its own, mournful howl, driving the freezing cold to the very center of my core. I remember wilderness survival training and what to expect just before hypothermia kills you. The body no longer feels the cold and you simply go to sleep. That is what I hoped for. I hoped that if it was going to end here, that I would soon feel the warmth of pending, eternal sleep.

I rode hunched over the saddle horn with my hands entwined in Jack's mane. I'd long since dropped Annie's lead and assumed that she followed at liberty. I could barely make out the figure of my dog walking next to Jack's left hind. Jack's nose was inches from the ground. He appeared to be sniffing out the trail and following...what are those, tracks? Wolf tracks? No, they are too small for wolf tracks, and much too large for coyote. They seem so familiar...so very familiar. Spud? What are you doing here, Spud? It is cold out here puppy – you shouldn't be out here in this mess. Get back in the house and curl up under the rock fireplace like you use to, before...before... It's sure good to see you Spud – I've missed you so much.

Spud did not listen to me. Jack continued to follow Spud's paw print for what seemed like hours. The tracks led us up and out of the draw we had mistaken for the one leading back to camp. I really didn't think I would last until we got back to camp even if Spud did know the way back. I no longer felt the cold despite being soaked to the bone and the harsh, merciless winds of the desert storm. I could no longer feel my hands and feet. I was very, very sleepy. It was all ok though. If I was going to die, there were worse places and worse situations to do it. I had a good horse under me and a mule that almost tolerated me. A good dog trotted at my horse's heels and another guided our way. Even though I could not see Spud, I knew he was there. I knew those tracks like the beating of my own heart. The size, the shape...the depth, right down to the unusually shaped pad of his right paw - all matched those of my constant companion of 13 years. Spud had been gone for over 5 years – yet I knew he had never left me. He was here now, as I knew he would be when it was my time to go. Spud was taking me home.

*“Oh Great Spirit – if I am dead...why are my feet so cold?” I laid spread eagle on the cold ground. Shade licked at my face as Jack and Annie looked down at me with what might have been concern. Well, maybe not Annie – her aloof expression more resembled that of contempt mixed with humor for what probably seemed to her like just one more proof of stupid human inadequacy. A mule would never have gotten in such a situation, let alone fallen off her horse.

I am not a mule, and I had, in fact, fallen off my horse. I have no idea how long I was out. It could have been seconds or hours. I lay at the mouth of a geo mine. The Succor Creek area is littered with geo mines carved out of the rock by rock-hounds in search of various minerals and thunder-eggs. This cave-like structure was about 6 feet wide and was cut back into the rock a good fifteen feet. It didn't matter that the ceiling was too low for me to stand up – I could barely crawl, let alone stand. I remembered a rule of hypothermia from a Wilderness first-aid course: "One of the most important rules of hypothermia treatment, no one is dead until they are warm and dead. Allow medical authorities to determine death in all cases." I was neither warm nor a medical authority, so decided to assume I was not dead and take necessary precautions to ensure I stay that way. I gathered what few dry bunches of grass and larger sage-brush limbs I could reach and crawled into the dry shelter. With numb fingers, I retrieved a lighter from my oilskin vest and started a small fire. The warmth of the fire slowly thawed death's harsh grip. Still weak from the effects of hypoglycemia, I curled around the small fire and fell asleep. Shade lay at my back and provided additional warmth. We slept through Christmas Eve in a man-made cave, somewhere lost in the desert.

Christmas day, under any other circumstances, would have been dazzling. The sun glistened on a white blanket of freshly fallen snow that gleamed like crystals of pixy magic. This was about as close to heaven as a person can get and still have their feet on the ground. I was still cold, but the fire had been enough to dry out my clothes. When my belly-button snapped at my backbone for the third time, I looked over at Shade. If she had been thinking, "Bet you wish you had that rock-chuck now, don't ya?" She would have been right. I was hungry and needed something to even out my blood sugar. I crawled closer to the entrance to the cave, peered out into the blinding landscape and stared down at two plump chucker laying side-by-side at the cave entrance.

I picked up the chucker and examined each of them one at a time; neither bird had a mark on them. Large, unusual but familiar tracks, led away from the dead birds toward the opposite side of the canyon. Images from the day before slowly began to form. Memories of snow, wind, and uncompromising cold, filled my senses and caused me to shudder against the freezing recollection. Driving snow poured over jutting cliffs into bottomless oblivion; hands clutching desperately to fistfuls of mane. Through the relentless blizzard, faint tracks of a four-legged guardian angel led the way to safety.

My eyes followed the tracks across a snow-covered draw and up the gentle sloping canyon wall until they disappeared at the base of a ridge. Standing atop the ridge was a gleaming white silhouette of a large dog. I knew it would do no good to call to him. I knew he could not stay. I raised my hand to wave and watched him disappear, knowing in my heart that he would always be there to watch over me.

You would think being a butcher's daughter that I would know how to cut up a chicken. I do not. I fumbled with the chucker, half skinning and half plucking, until they were satisfactorily naked and free of feathers. My attempt at cutting up the first chucker would have been marked a failure unless the recipe called for scrambled chicken. I decided not to mutilate the second bird and opted to skew it with a stick and roast it like a hotdog. It wasn't exactly the Christmas goose-but it tasted better than anything I'd ever eaten in my life. I split my Christmas dinner with Shade and headed out to find the horse and mule.

Jack and Annie were grazing contently in the bottom of a grassy draw. The warm sun had started to melt the snow, exposing grass that lay beneath. I was happy to see that Jack had not slipped his saddle. Good tack is not something to skimp on, and my saddle is one of the best they make. I checked the cinch and swung into the saddle with renewed strength of spirit. I looked around and recognized the area from chucker hunting years ago. Spud and I spent many years in this area shooting birds. One of my favorite pictures is of Spud, my back-pack and my feet in the foreground, overlooking sage covered rolling hills of the desert in this very spot. I was no longer lost.

I said in the beginning that this Christmas story is based on true events and experiences. Which elements are true, and which are exaggerations, I will leave to your imagination. Do not be too hasty in your assumptions. You may be surprised.

Merry Christmas to all...

*This line was from a movie I saw years ago. I can't remember the name of the movie. It was about an old Indian who took the long walk into the forest with the intention of dying. He did not die, and when he woke in confusion, asked this of the Great Spirit.