

## The Indian Runner

In the summer of 1977, when I was twelve years old, I went on a trip to the Grand Canyon with a group of backpackers. We were traveling cross-country from Pennsylvania, so the land passed by for days on end. I was the youngest in the group, by several years. Come to think of it now, most of my life having passed and a lot of it traveling, perhaps this trip was what ignited in my young spirit the wish to see the world's far reaches. I will attempt in these lines, with no mnemonic assistance other than the glass of wine before me, to recount the trip to you, and to tell the story of a miraculous acquaintance I then made, who visits me still from time to time.

For me, 1977 was a time of great duress. My family had recently broken up in a bitter and hateful way, shaking the moral foundations of my world. At the same time, I was game for adventure, looking to extend the domain of my explorations beyond the streams I followed to their sources on the mountainside above our home, along whose crest ran the Appalachian Trail, the sylvan playground of my boyhood, my realm of solitude and beauty. I remember vaguely the preparations for the trip, my exceedingly heavy and primitive equipment (compared to what we have nowadays), and I vaguely remember my departure for the three-week journey.

We travelled in a van, around eight or ten of us, forsaking seatbelts and lounging in all manner of positions on the floor and seats while John, the leader of the group, and another driver, spelled each other driving. We drove straight through, watching the landscape scroll by on the windows like a movie, punctuated three times by the diurnal rhythm. Once we arrived in the West, we visited a number of sights, from Four Corners, a spot where four state boundaries touch, to Mesa Verde, where the Pueblo Indians lived in dwellings hollowed from cliff faces, to the Painted Desert wilderness area. We made camp in this Painted Desert, earth sculpted by millennial flows of water into hills and valleys devoid of life, only to realize with the premonition of an oncoming storm, that our camp was in a dry riverbed, a *wadi* or *seyl*, as Arabian desert explorers say, terms I learned much later. I remember hurriedly moving our camp to higher ground as the wind increased in howling intensity.

I still vividly remember one image from this place. One of our group, I think his name was Phil, a troubled young man always aloof from the rest of us, wandered off from the new camp, into the storm. Surveying the surrounding hilltops, I saw him on top of the highest, an earthen pyramid, perhaps 40 m above the desert floor, his

plastic rain poncho billowing out behind him like a spinnaker sail. He was facing into the storm like Job facing God when He speaks from within the whirlwind, as if to say “I exist. I am here,” in the face of immense power. It was an act of defiance and self-affirmation that marked me. I wanted to be that man, alone to face the elements, bearing full responsibility for himself before the world. At the time there was no way I could have followed Phil—the howling storm would have blown me off the promontory like a leaf. But this archetype has held with me for my entire life. I hope that I have honored it.

I remember little else of the early parts of the trip, just these images, and those of some ancient petrified logs, and virtually nothing of the return trip home. But the central element of it all was the Grand Canyon, and that I remember still quite well. We parked our van in a lot with an observation deck nearby for tourists. But we were coming to do more than observe. After having something to eat, perhaps breakfast, I remember the endless (for me, twelve years old with a heavy backpack) switchbacks of the trail descending, the red rocks and red dirt, and the few tired people coming up from the other direction. We were bound for the Havasupai Indian Reservation, in the bottom of the canyon, to stay most of a week camping near the Indians. I may have had a map, and perhaps a compass too, but I did not know how to use them very well. And I know I did not have enough water. Our group was not particularly well-organized, and after some time I found myself alone. I will not say “lost”, because eventually I found my way, but I sure felt lost.

The heat was difficult for me to bear. I think it was July, judging from my memory of the t-shirt I got at the end of the trip (“Pack Shack Adventures, Grand Canyon, July 1977”) and which was lost many years ago. I had grown up in the northeast, not the southwestern desert, so I was much more accustomed to bearing cold than heat. I think I had only a small snack with me, no more substantial food, and very little water. When I stopped to eat it, I remember having the good sense to take shelter from the sun under an immense slab of red rock, sloping upwards at an angle, framed by blue, like a diving board into the sky. Having eaten my snack and finished my water, I tried to make sense of where I was, as there was no clearly-marked trail, and I did not know which way to go. The bottom of the Grand Canyon is big, especially for a child. Somehow I found my way, arriving at a village and then at the campsite hours after the others. Perhaps already I was being looked after by my new friend, though we had not yet met.

Our campsite was earthly paradise for a young adventurer. Along the banks of the Havasu River, with pools formed from sculpted stone, turquoise blue water,

boulders, and many waterfalls of all sizes. Only our group camped there, and there were no facilities of any kind that I can remember. I do not think we had any particular plans for the stay, as my memories are largely devoid of the other members of the group, though perhaps they were occupied with more adult activities than I was. Most of the days I spent with local Havasu Indian boys. They took me to their version of the “playground”, and I followed them through every obstacle course: jumping off the waterfalls they jumped, climbing back up the short cliffs to jump again, swimming behind the screens of water to see the outside world through a rain of diamonds, resting outstretched on beds of royal green moss to rest, having drunk our fill of the cool river water. As a child I was extremely agile and quite strong from gymnastics, so I managed to follow the Havasu boys everywhere, and gain their respect through physical prowess, in the absence of any common language. My last memory of playing with them was that an older boy joined us, perhaps 15, and performed a feat that definitively established his, or their, superiority over me. He climbed a high tree that had few branches, to perhaps 10 m in height, and dove from it head-first into the main pool below the waterfall! That feat was beyond me then, still is now, and probably was beyond me at any intervening point in my life. My memories of these boyhood revels fade after that remarkable dive.

On another day, I decided to go, alone, downstream on the river to see a higher waterfall than the one near our encampment, Havasu Falls I think. I still remember it, a ribbon of turquoise descending from an immeasurable height into a wonderful basin, with terraced pools of stone like those of various hot springs throughout the world (Pammukale in Turkey comes to mind). Thinking that I could simply follow the river downstream, and drink from it, I brought no water with me. The problem was that the riverbed was impassable, punctuated by many high waterfalls and canyons, so the entire approach to this wonderful place was far above the water and completely dry and exposed to the hot summer sun, descending to the river by a steep path only at the end. My imprudence became evident to me as I became tired and parched. There were many ups and downs along the path, and on one descent in the hot sun I began to feel really weak from thirst, having already been thirsty for several hours. Around a bend in the path, I looked up and saw a canteen sitting on a rock. I called out but no one answered. I looked around but there was not a soul. I took a long drink from that canteen, gave thanks, and continued on my way.

My last memory from this voyage was that in which I met him. For some reason I do not understand, I got it into my head that I had to call my parents. If you, reader, have children, you will know that their motivations are sometimes

inexplicable. The only phone was in the village, around 5 km distant, but the moment I had made the decision to make the call was already early evening, so I had little time. I took a drink, took all the spare change I had to make the call from the village pay phone, and set off running. I was quite fit, and accustomed to distance running, so I paced myself and was going fine. I had covered most of the distance to the village when, suddenly, a pack of wild dogs attacked me. There were many of them, perhaps ten or twelve, and I was small, and lacked the deep voice and bearlike beard which helped me in a similar confrontation at Mount Kailash in Tibet ten years later. I do not know how I managed. I think I may have hit one or two of them with rocks, and I surely screamed my lungs out at them. But I escaped. After I arrived in the village I made the call to my parents. I do not know if they even remember it.

By the time I finished making the call, darkness was enveloping the land. I was afraid. Not of getting lost, as the path to our camp was fairly clear, but of the dark, and of those dogs. So I took off running as fast as I could, with an urgency brought on by fear. I could taste blood in my mouth the whole way, but I did not stop, and did not reduce my pace. I reached a state of consciousness in which I was outside of myself, and then he joined me. I could feel him running alongside me, just over my left shoulder. I could see his face, but if I turned to look at him he was not there. He was calm, and imposed his calm on me, the way Indian warriors could affront any fate at all, with equanimity. I felt his presence with me the whole way, past where the dogs had attacked me (they did not return), all the way to the camp. And after that night, in my life when I am alone, and at the extremity of my will, he returns to accompany me once again. He comes, perhaps, from a vast reservoir of human souls left bodiless by the annihilation of their people, seeking company among kindred spirits who need their help.