

## The Trip They Should Have Taken

The car was packed and he was heading out the door when his phone rang. Caller id revealed his daughter's name and phone number. He would listen to her through the answering machine, but wasn't about to pick up. Her voice echoed with concern and he wondered when they had started to think of him as an invalid. "Dad, Ryan told me you're going to Joshua Tree alone. I hope you haven't left yet. I'd really like to go with you. Ryan can't make it, but I can come... with or without Fred. Please call me and we can make plans." She paused and he was ready to walk out when she finally added, "I'd really like to go with you. Bye."

He had never thought he would complete this trip alone. But the thought of bringing his daughter Cathy and her husband Fred made him queasy. He wasn't sure if it was the son-in-law Fred that caused the feeling, but knew that if he brought Cathy without her husband, the trip would forever be remembered in silent pauses and awkward moments. Not to mention that bringing Cathy without his son Ryan could create a sense of favoritism among his children. Ryan had explained that he had to get back to work. He had already missed a month and was hopeful that work would distract him back to normalcy. But waiting for this trip, even until the next weekend, did not seem like an option. The trip had been postponed too long already. So he was going, even if it meant going alone.

He looked at the back seat of his sedan, stuffed with camping equipment, among other things. He was sure he'd forgotten something, but knew he wouldn't be able to

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figure out what was missing until he needed the forgotten item. Such was the fate of someone taking a camping trip for the first time.

The highway between Phoenix and Joshua Tree was full of bustle, but felt lonely. The only connection he shared with the travelers was they each were using the same highway, but he was certain his I-10 mission was unique. Even if a few of the drivers were heading to Joshua Tree, which was doubtful, none were going for the same reason. Stopping for gas, to buy a hamburger or to use the bathroom caused interactions with other travelers and clerks, but did little to ease his feeling of isolation. He wondered how long the ordinary social interactions that once seemed benign would sting with loneliness.

These once forgettable exchanges with strangers caused memories of his wife to well in his chest. He'd glance out the window of the convenience store to his car, making sure no one had stolen the car and its contents. If someone stole his car with the urn in it, his daughter would be even more upset with him. He made a mental note to put the urn in a backpack and carry into every establishment going forward. Sure it would be awkward, but less awkward than explaining it's loss if that happened.

Of course, taking the trip alone gave him some flexibility in telling the family about the final disposition of the contents of the urn. Pulling out of a convenience store, the sign for 95 North tempted him. If he was the spontaneous type, he could head north to Las Vegas. Since he had recently been returned to bachelorhood, this seemed a more appropriate destination. While his wicked side smiled at the thought of a Vegas binge, every cell in his body knew he was going to Joshua Tree.

After four hours on the road, he arrived as the sun started its descent across the mountains. He was worried about being able to set up the tent and build a fire before

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sunset. Either of these operations would be compounded in difficulty if he had to hold a flashlight while executing the task. At the ranger station he asked for “the most secluded campsite you’ve got.”

“You can hike to some sites that are pretty remote,” said the uniformed and clean shaven park ranger. “Let’s look at the map here.”

“Do you have anything close to the road? I can’t carry everything in my car.”

“Well, if you’re camping out of your car, the campsites by the road are bunched together. I can find you a secluded one for now, but if other campers show up, you might get company.”

He noticed a hint of condescension at the idea of camping out of his car. He wanted to argue that any form of camping was a big step – that he’d never been camping in his life, even after his wife had begged him to go. But the thought of Marian brought tears to his eyes that he fought to keep inside. “Just get me something that’s alone for now. I’m not in much of a mood to be social.”

“Camp site 34 in the Black Rock campground. That’s \$12 dollars per night. How long you planning on staying?”

He hadn’t thought about that at all. How long does it take to spread your wife’s ashes? More importantly, how long did he need to stay to make up for the fact that in twenty-four years of marriage, he had never taken his wife camping to Joshua Tree, although she had asked him numerous times? He knew this was a question the camp ranger likely couldn’t answer. “Let’s go for one night and if I want to stay longer, I’ll check in with you tomorrow.”

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He paid his fee and got back in his car, trying to figure out the map. He was a few turns into the park when he hit a long stretch where he could put the map down and get a view. The tears he held back in front of the park ranger flowed freely now. Even if he had wanted to stop them, he couldn't. He had always imagined the park as drab grey desert of rocks with the occasional signature Joshua Tree. But entering the park at dusk turned the drab desert into a rainbow of reflections. Orange rocks mixed with purple flowers, green trees mixed with red clay and the pink clouds hid the orange sun as it set. The rocks and trees came alive with color and let him know what he had missed—sure, he was seeing their display, but he would never get to share the display with Marian.

He began setting up the tent, which he had purchased the day before. The setting sun was going quick and he hurried to get the shelter done before dark. One of the plastic poles got stuck in the nylon tent. He pushed too hard and heard a tear in the nylon. “Just my luck,” he said to himself. “I’ll have to sleep in the car.” Since Marian had died, he found himself speaking out loud as if she was still there to hear his complaints.

Surveying the damage, he realized the tear was on the outside lining. He was able to finish the tent, but it had a significant lean where the lining for the pole had torn. It created a limp tent, but he felt it was adequate for one and an appropriate symbol for this camping trip.

He set about arranging a camp fire not because he was cold or needed it to cook, but because he had nothing else to do. After getting a few logs burning, he made a turkey sandwich. He had no desire to try to figure out his new Coleman stove in the dark. His original intent was to grill a pork chop, but that would have to wait for another meal. The campfire made him feel more alone, as he had no one to share campfire stories with, no

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smores to cook, and no woman to sit on his lap. He drank four beers alone as darkness surrounded his campsite. He had another stash of logs to build the fire back up, but fatigue got the better of him and he crawled into his deformed tent.

The next morning the tent was cold. His sleeping bag seemed a refuge not worth giving up, but he wasn't used to sleeping in (never had been). He put on a sweatshirt, but that too felt cold. The walk to the bathroom was lengthy—the price he paid for his solitude. After going to the bathroom, he began brushing his teeth to remove the stale beer that lingered in his mouth.

“Hey partner,” another man called out in a booming voice as he entered the bathroom. “It's going to be another beautiful day,” the voice echoed off the walls of the campsite restroom.

“Yeah,” he said, wondering how this man could exert such exuberance at 6:00 AM. It's one thing to get up early; it's another to be loud about it.

“Where you from?” the man asked while scratching his beard.

He knew a line had been crossed, but he wasn't sure which. “I just drove in from Phoenix last night. How about you?”

“Bakersfield.”

He hoped the sign of packing his toiletries would indicate the conversation was going to end. “I'll warn you, there's no hot water.”

“My wife and I been coming here for over twenty years. Ain't had a hot shower here once.”

He smiled and then walked out of the bathroom to the man's guffaw.

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Typically he would wait to eat until his wife woke up. His morning's used to be filled with reading, watching the news or taking a walk. They would then breakfast together. But here in Joshua Tree, he had no paper and had forgotten the book he was reading (he could picture it on his night table next to his bed and lamented he hadn't picked it up when packing). And he wanted to wait to take a walk until a little later in the morning. So he decided to scramble some eggs even though it seemed too early. He was able to re-kindle last night's fire for some warmth. It wasn't freezing, but standing next to the fire felt soothing. He got the propane stove fired up and beat two eggs right in the pan. He had decided before leaving that sausage or bacon would be too messy, and not necessary for a single camper. He had brought some beef jerky as a substitute.

He chewed on the jerky while the eggs turned light yellow. The quiet of the campground made him think of Marian and when she would tell him about Joshua Tree. Her father had taken her on camping trips to the park numerous times when she was a child. She described it like an amusement park—noisy fun, festive campers and active wildlife. And while he got the sense the other campers viewed the park in the same way, he couldn't help but feel the festivities were closed to him. It was something he only could have enjoyed if he had gone with Marian. He tried to figure out why they had never made the four hour trip: careers, kids, twenty-four years of distractions and other priorities. There wasn't one reason, there were a thousand.

He devoured the eggs and half the jerky. The whole 'camping alone' process seemed silly as it took him longer to wash the dishes than it had to eat. But he was glad as it got him one step closer to his real goal.

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He went back into the tent and eyed the sleeping bag. It looked inviting. Naps were something he had never taken when Marian was alive, but lately he had thought about adding them to his daily routine. It might be a good way to pass time without requiring any thought about his loss.

But as much as he wanted to crawl in the sleeping bag, he knew it was time. He carefully picked up the backpack and exited his tent. He grabbed a water bottle from his cooler and made sure his car was locked. Studying the map, he pointed himself in the direction of the Boy Scout hiking trail. The trail name appealed to him as he felt like a boy scout, this being his first camping trip. But he knew there was no merit badge for this particular mission.

At the entrance of the trail, there was a sign with a map and hiking guidelines. The guidelines included a lengthy section about the importance of leaving no trace behind. He wondered how many tenets of the “Leave No Trace” program he was about to violate. Surely what he was leaving was biodegradable. He thought about asking the park ranger for permission, but knew that even if he dragged himself to the park ranger station, there was no way to articulate the words about what he was going to do. Not to mention he was pretty sure the answer would be no. Some things you just have to do without asking.

The hike was exhilarating. The rocks and trees captured the morning light just had they had done when he drove in. He appreciated that his wife was sharing her love of nature even after she was gone. Every step was filled with regret that she wasn't walking with him, even though the backpack made it feel like she was with him. He waited until

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he was about five miles into the trail to begin his lookout for her spot. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, but hoped he would know it when he found it.

The trees were becoming fewer, and this concerned him as he thought Marian would want some shade. He also thought she would have liked some water, but that was him talking, not her. She loved the desert. Loved Phoenix. Loved the heat. So while he would have wanted shade and water, he knew she appreciated life's ability to survive, to scratch through the rock and sand and find a way to eat, to drink and to procreate. It was a testament to biology that anything lived at all in this place.

He found a small path off the main trail and made sure nobody was coming. According to the map, he was heading towards the Wonderland of Rocks, and he couldn't think of a better place for Marian. Being careful not to step on any plants, he left the trail for about 100 yards. He opened the backpack and removed the urn that contained Marian's remains. Tears streamed down his face, warm and salty as they reached his parched lips. Sucking in his gut, he opened the urn and wondered what he should say. He knew it had to be an apology first. As he poured the ashes, he said, "I'm sorry we never made it to Joshua Tree together. I can see why you wanted to return here. It's beautiful. You stay here and enjoy the view. You'll always be in my heart." He crumbled to the ground wondering if his legs would be able to get him out of there. He lingered for several minutes, unable to look at the mound he had created, but unable to leave it.

Eventually, he backed away, trying to remember the surrounding area so he could recall her spot if he ever wanted to return. But he also knew his memory was likely not up to the task. Making his way back to the trail, he thought about continuing and doing the whole Boy Scout trail, but knew this would be a mistake. He could envision the



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sleeping bag in his tent and wanted to be inside it, hidden from everything. About half way back to the camp site, hunger pangs began to rumble. He wished he had cooked four eggs instead of two. He had refrained from putting any snacks in the backpack, as it seemed inappropriate to store food with Marian. The backpack was much lighter, rested higher on his back and felt uncomfortable with the empty urn.

As he neared the trail head, he saw a family approaching. Two boys were racing ahead of their parents, eager to start down the trail. Their shouts made the park seem like a different place, as if the noise transformed the rocks and trees into the amusement park Marian had described. He thought about his own relationship with his grandkids and how he had trouble relating to their video games and hyper lifestyle. It wasn't that he didn't love them, but he could only handle so much of their screams and games and music. And when he was around them and felt this way, it made him feel deficient, like he was a bad grandparent for not loving them unconditionally.

The father approached him, "How's the hike?"

He stopped, surprised by the question, and not ready to respond. 'I just left my wife's ashes on the trail' was probably too much information. "It was nice, but I'm a little hungry."

"We have granola bars," his wife began unzipping her backpack.

"No, I'm fine. A little hunger isn't such a bad thing. Plus, I'll be at my campsite in ten minutes. And you've got your boys to worry about down the trail."

"Did you see any wildlife?" the husband asked.

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“I didn’t see a thing,” he said in amazement. He had not thought about it, but the animals and birds had avoided him like they knew his purpose and wanted nothing to do with it.

“We’re not going to see any either, with those boys hooping and hollering all along the trail,” the wife pointed out.

“They’ll quiet down a mile or so into the walk,” the husband reassured her.

Every bird and critter will be scared off to another county by then, he thought. Instead of sharing this thought, he simply said, “Enjoy the walk.” He departed the group and quickened his pace to get to his campsite.

Although it was barely 11:00 AM, he made another turkey sandwich for an early lunch. Who knew camping could make you so hungry? After lunch he thought about what he should do next. While he could see why his wife wanted to camp together, being alone at a campsite seemed lonelier than being in his house. He knew he could make it through the day hiking and resting, but the thought of another evening sitting by the campfire drinking beer by himself scared him into action.

Packing his stuff was a fairly simple operation, until he got to the tent. Folding it the first time made it twice as big as the nylon bag it came in. He wondered how it had come out of the bag last night, but couldn’t recall. He unfurled it again so he could re-fold it to get it to fit. Carefully scrunching the air out of every corner, he reduced its size, but it still wouldn’t fit in the bag. He thought about doing it one more time, but his urge to leave convinced him to stuff the bag and tent separately into the car trunk and leave.

The afternoon sun was now pounding the park. The trees and rocks all turned the same dull grayish brown, as if the colors were hiding from the sun. He stopped at the

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ranger station to let them know he would not be staying another night. As he pulled out into the highway, he realized he would need to explain to his children why he scattered their mother's ashes without them. He had the whole ride home to figure out an explanation.

The End