

WILLY

I've never had many friends. As a kid, mom insisted I was just a shy boy. Dad was sure I suffered from some sort of antisocial disorder. I didn't feel like I was suffering, but my parents seemed alarmed. They sent me to a psychologist. The doctor asked a lot of questions and made me fill out a long, multiple choice questionnaire. My father fired the counselor after three sessions. He said she knew a lot of long words, but didn't know how to fix my problem. When I was 16 years old dad enrolled me in a Dale Carnegie course on how to win friends and influence people. It didn't take long before the instructor reported to him that I was a poor student. I wouldn't have minded having a friend or two, but I preferred video games to people. I held the record at the local bowling alley arcade for the high score in Pac Man, Frogger and Space Invaders.

After the shrink and Carnegie failed, dad surrendered and shipped me off to military school. Most people would have dreaded the thought of going to a place like that. But it didn't bother me. As long as I followed orders and did as I was told, they left me alone. When I graduated from the academy two years later my best friend was the Nintendo Game Boy mom got me for Christmas. Dad grimaced as I opened the gift, but he kept his mouth shut. By that time, I think he had already started giving up on me.

On a visit home one weekend in my senior year, father pulled me aside for a man-to-man talk. He said it with nicer words than I could later recall, but he decided that he'd already invested enough in me and didn't think it was worth paying for me to go to college. He said a real world education would do me more good.

So I joined the Army. Free room and board, plus they gave me a check every month. Dad

liked that. Mom was too timid to protest. The Army taught me how to shoot a gun. Six months later I was marching over the sands of the Iraqi desert in George the First's war against Saddam Hussein. It was there that I met Willy, the only friend I'd ever had that stayed my friend for more than a week.

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Willy and I were best of friends throughout our twenty years in the Army, and thereafter. We did everything together, hiking, crazy travel adventures, bowling, Friday night poker, skeet shooting; we were inseparable. He was best man at my wedding. We knew each other better than we knew ourselves.

A few months ago, over 25 years after we first met, Willy and I launched our raft onto the serene Oregon side of the Klamath River. We paddled by deer grazing on the riverbanks, osprey soaring above the lush forest, and dragonflies buzzing through beams of sunlight at daybreak. We seemed to be the only boaters on the waterway. Morning dew weighed upon the leaves; fresh air filled our lungs. It got hot as the sun lifted into the sky and by mid-day I'd already dived in a few times to cool off. By early afternoon we passed onto the untamed California side of the river; waves cascaded over boulders and thundering whitewater eclipsed all other sounds of nature.

We zoomed down the Klamath River, Willy at the helm. The forest whizzed past, and a towering, dangerous waterfall lurked straight ahead. It was late June and the waters had already toasted to summer temperatures. But it had been a heavy winter and the river was at a high level, rapids still at their most ferocious.

Willy and I had traveled on many adventures together since our Army days in Iraq over two decades earlier. Yet Willy had to talk me into this trip. We were experienced rafters, but we didn't know this river. I'd never been one to underestimate the mighty force of nature, and I had reservations about this venture. Plunging down a river like the Klamath without a guide was foolhardy. But Willy scoffed, said he had it all mapped out. And there were some old, abandoned nineteenth century mining camps worth exploring. Besides, he promised me a surprise that I was going to love. Willy grinned and asked if I'd ever heard of an old green treasure box. I laughed, but he just kept the smile and wiggled his eyebrows. Willy always made up stuff, whatever it took to get his way. I waffled between the hype and trusting my instincts. But in the end, I acquiesced because Willy asked, nothing more. Willy was my friend, my only friend.

Willy was a headstrong, take-charge man. And once he got something in his head, there was no changing his mind. Those traits had earned Willy his Captain bars back in Iraq. Captain Rocco had led our unit into a tiny Iraqi village to capture some strategic computer files detailing enemy attack plans. Willy was second in command. It was well after midnight and the mission was supposed to be an easy in and out. Flashes from the second story of the targeted building ahead lit up the midnight sky. Rapid machine gun fire cracked our eardrums; heart rates tripled in an instant. Rocco doubled over and collapsed onto the dirt street; his right hand clutched his ribcage, blood spouted from the side of his neck, and the dread of his pending demise was etched into the crevices on his face. We dragged our wounded captain to cover. Rocco ordered us to retreat, but Willy objected.

“Abandon the mission. That’s an order.” Rocco belched blood along with his words.

“Fuck that, Rocco,” Willy countered. “You’re in no shape to give orders. You’re relieved.”

Willy left a man with Rocco and the rest of us took out the gunner and captured the computers.

Rocco recovered, but his wounds merited him a ticket home. Willy's decisive action earned him a promotion.

The waterfall roared a hundred meters straight ahead. Willy had told me about the falls, but the flash of anxiety he couldn't mask announced the arrival of the obstacle a little sooner than he'd expected. Willy stretched over the side of the raft and paddled hard to his right in a frantic endeavor to reach shore, no more than ten meters away. But the current was strong and the river rocketed us forward. Spit spewed out of his mouth as Willy exhorted me to do my share of the work. But water pellets battered my eyes, and blindness was the price I paid for neglecting to wear goggles.

"I can't see a damn thing," I said.

"You don't need your fuckin' eyes to paddle, asshole. Pull hard right."

Willy had captained our 3rd Armored Cavalry Battery in Desert Storm, and demanded that his orders be followed without question. Willy led us on long marches, zig-zagging around rocks and hills in a remote section of the Iraqi desert, for no reason other than to remind us that Herr Willy was the man in charge. And he held no empathy for laggards.

I plunged the paddle into the water as far forward as I could reach, and pulled towards shore. My left arm was weak from an old war injury. An osprey swooped into the water in front of us and emerged seconds later with a fish in his mouth, wiggling and fighting for his life. The nose of our raft dipped, and a gush of water washed over my head. I didn't let up, and continued paddling as hard as I could. The rapids snickered at our feeble efforts. My back was to Willy, but I could picture him grumbling "Fuck you" with his middle finger wagging towards me. I muttered, "Fuck you too, Willy," under my breath. But I don't think he heard me.

Willy could be autocratic and callous. But he was also a kind man. There was nobody I would want more as my advocate than Willy. After being blown apart by a landmine in Iraq, I lay in a makeshift hospital tent. When I awoke after three days in a coma, Willy was by my side. One of the nurses told me later that the doctors wanted to amputate my left arm. But Willy wouldn't let them. He not only never left my side; he posted an armed guard outside the tent to make sure they left my arm intact until I could decide for myself. By the third day, even the doctors saw enough progress to give it a 50/50 chance of recovering. Willy never mentioned that episode again. I never forgot it.

I rubbed my eyes back to sight just in time to witness the falls directly in our path. Willy loved to beat his chest, but his strokes did no more to propel us towards the riverbank than my own. Our paltry production paled in contrast to the river's strength. Willy groaned and stopped paddling. "Sorry bro, I might have miscalculated a bit."

I pulled in my paddle, bewildered, and looked back at Willy. He forced an apologetic smile and a resigned expression emanated from his cat-like amber eyes. He stared right at me, yet seemed to focus elsewhere. In all the years we'd know each other, I'd never detected even a wisp of defeat or acquiescence in Willy. But I saw it in his eyes that day.

I turned forward just as our craft launched over the top of the waterfall into the blue sky ahead, soaring as if in slow motion. "We're fucked," I groaned to myself.

In an instant we accelerated to warp speed. The paddle flew out of my hands and I grabbed the lifelines along each side of the craft. The raft twirled in mid-air, on a rollercoaster without rails. My backpack whacked me in the head as it sailed out of the raft. Forest, water, the boat floor, and the cloudless sky raced by, in no particular order. I prayed as we flipped through the air, gyrating in

every direction. But the words shot out of my mouth garbled, inadequate and confused, collapsing unheard into the pool below. I clutched the rope so tight that I could feel the indentations pressing on the palms of my hands and fingers.

I scrambled for a solution, any little thing that could salvage the outcome. Thoughts of regret and death marched side by side through my mind. No time to think. Just then, Willy catapulted forward past my head. I instinctively ducked, but could feel his arm brush against my shoulder and the warmth of his breath as he screamed in my direction. Torrents of water muddled his words, some crazy drivel about happy birthday wishes.

The lifelines jerked from my hands. I tumbled through the air, then plummeted feet first into the water. Toes pointed and knees slightly bent, just like they trained us to jump out of a helicopter into the Iraqi Sea. I torpedoed towards the bottom at electric speed, trapped in the cage of a billion bubbles.

Water rifled up my nose and into my sinus cavities. Instant sensations of drowning triggered waves of panic and nausea. My left foot and knee banged on the river floor; my ankle twisted in a crevice between rocks. My ears plugged up, as if I were in an airplane descending too fast. I managed to hold my breath, but my head felt as though it were about to detonate at any moment.

I gathered my bearings and stabilized my feet against a hard surface. I coiled and pushed off the slippery bedrock, propelling myself upwards. Water found a way into my throat and displaced whatever air remained in my lungs. My chest imploded. I was desperate for oxygen. Bubbles gushed by, tingling over my skin.

I erupted through the surface, sucking and gasping for air. I gagged and belched, spewing a putrid concoction of vomit and river water. I bobbed up and down, thrilled to be alive, still

coughing and convulsing. I looked around for Willy, but spray from the waterfall limited visibility. I glanced up and thanked God for answering the prayer that I thought had fallen unheard. I also vowed to follow my instincts and never again blindly stumble into such a risky endeavor. That asshole almost got me killed. I called out Willy's name.

No answer.

The water churned and I dog-paddled away from the plunging waterfall. An eddy swirled along the riverbank to my left. I pinched my nose and popped my ears. Another pool whirled about on the opposite side of the river behind an ancient pine tree that had toppled halfway across the waterway. Beyond that, the river meandered away, placid, in stark contrast to the violence that roared behind me. Our raft floated upside down a hundred meters downstream, before disappearing around a bend in the river. The backpack containing all my essentials was lost.

I scanned the riverbanks from the base of the waterfall down to the river bend, then back again. I couldn't see him in or out of the water. I called out for Willy. No reply.

I could barely hear my own thoughts. I powered my way through the eddy that challenged my every stroke, fatigued and fueled by adrenaline alone. I waded towards shore, still looking around for my friend. I dragged myself up the embankment, exhausted.

I stood at river's edge and surveyed the surroundings. Blood oozed from a gash on my foot. My scraped knee stung. Neither wound warranted a second thought. The left ankle throbbed, but wasn't debilitating. I was far enough away from the falls that my voice could be heard and I once again called out Willy's name. Still no response. He could be anywhere. Sitting on the shore a half mile downstream waiting for me. Or drowned at the bottom of the river.

Then I saw him across the waterway.

Willy's body was splayed over the pine tree collapsed across the water, juxtaposed and somewhat camouflaged by half-dead branches near the top of the tree. His arms draped over the downstream side of the trunk as if hanging on to a lifeboat. His legs and feet drooped in the water, wobbling with the ebb and gentle flow within the pool. His head hid atop the tree trunk amongst the branches.

I hobbled along the riverbank, then dove into the water towards my friend. I kept my head up and eyes focused upon Willy as I swam, frantic, as if the pace of my strokes might assure a good result.

I grasped onto a branch from the fallen pine and worked my way along the trunk towards Willy. I climbed onto the tree, sat down, and cradled his head on my thigh. Blood trickled out of the left side of his skull and was caked down the side of his face and neck. Rocks had gouged a considerable chunk from his cheek. His eyes were open. I checked for a pulse. But water sloshed up and the tree-top oscillated before I could get a reading.

With one arm I clutched Willy under his armpits, and we eased into the water. He was heavier than I expected him to be. He started slipping from my hold and sinking to the bottom. I tightened my clamp around his chest and managed a few strokes, then discovered the river was shallow enough to walk. I staggered to my feet; struggling to keep my balance on the mossy stones. Then lugged Willy onto the shore before tripping on a root, and fell atop him. I wrenched my knee on a jagged rock and groaned. Willy had no reaction to my body crashing onto him.

I towed him up a slight bluff onto a flat spot. His eyes were rolled back, his face white and clammy. His fingers were blue. They felt squashy and malleable, like one of those little black rubber balls you're supposed to squeeze a hundred times every day to make your hands strong. I

pressed his wrists.

Willy had no pulse. I placed my ear over his heart as a double check. Nothing. I instinctively resorted to my CPR training, pressured his chest and breathed into his mouth, like blowing up a balloon. But different than ever before. I'd given mouth to mouth a hundred times during my Army schooling. But never to someone that I knew well, or who might actually be dead. My heart rate quickened and battered the walls of my chest. Sweat rolled off my brow and onto Willy's face.

No response. I frantically repeated several times. Then finally stopped, out of breath. His arms were limp, his face listless.

I lifted my lips from his and looked into his eyes. Then scanned his head, torso and limbs. I'd seen plenty of dead bodies in my Desert Storm days. I couldn't tell if drowning or blunt force trauma had caused his demise. But Willy was gone.

I sat upon my knees on the riverbank, arms draped over Willy's torso, my face just above his. I willed up and started to cry. But the tears never came. Willy wouldn't have liked tears; that wasn't the Army way. Whatever pain our violent journey had inflicted upon him had dissipated in death. I rested his head upon my lap and rocked back and forth for the longest time, lamenting the choices that had delivered us to that moment.

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We had both retired from the Army five years ago, after completing the 20 years required to earn a full pension. Willy succeeded right away. He started a security consulting firm and landed fat contracts with a few Silicon Valley companies. He'd earned gobs of money the past few years,

more than enough to last his lifetime.

With Willy's tutelage, I started my own security company in Southern California. But a break-in on my watch and an unfortunate shoot-out started by a delusional employee who thought he was surrounded by Saddam's Royal Guard cost me my only two contracts. I wallowed in debt for several months before calling it quits. Willy offered to bail me out, but I declined. He knew I was too proud to take his money. He'd been trying to put cash in my pocket ever since without dinging my pride and ego. Willy suggested I go to work with him, said we'd be partners. But I hadn't decided what I was going to do yet.

My wife, Cara, left me about six months ago. She said she loved me, but it was a one-sided relationship living with a man who rarely talked to her and answered every question with a one syllable grunt. I told her that I'd change, but she didn't believe that was possible. Cara took our five-year-old daughter, Amanda, and moved to Colorado. I think Cara felt left out when Amanda and I huddled around the computer playing video games. Perhaps I should have spent more time teaching Cara how to play the games. But she didn't have much interest, and she really wasn't very good.

I swished away a fly buzzing about the gash on Willy's face. The sun sank below the horizon and a cool breeze whipped up over the river. I shivered, running both hands over my arms and legs to erase the goose-bumps. It was probably thirty miles to the nearest civilization, and I couldn't tell you in which direction that would be. I had no raft, no food, no phone, no compass, no dry clothes and no shoes. Just the wet shorts and tee shirt I started the day with.

Willy was dead. But in a way, Willy proved to be my savior. We all complained about those long desert marches, but Willy taught us to survive in conditions and situations much harsher than

my current dilemma. He directed us how to find shelter when exposed to the elements, and taught us how to use nearby resources to keep warm on freezing nights. Most important, he trained us to erase panic and fixate on the positive. “Ignore what you’ve lost. Focus on what you have.”

I placed my hand upon Willy’s arm and calmed myself. I didn’t need a phone, a compass or shoes to survive. I had strength, good health and a swift-running river. I placed Willy’s head on a soft bed of leaves and set off into the forest in search of asylum.

It didn’t take long to find a large, protruding boulder that would defend me from the wind. And there were plenty of pine needles I could pile onto myself to keep warm enough to sleep, and survive.

I returned and dragged Willy to a nearby embankment of rocks, earth and small pine trees. I laid him by the base of the crag and stacked branches, pine cones, leaves and whatever else I could find onto him to keep away predators. Just as I got him settled, the corner of a piece of paper in his hip pocket caught my eye.

I rolled Willy a quarter turn and removed the leaflet. It was like a long thin pamphlet, or a program they might give you at the theatre. It was encased in one of those clear ziploc plastic sleeves, like a kid might use to protect his most valuable baseball card, hoping it would last a lifetime. The single sheet of paper was dry and had been folded many times. I opened the pouch and unfurled the document with great care, then laid it out atop a nearby flat rock.

The writing was in ball-point pen and some of the words were smudged. There was no doubt, however, that this was a handwritten map of some sort.

The Klamath River weaved its way from the upper left to the bottom right corner of the map. About a third of the way down, the river dropped vertically, about three inches straight down

the page before continuing its winding and bending path. Above the vertical drop were written the words “CAUTION – WATERFALL.” I stopped reading, stared at the map and re-read the capital letters. Willy was no bumpkin. He may have been a thrill-seeker, but he was also a detailed, meticulous planner. In our Army days, he might have made us march in a half-mile circle ten times, but he would have calculated a safe excursion around the waterfall.

But he became more reckless since leaving the Army. I’d been deep sea diving for years, but Willy took up the sport to pursue his interest in wreck diving, especially ships and planes sunk during World War II.

We traveled to freezing waters of the Barents Sea inside the Arctic Circle off the northern coast of Siberia. Willy had only been diving for three months, but thought he was more expert than he really was. He ignored my pleas and those of our Russian guide, and plunged deeper than advisable to investigate the inside of an Allied ship of the Arctic Fleet. I accompanied him; the guide refused. Willy got stuck in an interior window of the vessel. After a while, the cold permeated our thermal dry suits, hypothermia set in and our oxygen was running out. I waffled between trying to extricate Willy and re-surfacing for help. I kept tugging and finally budged the window frame a few inches. Willy broke free. After an abbreviated stop halfway, he ran out of air on the way to the surface. Fortunately I had enough to get us both to safety.

Willy rested an hour and then went right back down. When the guide and I protested, he said “I didn’t come this far to leave part of that ship unexplored. Who knows what treasures I might be able to salvage?”

A month later we were trekking off the established trails in Nepal in search of one of the original wood block printers from the Tang Dynasty, over 1,200 years old. Willy slipped on the

glacier and tumbled into a crevasse. He broke his leg, but the guides were able to pull him out. He was lucky the crevasse wasn't deeper.

Willy seemed to be on a quest to match the adrenaline rush of bullets whizzing past his head or being knocked off his feet by exploding landmines. I grew leery of his crazy adventures, but I never mustered up the nerve to say no to Willy.

Now, there was a large, circled red "X" on the map, about two miles downstream and a mile or so east of the river. Much like the big "X" marks the spot you might envision on the 19th century treasure map to Edmond Dantes' jewels in the Count of Monte Cristo. Beside the red "X" was a tightly written paragraph, which laid out clear instructions on how to travel from the banks of the river to the spot marked on the map.

I wondered what the hell Willy had in mind. He had been on plenty of grand adventures. It would have taken more than just an old deserted mining camp to spark his interest. There had to be more. Perhaps this was indeed some sort of treasure map. After all, he had promised a surprise. I looked back at Willy, nestled along the edge of the boulder. His face looked older and his wrinkles were deeper than when he was alive.

I went back to the shelter I'd found for myself, but couldn't sleep. My mind bounced back and forth between hunger, cold, treasure and survival. I wondered if I would ever see my daughter Amanda again. If there was any chance that Cara might take me back. What was sitting by that little red "X" on Willy's map? Perhaps I should sign up for the Dale Carnegie class again. That'd show Cara how sincere I was.

Something flitted around and around my head. It sounded like a cricket, but buzzed more like an annoying fly. I swatted left and right with both arms at the tiny tormentors until the noise

went away. I thought about insects crawling all over Willy's open wounds. Then the bugs started creeping up my legs, my chest and onto my face. I leapt up, shook my legs and brushed my body as fast as I could, face first. But there was nothing there. No bugs, no insects, no crickets, nothing. I climbed atop the boulder and huddled up shivering the rest of the night.

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I jumped up with the sun, tired, weary and anxious to be on my way. I ran straight to the river and dove in. Didn't give a shit how cold it was, I had to wash off all those bugs, imagined or not. Then I walked over to take one last look at Willy, and piled rocks and leaves around his body. It was the best I could do for now. Hopefully I could get back to retrieve him soon. I stuffed the map into the waterproof plastic sleeve and stashed it into the zippered pocket of my swim trunks.

I trudged back into the river. The water was chilly, but not near as cold as being hunched up on that rock and quivering all night. The river would be warm soon enough. I rolled onto my back and let the current carry me downstream feet first. The float was gentle and peaceful, nothing like the calamity of the prior day.

About a half hour into the tour I recognized a landmark from Willy's map, a large dead pine tree on a sandbar, charred and split from an old fire. Also washed up on the sand and gravel shoal was our raft. I swam straight for the spit and charged towards the boat. There was no paddle, but Willy's backpack had been tied into the craft. I rifled through the knapsack and found shoes, a flashlight, a waterlogged iPhone, fold-up camp shovel, a wallet, compass, long pants, keys, a hatchet, a bag of protein bars, eating utensils and plates, a Swiss Army knife, and a sweatshirt I sure

could have used last night. With the hatchet and knife I knew I could carve out a makeshift paddle out of some branch or driftwood. The ride home just got a lot easier.

I grabbed a few protein bars and sat down on a large Douglas fir tree fallen across part of the river. I scarfed down two bars, dangled my feet in the water, and pulled out the map.

The camp with the red “X” on the map was less than a mile away. Willy expected to find something there, the map didn’t say what. But by then I’d conjured up visions of chest-loads of jewels, rubies, pearls and sapphires. Or long rows of gold bars stacked to the ceiling of some cave. Perhaps a trunk filled with uncut diamonds. I had no idea where he got his information. But I knew from experience that Willy did a lot of research, always had great sources, and he was usually right.

All the strange and smeared markings on the map popped to life as the terrain had unveiled itself over the past 24 hours. I looked left and spotted a boulder with a small pine growing out of it, indicating the trailhead. The camp was no more than a twenty-minute walk away.

The map to the treasure rested upon my lap, mine for the taking. I started whittling a paddle out of a piece of driftwood. I thought about the old green treasure box and the surprise Willy had promised. I was unemployed, had my car repossessed, my house foreclosed on and would soon be evicted from my dead friend’s sofa that I’d been sleeping on. My wife had left me and took our daughter with her. I was \$10 short of bankruptcy and a day or two away from spending my foreseeable future in a tattered sleeping bag in front of some massage parlor in Chinatown. That treasure was going to turn my life around.

But Cara was never too dazzled with money. She’d probably be more impressed if I came out of the Dale Carnegie course with a few more social skills. Cara and Amanda were the only friends I had left, and I hadn’t seen them in six months. I could even swear off video games if that

would help convince her to give me a second chance. Amanda probably wouldn't be too thrilled with that choice. But there were plenty of things we could do together, things we could all three do together.

My thoughts kept circling back to Willy. He had survived all those battles, bombs, snipers and mortars in Iraq. He endured diving in Arctic seas, and falling off a glacier in Nepal, only to be done in by his quest for some treasure that may or may not even exist. What a waste, what a fucking waste of a good life.

I gazed back at the trailhead boulder, then down at the treasure map. I stared at it for the longest moment, then very calmly I tore the map in half. The thought of doing so had not even crossed my mind seconds before. But now it felt like the perfectly correct thing to do. That silly map had already brought enough grief.

I ripped the map in half again, and again, and then again.

I stood up on the fallen tree trunk and crumbled the fragments into the shape of a paper baseball. I wound up like Sandy Koufax, hesitated for just a second at the top of the windup, then chucked it into the rapids.

I doubt if Willy would have approved of destroying the treasure map. But I didn't care. I had his car keys and credit cards to get me to Colorado. I suspected that I might come to regret the impulsive decision someday. But at that moment, for some mysterious reason, I was quite pleased with myself. That treasure would have felt like some sort of trade-off, or compensation, for Willy's life. I don't think I could have spent a nickel of that money with such a thought in my mind. I didn't need all those riches. The Army had taught me plenty of skills. I wouldn't have any trouble finding a job.

I didn't wait around for second thoughts to creep into my mind. I dragged the raft down to the water's edge and launched myself downstream. The paddle I'd carved out of an old piece of driftwood was ugly and crooked, but it steered me just fine. Good enough to get me back to where I belonged.

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