

I Drug Him Further

by Isaac Spear

Introduction

When you stand at the edge of a canyon, look down. You see the rock just beneath your feet that might be a million years old, then look all the way down to the bottom and see some that are billions. It's full history that stands strong enough to support me standing on the top. Yet I will never know what happened to cause this or, more importantly, why. Our lives are sculpted by those that came before us and gave us that granite foundation. We will sculpt our layer of the canyon by smoothing a sandstone blanket of knowledge, wisdom, and traditions on the very top. Sooner or later, we all will pass, leaving only that sandstone layer behind. It is only then that we will see how the wind and rain carve into the blanket of our whole life's work. It is our responsibility to smooth that layer well enough to someday form that strong granite foundation that we once stood upon. Without each of our strong layers, others after us building upon our layer would all fall, should ours crumble. We must enforce it with good morals, pack it with wisdom, smooth it with knowledge and coat it with tradition. It is only then that our layer will contain the ingredients for that granite layer for the many others that may come after us to stand upon.

This is the story of a man who lived his whole life fighting for that granite foundation, a man that understood that the future rests in the hands of the youth, they are a ball of clay, and we have the sculpting knife. It's about a man that wanted nothing more than for his layer of the canyon to last forever, and to allow the many others that will follow to stand atop and look down. They won't be looking down a rusted, sandstone canyon but rather on their own life, with experience to share and wisdom to pass down. It's this tradition that creates such a rich and valuable life for the many others that had the opportunity to absorb all that they could from this special man. It's all about what they contribute to the canyon and what they will leave for others to stand atop and build upon. This is his story.

His Story

I drug him further. Not because I wanted to, but because I had to. It was three years ago when I signed onto this mess. It was an early mornin', like every morning. It was still as dark as the coffee that filled my cup. If you listened closely you could hear the sun turning in bed and rubbing his eyes as he began to rise and put on his work boots.

I was out in the field when Mr. Gordan came up to me, "Follow me son," he said, squinting through the darkness.

His vision was rough when it was noon, lord knows what he was seein' now. I was extremely puzzled; work was nowhere near finished. I had only started bustin' the rows less than an hour ago.

"Wipe that look off your face boy, you look dumber than a stump."

"Yes sir" I replied with little hesitation.

"I been thinkin 'bout it, you and I best take the weekend off, I believe we have a date," he said with a chuckle. "Go saddle up and pack things for three days. We'll be off at daybreak."

I did just that. I was excited to see what old man had in store for me. There was an odd feeling in my stomach, though, one I couldn't really explain. It's been nine years now since I started working for Mr. Gordan. I've been mad, pissed off, confused, disappointed, and about

any other feeling you can choke out. I ain't never felt this way before, I was scared and I had no idea why.

I stumbled around in the haze back to the tack shed and threw two saddles on the fence. I grabbed our bedrolls and tied them behind the canteen on the saddle. I grabbed a pitchfork and fished around knocking things off the rafters where I remembered seeing the saddle bags. Finally the fourth one fell down and hit me in the head. I threw them on the fence along with the saddles. I packed some nuts and grain for the horses and filled up the canteens. The Old Man always liked to shoot small game along the way for supper, so the rifle came along, too. I threw all our things in the saddlebags, saddled up the old buckskin just as Mr. Gordan rode up beside me on his bay.

Comment [OD1]: Not necessary to capitalize; style choice. (However, remember to stay consistent.)

"We're burnin' daylight son, get a move on, we got things to do." He barked. And sure enough, just like the Old Man said, we were off at daybreak.

* * *

The cold bit at my ears. This wasn't like the friendly gnawing from an anxious puppy dog, but more like I had a Caiman chewing on my face. I have been out in the cold weather for long enough that the wishes of my body warming up turned to wishes that it would grow colder so I'd go numb. There was not a living thing in sight. Any animal out in this weather was plumb foolish. Would this be my last trip? Would I let Mr. Gordan down? Would this place be a good enough compromise for him? These questions crossed my mind over and over again.

"No, No, No!" I shouted, continuing to push on.

North and South turned to rough bark on an old spruce and an oddly plied heap of oak leaves. East and West turned to the gash from a lightning strike on an adolescent aspen and the ancient Liken perched atop a balanced boulder on the mountainside above me.

Comment [OD2]: What is this?

Icicles formed on his chin as two clouds of steam bellowed from his nostrils with every step. The weight of the sled was gaining on us and dragging us down. I had very little food left and my water was frozen. The old buckskin knew what we were doing and he knew where we were going: it seemed as though I was just along for the ride. I bowed my head as it was my last attempt to find strength. I finished my prayer, hoping that was enough. I just couldn't understand that a man could live for nearly a century and still be so damn heavy. We pressed on for five hours, right after left, right after left. My fingers froze to the reins.

* * *

We started riding; I grew more and more anxious as we went. So many things were downright strange today.

It was more than three hours before I rode up beside Mr. Gordan and piped up, "Are we going back to the Big Horns sir?"

"Well son, does a bear shit in the woods?" he said with the best condescending voice he could muster.

"Yes sir," I rambled off, "I was just curious as to where we might be headed so early in the mornin'."

He cut me off, "Son, you can't learn nothin' if your mouth's a-jawin'. Now hush up and listen," he said. "You think you know me, don't you?"

He looked at me with the deepest stare, like he was trying to get to know my ancestors.

He continued before I could answer, "Hell no you don't, and you ain't goin' to before I'm pushin' up daisies in some podunk corn field."

He looked back the other way, it was obvious he was making a point not to look at me.

"Looks like I best help you out a bit," he said as he replaced his condescending tone with compassion.

I had never seen this side of him before; this tone grew in his voice and I didn't recognize it. It's a tone that only comes from wisdom. He was pulling from his whole life's experiences to finish each sentence. I rode along beside him and he continued to not look at me. His head was cocked sideways and he gazed off ahead of us, looking for something to help him put his pride away and tell me what he had to.

"What do I do, boy?" he asked. I looked at him with that puzzled look again. "Son, you know I don't like that look. You best wipe it off before I do." I smiled as he asked his question again, re-phrasing it slightly, "Why have I lived my life the way that I have? Why do I do what I do? Don't go answerin' it now, ride for a while, think about it son, it's why we're out here this mornin'. You go on ahead and enjoy the scenery for a while and pipe up when you think you've got it figured."

I thought for what must have been hours. The sun came up and it went back down. We didn't speak for the rest of the first day of our journey. The Old Man wasn't ever one to talk your ear off but it was obvious he was hittin' on a soft spot and didn't know how to handle it. We came to a clearing that was fit to stay the night. I unpacked my bedroll in a clearing about ten yards from Mr. Gordan and turned our horses out to graze for the evening.

I rose the next morning to Mr. Gordan sitting on a log around a pit of smoldering coals; I'm sure he'd been there all night long. The silence was so golden but I had to talk to him.

"Good mornin'," I said, as naturally as I could. It was obvious that I was nervous.

"You got it figured yet?" he ranted back.

"Is it. . . is it. . ." I studded.

"Well don't choke on it son, I'd feel bad if I my horse had to drag you all the long way down the mountain if you died," he said laughing.

I laughed and tried again, "Because you love it sir? It's your life!"

"What is?" he asked.

"Everything sir," I said. "Your work, your animals, your friends, your land."

He looked at me for the first time in about three hours. Compassion leaked from his tone to his stare.

"Why do I treat them with such pride and respect?" he stuttered a bit as he blindly grabbed for the right word to start his sentence. Without leaving time for me to respond, he answered, "It's because I want to leave them behind. I want my experience and wisdom to be passed on through the things I have left when I'm gone."

I started to think about the significance of what I was hearing. He kept talking as my mind drifted everywhere. It could have been thirty seconds or it could have been hours. I'll never know what he said as my mind wondered.

"Boy, are you listenin' to a damn thing I'm sayin'?"

"Well, yes sir," I lied. I couldn't have told you if he was talkin' about goats or about his mother-in-law.

“I’m bout to ask you somethin’ boy, and the ball, as they say, is gonna be in your court now.”

I smiled as if I knew what he was talking about. To tell you the truth, I was nervous to the core and I couldn’t even tell you the start of what he was about say.

“Are you listenin’ real careful-like, son? I’m only gonna say this once,” he spouted off.

* * *

I stopped and stepped off to check the riggin’. I pried my fingers from the rock-hard reins. The straps were wearing badly and there wasn’t much I could do now. I did the best I could to refasten the sled; there was a crack growing in the wood from all the bouncing around. I threw another strap around it and tied it off, hoping that would be enough. I have 13 more miles to go. I climbed on top again and gave him a kick. Thirteen, I thought, over and over again, it’s plumb straight bad luck. Again we got movin’, draggin’ one hundred years behind me, and back in the Big Horns we went. I drug him further and further.

* * *

He paused for a minute as we tacked up the horses and packed up camp. It was another 3 hours before he continued our morning conversation.

“I’ll have you do one last thing for me, and that’ll be all that’s left. Boy, it ain’t gonna be easy and my family will be as mad as a coop of old wet hens. You’ll know that it’s what I want and that’s all that matters.” He chuckled a bit as he looked up ahead of him. I could tell he was thinking long and hard. “I’ll warn you once about my wife, if there’s one thing I can teach you ‘bout her, like all women, it’s that you best not get into a pissing contest with a skunk.”

I laughed, perhaps a bit more than I should have. I was so grateful for a bit of humor though. There was enough of this serious stuff to last me for the next 10 years. “Gene,” he said loudly, like he was trying to wake me up or something. I spun my head around quick enough to get a crick in my neck. I thought something might have happened to the Old Man.

“We’re here,” he said. It was music to my ears. He stopped in a small clearing, not 10 yards long. “Look up!” he said, overjoyed.

I was able see forever. To the right I could see a farmer busy at work on his field. I could almost smell his sweat running from his forehead to his hands and onto the worn, cracked wood handles of the plow. Good-old-fashioned elbow grease, as Mr. Gordan liked to call it. If there was one thing I learned from him, it was hard work. Just beyond the plow lines, a tanker truck backed under a water tower. All day the sand will breathe its heat waves before being doused with a cold shower. There was a lake in the distance that reflected the snowcapped mountains with an effervescent glow. The many vehicles moving around reminded me of my favorite ant-hill I used to pester all summer long.

“Well, this is enough beatin’ round the bush ain’t it, least for a slick-nuttid kid like you.” he said as he stepped off his horse and grabbed a rein.

I snickered. I had no idea what he was implying at the time but I laughed anyway.

“Boy, when I die, you and I will take one last journey together, just you and I, for the last time, just how we are together now.”

He paused for a moment.

“I guess a bit different, there will be one horse and much more wood. I would like to see you as the last person I see.”

He paused for a minute as he kicked around on the ground in search for something. It was then that it dawned on me: I started to choke up and it was all I could do to stop the tears—never could I let him see me cry. This was the first time I understood how much I meant to the man. My eyes puffed up like dead toads as a single tear made its trail from my eye, down my cheek and around my chin. I’ll never know if he saw it though. Mr. Gordan found the remnants of a termite-eaten pine branch and jammed it in the ground so it was standing tall and proud.

“Here,” he said, “right here, this is where I wish to spend all of eternity. Boy, you will never tell a soul where this is. I want to be cherished by the tangible, useful things I leave behind, not by my grave. I don’t want those damn flowers spread out everywhere like it’s New Year’s confetti and people blubbering like fools over my tombstone; people can find a better use for their time and money. Son, you just tell them I’m in the Big Horns and I’ll always be watching. Can you do that son?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” I replied quickly with a choked voice. “I would be honored to, sir.”

* * *

I started counting the trees I passed. If the branch touched me, it got two points; if it was broken, it didn’t get any; and if it was close I gave it one point: 738, 740, 740, 741. I was being ridiculous and foolish but it was my only attempt to forget about my frost-bitten fingers, and the absence of a nose or ears. Sure enough, it passed the time, about nine and a half miles of it to be exact. I began to hear Mr. Gordan creakin’ behind me, like he could feel where we were. To me, it said that I was on the right path, but I was nervous. The Old Man always told me a solid nail never spoke. These nails were sure as hell speakin’; in fact, they were having a damn party. Nerves ran through my blood. Every time I looked back I feared I would see one side missing and something roll out on to the mountainside. Ahead I saw the gash I was looking for. That same young adolescent aspen was just to my left, and soon after that, I saw my oddly piled heap of stones and oak leaves. For three years they had stayed there. To think that the last person they looked up at was Mr. Gordan yellin’ at me, “Don’t destroy the landscape like a damn fool.”

I could see up ahead a small pointed branch leaning to one side, buried in the ground. I knew what that was. I stepped off my Buckskin and he just stood there. I lowered the sled and laid it on the ground. It was just then that he bowed his head and let it rest on the coffin. I untied my shovel and began to dig as once again a tear rolled its way down my cheek and over my chin where it sat for a moment and froze. I dug and dug, six feet down. I lifted the top of the sled as Mr. Gordan worked his way lower and lower into the earth. Old Buckskin left his muzzle on the head of the coffin till it was too low in the ground to reach. One more tear met the others now frozen on my chin. This one I am sure that Mr. Gordan saw.