**Abandoned, Neglected, and Isolated:**

**A Memoir of an Addict’s Resurrection**

I was abandoned in the middle of a desert. My family left me, my friends failed me, and I was powerless. It was the start of my resurrection from the dark depths of depression and addiction.

Following the advice of a therapist, my parents subjugated me to a wilderness rehabilitation program. The recipe to cure my wretched soul: complete immersion in the desert, primitive essentials, and therapeutic guides.

The program started off at a warehouse in the nearest town. I wasn’t allowed to bring anything. They gave me the clothes I would wear, the gear I would need, and a backpack so large that I could have fit inside it myself. If an M-16 were included, I would’ve been ready for war. Yet we were deprived of what seemed to be basic necessities: I did not get toilet paper, a pillow, or utensils. All necessities I would learn to live without.

We boarded a monster truck and drove off into nowhere - for three bland hours. Half the time I don’t even think we were on a road. Venturing into the wilderness, void of everything to which I was accustomed, should have inflicted trepidation, but I was so depressed I didn’t feel anything. This was a last-hope program designed to radically repair my suicidal soul, but really I couldn’t care less. The only thing that elicited even a slight emotion was the scenery. We were in The Grand Staircase, a national monument, replete with colorful cliffs and grandiose plateaus which, I thought, was actually a bit beautiful. It was the first time I had thought positively about something in months.

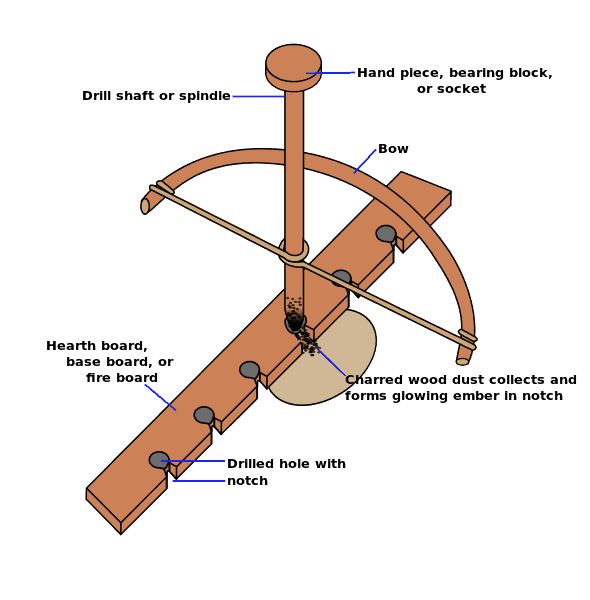
“We’re here,” the driver announced.

“We’re not anywhere,” I sarcastically responded.

Sure enough though, there was a group of six guys and two guides waiting around a campfire for me. A nearby line of sleeping bags and a hanging food line comprised the rest of camp. Other than that, there were trees and sand, for seemingly ever.

I didn’t sleep the first night. The bed of sand wasn’t as comfortable as any mattress I had ever slept on. I barely ate the first day. The pots of slop weren’t as tasty as anything that would be served in modern society. It poured rain and, without anywhere to take cover, I sat in the sand and took it. I watched with reluctant acceptance as my clothes, backpack, and I became drenched. This is what I deserve, I told myself. Hell on earth, fitting for a wretched soul on earth. It’s not that I wanted to die, I just didn’t want to keep living. And who would actually want to live like this?

Every day was roughly the same. The sun would wake us up, we’d cook breakfast, then take 15 minutes for ‘personal meditation time’ during which we’d read, write, or sit in silence. The last part of our morning routine, according to the strict requirements of the ‘Leave No Trace Act’, consisted of cleaning up every last trace of our presence. Then the hiking began. It was grueling, especially with the hot desert sun bearing down upon us, and the guides never told us how close we were to the next camp because, “It’s about the journey, not the destination.” After hours of having our will to continue tested, we would encounter several gallons of water on the side of the trail, marking our campsite. After a full day of hiking, they were always a welcome sight.

Next, we’d set up camp. We would find a flat spot to sleep upon, an open spot for the campfire, and two trees to hang our food in between. Once the camp was set up, we’d race to start a fire, without lighters or matches. We started fires using only items we had found in the desert and a string the guides provided. It was extremely difficult. Bows were fashioned from a curved stick, spindles from a smaller, straighter one, and a fireboard from a flat piece of wood. Using a rock to push the spindle into the fireboard, we’d twist the spindle into the string, push it into the fireboard with the rock and, with a foot holding the fireboard in place, vigorously spin the spindle back and forth with the bow until hopefully, char from the wood ignited. Most often however, something would go wrong. The spindle would fly out, the alignment would get lost or, what would happen most of the time, nothing. You could go for hours, wearing yourself to abject exhaustion, without igniting anything. Fire busting is an extremely difficult task. It makes you realize that lighters are a taken-for-granted modern luxury, so starting a fire without one is very rewarding. Still, everyone else in my group was able to do it except for me. That wasn’t surprising though, I was a worthless, sorry excuse for a human so of course I couldn’t, of course I was inferior. Everynight, somebody would start a fire, so every night, I was reminded about my inferiority. We’d cook our dinners over these fires. Then, the guides would prompt us to open up about the tough times we went through.

The after-dinner talks were deep and emotional. One addict broke into tears when he opened up about his father molesting him, another when he talked about the impact of his father’s suicide. For me, it was the indirect agony I inflicted upon my mother. According to the philosopher of morality, Victor Kumar, “If an action doesn’t hurt anyone else, it is not morally wrong.” Unfortunately, no action only affects oneself. While my mom played no part in my drug addiction, it wreaked mental havoc upon her. She wouldn’t go to bed until I came home, and when I did so high, which was every night, she wouldn’t argue against me or preach the dangers of drugs, she would just cry. Since we lived in an old, small house, her sobs permeated every room. During these times, I’d convince myself that it was her fault for having those anti-drug beliefs, that if she accepted me as an addict she wouldn’t be miserable, but one campfire talk forced me to accept that the blame was on me. I caused my mom’s depression. She loved me and did everything she could for me, she wanted the best for me and saw my potential but I didn’t care: I gave up. By ruining my life, I ruined hers. I made her so miserable that she resorted to antidepressants. I opened up about this to my group and in a rare moment of vulnerability, I shed tears.

Some nights, like that one, the conversation would flow for hours. Though if it were raining or if we were exhausted from a long, hot hike, they’d get cut short. If the weather was nice, however, we’d sit around the hand built fire all night. Then, my favorite part of the program, sleeping under the stars in one of the darkest places on earth. We’d see a shooting star every few minutes.

The first time I saw a shooting star, I couldn’t deny it’s beauty. This place was dark, literally and figuratively, but that was an ephemeral moment of beautiful light. My mind was even darker than the night but I recognized the beauty of that shooting star. That one, small, positive thought was like a shooting star itself, a glimmer of light piercing through my dark mind. It shot through the walls of misery I barricaded behind. It forced me to face the fact that there is beauty in this world, I was just blinding myself to it. The next day, I decided to put more effort into my meals. I managed to cook something tasty; I actually recognized it as tasty. The next night, I took a few minutes to sculpt a bed out of sand. It made it more comfortable, another positive thought. I carved utensils from wood, found smooth stones for toilet paper, and configured my clothing bag as a pillow. I actively took steps to make my life better, to facilitate positive thoughts. Life’s hard, especially in the wilderness, but we have the power to make it better. And no matter how hard life gets, it will always get better. Rain came but always stopped. Hiking lasted miles, usually eleven, but we always reached our next camp. Friendships developed and conversations deepened. Slowly the desert tundra became a remedial paradise.

2.

I was born and raised in Fairfield, Connecticut. Located a short train ride from New York City, the town is full of rich, spoiled, arrogant white people. Since all our parents have money, everyone thought the world of themselves. Inside however, we were all terrified to grow up and lose our luxurious lifestyles. We all knew that unless we achieved excellence then we’d end up living significantly worse than what we’re accustomed to. The average household income in America is $50,000. In this bubble, that average has an extra zero. We knew that unless we did exceptionally better than everyone else, the quality of our lives was doomed to drastically decline. This drove the rich kids to step on each other’s shoulders, to belittle others in every way possible. Everyone’s main goal: to get into the best college so as to optimize the probability that they would somehow do better than their parents, no matter the costs. There was cutthroat competition in every aspect of life and I fell into this trap.

My father, having been raised in a relaxed, friendly suburb of Michigan, has credibly reported the rapid pace of life in Fairfield. The town is blinded by ambition for material success. Everyone is trying to jam more and more into their already packed days. The people think they need more of this, a better one of that. Materialistic beliefs govern their lives and contagiously infected me. In wilderness I realized a plethora of fallacies in my thinking: a need for success, luxuries, and the best college to name a few. I saw other people wearing Vineyard Vines and wished I could wear the same. I witnessed other people with in-ground pools, mansions, beach houses, Range Rovers, Manhattan penthouses, and thought that must be the reason they’re so much happier and cooler than me. Comparing myself to the people in the town made me feel inferior. My hometown is a bubble that disillusioned me, that blinded me from the reality of life.

I didn’t belong there. I never truly belonged anywhere. I had friends, but not good friends. I played sports, but coincided with the team’s chemistry. No girl presented herself, no popularity reigned, and certainly no groups welcomed me.

During my junior year US History class, the teacher matched me up with a stoner for a group project. Although he was friendly, I was dismayed at first. Unrestrained ambition compelled me to pervasively try my best, I had to achieve greatness like all the adults around me, I couldn’t let a stoner hold me back. To force effort from him, we did some work at his house, and actually accomplished a huge chunk of the assignment. Then he pulled out a two-foot tall bong from his closet. I had never smoked before, but was yearning for friends, happiness, and a new experience. Being at a rock bottom of sorts, I figured a bong rip couldn’t hurt.

Two months later I was a steadfast stoner, a part of his group of friends, and socializing almost every day. I had a valuable bong of my own now, and the desire to rip it influenced my habits even more. But with my loneliness problem alleviated, others started to develop. My grades started to slip, parental arguments developed, and dissonance between my previously ambitious work-hard do-good lifestyle and my now carefree have-fun lifestyle inflicted anguish.

My love for marijuana led to curiosity for other substances. My dealer told me Xanax creates a pleasant state of mind, which I found to be an understatement. The pill dissolved all mental conflicts. No longer did I worry about school, girls, success, my parents’ approval, or anything. It eradicated all my anxiety. Xanax put me in a place of no worries and no regrets. Like the great philosopher Thomas Gray once said, “Ignorance is bliss.” As I would later learn the hard way, it’s also dangerous.

Within a month I was failing every class. My parents were furious with me. Even my younger brother, who was characterized as the fuck-up of the family, looked at me disapprovingly. I was taking his place. Negativity appeared to me in every moment, negativity that was being erased by Xanax. But I wasn’t able to feel that high 100% of the time. The time before I took the pill was agonizing. I overthought everything: what would I do with my life, how would I fulfill my parents expectations, what do people think of me, what if I can’t get into a good college, why does shit keep happening, what’s going to go wrong next? When I had no social life, I had good grades and a healthy relationship with my family. Now that I had a social life, I had a terrible personal life. I couldn’t deal with the anxiety, nor could I erase it all with Xanax. Feeling hopeless, I jumped off a bridge. Thankfully, I landed in wilderness therapy.

3.

There was one event during my eight-week stay that I will vividly remember forever…

“Have you started a fire yet?” hollered the wilderness leader.

“No man, just smoke” I yelled back. In all honesty, I was feeling a pinch of disappointment even though it wasn’t expected of me to have started a fire by now. I had only been out here for two weeks: too early to kindle a campfire. And way too early to re-kindle a passion for life.

Now I was crouched, forcefully spinning one sage limb into the carved out hole of another. My head hung low and although there was a spindle in my hands, I was actually empty-handed. All I had succeeded in doing up to this point was futilely callusing my hands, which I now palmed my face with. Even when faced with one task, I couldn't do it.

Leaning back against a tree, I closed my eyes. My mind flashed back to what a music teacher once told me about the term Rubato, "This term gives you freedom. It enables arbitrary styles, tempos, and dynamics. One way might sound like the best way to play the passage, but experimentation may elucidate ways to enhance the emotions and beauty.”

It was dark out now, but I was still able to see those anomalous chunks of wood. I picked up the spindle, now much shorter than when I first started using it. I spun it against the other piece of wood as fast as I could, but only succeeded in tiring myself out. After that, I went at a slow and steady pace. Surprisingly, after a while, smoke started to rise. I excitedly started to go faster, until the spindle flung out of my hands and I had to restart. Each time, I tried a different combination of down pressure and speed.

Busting a fire isn’t as easy as it looks in movies. In fact, one of the guides was the trainer who taught Tom Hanks how to do it in Castaway. Apparently it took him multiple sessions over multiple days. Here I was after multiple sessions over multiple *weeks.* Every other person in my group could do it, some of whom had arrived here after me.I was a failure.

Despite the calluses, my hands were bloody. I cried, not out of pain though, out of self-pity. Busting a fire was something that every camper learned to do; we couldn’t finish the program without doing so. But here I was, weeks into the program, having only failed. I felt incompetent, worthless, like I was far below average, no-one special. But I reveled in these emotions. It meant that my depression was justified, that my lack of self-esteem was deserved, and my belief that I was better off dead was correct. So I kept going, for each failure reinforced these feelings. It was masochistic.

My arms were burning more than the wood, but they didn't stop moving. Despite negative Celsius temperatures, I was sweating in little more than a t-shirt. I could feel beads of sweat soaking my clothes and dripping from my forehead, so I juxtaposed myself away from the spindle to avoid dripping a drop of sweat onto the fireboard. This made it uncomfortably difficult, but I hated myself so much I didn’t care. I deserved the pain and the failure. I deserved to suffer so I kept going.

There was a certified personal trainer turned crack addict in the group who claimed that people stop way short from what they’re capable of. That people could actually exercise way harder and do way more way more reps than they think they can, we just give out sooner than we should. Well, I decided to prove him wrong. I decided to see if my muscles would give out, if I could actually reach a point where I literally could not continue any longer. I spun that spindle back and forth longer than I ever have before, only for it pop out again. So what. I might as well be dead. I had nothing better to do and I deserved the pain, so I tried again. This time, the spindle didn’t pop out so soon. I kept spinning it, past the point of fatigue, past the point of that quintessential muscular burn, to where it was so painful that I became numb. My muscles burned, my lungs were overworked, and my energy was obliterated. I screamed my last bit of might out, then dropped the spindle and fell back.

I languidly stared at the fireboard and all the black ash that surrounded it. It was still smoking a little bit, but it usually did that for a few seconds afterwards. Curiously though, after a few more seconds it kept smoking. Frantically, I gently blew on it, and it glowed back at me. I screamed again, not out of exhaustion this time, but out of pure bliss. I threw some kindling over it then sat back and watched the fire grow.

“Woohoo!” I shouted triumphantly.

The group rushed over to see my success for themselves. All of them knew through personal experience how difficult this task is. They enthusiastically congratulated me. I named the fire after my mom, Cheryl, who despite my actions never gave up on me. She’s always been and always will be a flame that guides me along my way, a source of heat that never relents. She has persevered through all my failures and, despite their recurring nature, she always finds the silver lining to motivate me to continue – to never give up. She saw the potential in me even when I didn’t. She’d have never doubted that I’d be able to achieve this. If it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t have achieved half of what I have - achievements even I thought were unachievable. She’s the reason I got through wilderness. She’s the reason I’ve emerged triumphant from all of life’s hardships. I happily gloated the entire time we cooked dinner over my hard-earned flames.

4.

The environment I was raised in set up the foundation for my demise. Humans are social animals, and my inability to fit in with the pompous high-strung Fairfieldians inflicted feelings of inadequacy. Drugs answered this problem, but caused others. Even if I had never turned to them, I still would have wound up in wilderness due to depression.

We are biologically programmed to adhere to norms. This psychological propensity was naturally selected for because it deters betrayal. Since we adhere to norms, we can function in groups. Norms foster trust by creating mutual expectations, they cultivate prosocial behaviors by providing clear guidelines for proper conduct, and they also galvanize the ostricization of norm violators. These norms are sustained by mutual expectations of conditional conformity - shared understandings of most people’s disposition to conform to the rules on the condition that others do so too. Otherwise, if nobody thought anyone cared, people wouldn’t abide by any norms themselves. Consequently, humans have a strong innate propensity to adhere to norms

In Fairfield, Connecticut, the norm was material wealth and pompous attitudes. I couldn’t help but to think the same way due to my innate norm adherence mechanisms. So I felt an intense ambition to attain wealth of my own so as to be justifiably pompous and high-strung. Everyone who succeeded at this were the coolest, most popular people in town. I didn’t succeed and was thus inflicted with a twofold cognitive dissonance. Norms made me want to display wealth and a high ego, but I wasn’t as wealthy as the other kids and I’m not naturally an egotistical douchebag. So I couldn’t align my actions with these beliefs, but these beliefs weren’t what I really wanted to believe anyways. Intrinsically, I value kindness, empathy, and genuinity, but these traits had no place in the adolescent social life of Fairfield. So my actions also failed to align with the beliefs. Even my beliefs failed to align with my true beliefs. Social norms riddled me with cognitive dissonance, but they weren’t the sole blame for my downfall.

In hindsight, most of what happened to me was the result of my decisions. I had to reach rock bottom to realize that I brought myself there. Social norms heavily influenced me, but ultimately my immature stupidity is what made wilderness necessary for my resurrection. I was so ignorant that I didn’t even realize how badly I needed help.

I had no say in my deportation. Previously, I was being held in a hospital psych ward. I had made a swift recovery from the bridge jump (miraculously, no bones were broken), but they wouldn’t let me leave out of fear that I’d jump off another bridge. So they kept me locked inside the hospital by handcuffing me to a stretcher, injecting a needle into my arm, and sedating me. The necessity of this drastic event might have been elicited by my manic screaming. But if you were told that your parents had signed for you to be locked up in a psych ward, wouldn’t you have reacted the same way?

On just one floor in one corner of the hospital, we were confined to our bedrooms (nobody else’s!) and a living room. We ate, watched movies, did occupational therapy, and talked to doctors. It felt like prison except the guards were nurses with caring facades who shoved pills down your throat. It seemed like I had been there forever. Desperate to go outside again, I accepted the first offer presented. 8-10 weeks in hell then home. Sure, I could get through that. I didn’t want to go home, I didn’t want to go to rehab, I didn’t want to do anything but neither did I want to do nothing. I was stuck in an existential state of apathy, but knew that I needed help. Somewhat thankful for the opportunity, I seized it and left the very next day. It was the first time I felt hope in months.

During my first few weeks there I was gloomy as hell. I had my hood up and sulked everywhere. My letters home were all about how terrible the conditions were, how I was being mistreated, that the program was a waste of time and would render me worse off then before I began. Then, slowly, I became acclimated, and started opening up. I realized how nice and peaceful it is to be away from everything. There was plenty of positivity to focus on, and I learned to find happiness there. Weeks 3-8 contained some of the most therapeutic and beneficial moments of my life.

Wilderness revolutionized my outlook on life. In the most primitive of living conditions, I found positivity all around me. From the beautiful landscapes, to the food I cooked, the friends I made, and the stars at night, I learned to appreciate the little things in life. I read a book on Taoism, the religion that founded the yin-yang, and learned that there’s positive and negative energy in everything – that reality is merely the manifestation of co-existing opposites (yin and yang). We have the power to perceive either one. We can focus on the negative and let it rule us, or we can focus on the ubiquitous positivity. As Zen Master Jon Kabat Zinn put it, “You can’t stop the waves but you can learn how to surf.” Since we have control over our reactions and emotions, every moment has the potential for appreciation. Indeed, the most precious thing in life is the moment that we are currently experiencing. No matter where we find ourselves we have the moment, a moment that, no matter what, contains something positive. That’s why it’s called the present. With this realization, I found the difference between consuming a meal and eating a meal, trekking with a 50-pound backpack and hiking with friends, a mistake and a learning experience, and the difference between existing and living. I learned to focus on the positive.

My wilderness therapy experience is no doubt the most influential event of my life. I entered as a wretched soul with no hope and no emotions. I graduated with a new perspective on life. The expedition ripped me to pieces, but provided the perfect environment for me to rebuild a better version of myself. I always looked for happiness in the distance, never found it, and then learned that I can make it with my own two hands. Fire-busting taught me that we all have determination and the power to achieve grand achievements; we just need to find the motivation inside ourselves. Knowing that I can do what less than 1% of the world can do (bust a fire) gave me hope that my life wasn’t meaningless. In the middle of the desert, I found the faith and ambition to pursue life to its fullest.

I learned many truths about life while in that dessert. Most importantly that addiction is a disease I gave myself. Life is what we make of it. I’ve been sober for the past five years and have never been happier. My mom, my flame, now gets to see me being happy and living a meaningful life – what she’s always wanted for me. In a way, wilderness saved not only my life but also hers.

5.

Writing this memoir was provocative but cathartic. These events are not easy for me to talk about. To this day, only my immediate family knows the full extent of what I went through. I never even opened up to my exes, who I was in love with, about what happened. I like to think of myself as sane and in touch with reality, but my history contradicts these beliefs. Have sane people been involuntarily sedated? Then involuntarily admitted to mental hospitals? Have sane people attempted suicide? I think I've beaten my mental illnesses, but aren't mental illnesses innate? If they're contingent upon biology, then they're incurable. I tell myself that mine were exacerbated by my environment (Fairfield) and since I'm no longer in that environment I'm fine. But what if a future environment provokes me in the way this past one did? That's already happened. After rehab, I thought I was cured, but just months later I wound up back at a mental hospital. It was my favorite one and I thought the program was effective, but a year later I lost it and got kicked out of school. Months after that I overdosed. Evidently, I have a propensity to ruin my life. This terrifies me. Look at what has happened, multiple times. After each event, I thought nothing like it would ever happen again, but it did. I'm scared of my character, by my propensities, by what I've brought upon myself and what I therefore will probably bring upon myself in the future. So now, even though I'm excelling at life, I'm adamantly aware that my life can fall apart at any moment. I know it can happen again because it already has happened again, and again. And if it's just going to keep happening, why let it? There's an easy way out, but I've already attempted it. So I’ve been pretending like what happened never happened. My tumultuous history has been bottled up, denied, for years. This coping strategy was the only way I could consider myself sane and be optimistic about my future. But it wasn’t sustainable. Random events, even something as docile as sand, would spark memories of what happened, and the fragile defense of that bottle would break and vehement emotions would pour out. I knew I couldn’t live my life letting ordinary entities trigger me, I had to let out my emotions in a safe, secure fashion, so I purposely broke the bottle and wrote this memoir. I’ve reread it maybe thirty times now and each time I cry, but these tears are justified, unlike the one’s provoked by sand. Now, my thoughts and feelings are contained, safe and securely, in this memoir.

Writing this reminded me of the profound influence wilderness therapy had on me. Recalling all the significant ways I emerged a better person refreshed my gratitude for primitively persevering through the wilderness. Telling this story forced me to open up and let out thoughts and emotions that were bottled up, some of which positive, others negative, but overall I now appreciate my wilderness expedition in a whole new way. It's reminded me that no matter how bleak life becomes, there's always hope. Even if you find yourself abandoned in the middle of a desert, life will get better. I've resurrected myself from multiple dark times, so no matter how dark times get in the future, I know I have what it takes to cure myself. Yes, I've ruined my life, but I've also fixed it. So even if I continue the pattern and ruin my life in the future, I'll also continue the pattern and rebuild my life. If there's one thing that I've learned from my battle with mental illness it's that no matter what, life always has the potential to improve. Never give up.