

Hypothermia in California

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A true story I wrote 10 years ago and have somehow managed not to lose. It has made its way from one computer to another and serves to remind me that almost every thing is a challenge, and that in the face of adversity it's possible to find the strength to carry on.

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Adversity. Well, there's a word. It could be said that adverse situations occur in relationships, at work, at home, everywhere. I feel a strong connection to the word, and not because of internal hardship. Thank god that real adversity showed itself to me, on more than one occasion, but one situation has stuck with me over the years. It has had a way of softening blows that would otherwise have floored me. The adversity i speak of was physical, mental, and emotional but my mind carried me through the situation, as it has done before, but not with such a determination that i must absolutely live to see another day.

It all began at the base of an ominous looking, craggy mountain called Mt. Ritter. I didn't want to climb it. I was actually trying to get away from it, with my best friend. We had camped at the base of this mountain in the Sierra Nevada, some of the most remote back country that the lower forty eight states of America has to offer. At this particular location we were only about twenty miles from a road, but that was rare in this wilderness. Goods are still carried through the Sierra on pack mules, being quicker than the several hundred mile trip on the roads. That's how remote the place was. I had woken after a well deserved twelve hours of sleep, having gone to sleep at six o'clock the previous evening. We would not usually have gone to bed so early, but the altitude was affecting our stamina. I believe that the base of the mountain was at 9000ft, and we were near that point somewhere. There was sign of bear activity around the area we chose to call home for the night, but tiredness, damp, and cold led us to make the decision to stay.

In the morning my friends tent birthed him, as did mine. We were both groggy and tired. The view across the rugged meadow to a vast glacial lake at the base of the mountain was stunning. Even the grayness of the day did not detract from the beauty. Only when spending time in the wilds is it possible to feel like shit and elated simultaneously. Packing was a chore that was best left to the auto pilot cunningly located at the back of the mind. The pilot was busy on this day, He packed up, cooked me some oatmeal, and laced up sopping wet boots on to my damp socks. My friend, Andrew, and I, bushwhacked to the lake shore, feeling the early morning aches of carrying 70lb packs (20lbs of which was food alone), where we soon found the established trail that we had been following for 100 miles thus far. A trail that the day before had dragged us over our first major mountain pass of the expedition at over 11,000ft, seen us hike in extreme heat, and introduced us to morning nose bleeds and fatigue due to the extreme elevation change we had experienced since leaving San Francisco.

The next job of our auto pilot's was to make sure that we had enough water to see out the next few hours, as if there wasn't enough moisture in the air already. We both downed packs and extracted our water filters. Andrew had a tricky time of this. It was very cold, to add insult to injury. His hands would not let him perform the simple task of feeling in a back pack. When he finally found the filter, as if by some natural magic, it jumped from his pack, bounced on a rock and made its way to the bottom of the lake. Andrew, being a very quiet, reserved Englishman proceeded to shout the the word Fuck at an incredible volume. It shocked even me. I looked around to see if birds would stir and fly from nearby bushes and brush, but nothing happened. Of course i did the only appropriate thing a friend would do in that situation, i laughed. The laughter was not reciprocated. I felt his pain, i really did. He fished around the lake for a while in the freezing water and finally found it. He was very pleased at finding it, even at the sacrifice of his nerve endings. This is about the time that the rain began to pour. We both looked up, looked at the mountain, looked into the lake, looked at each other, two sets of despondent eyes in the same place at the same time.

It seemed appropriate to get out our waterproof jackets and pack covers, with the hopeful pretense that they may actually keep our packs dry. I mean, why the hell hasn't anyone invented a water proof pack? Packs are designed to endure severe punishment. They can be dropped, torn, tossed, stuffed beyond capacity, sat on, jumped on, thrown in disgust, fondled, used as a pillow, slept in, written on, and even stabbed! But a few

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drops of rain and all contents become vulnerable, almost as though the pack were invisible and my belongings were hovering in space close to my lower back. Thanks to a non biodegradable substance known as black plastic the contents were safe, or as safe as my mind would let them be. I even put certain items inside black plastic inside of the outer black plastic, just to be sure that not one ounce of moisture would enter.

The trail wound away from the lake over a series of bluffs and crags. A steady climb saw us leave the lake, with snippet views of the lake and Mount Ritter soaring to its black depths. A forboding mountain if ever there was one, rising to a slanted peak, poking the skyline at an ominous angle. John Muir had hiked and climbed the beast, Gary Snyder had hung on for dear life. It was stunning, albeit gray and harsh. Our final view of the lake came not too long afterwards. We were not sad. A series of lakes awaited us on this days hike. I call this kind of hiking roller coaster hiking. The trail will slowly drag us up to a non descript summit, sling us in the opposite direction, send us hurtling down a steep slope and immediately do a loop the loop almost back to where we had just been. It carried on like this for a while, the rain steadily beating on us, the damp air surrounding us, the cold sapping us. I decided to stop to roll a cigarette, Andrew was not amused. I took off my wet gloves and tried to insert the new set of hands i had acquired into my pockets. At this point Andrew decided to shove out, it was too cold and damp to stand around and watch me fumble. I managed a feat of great dexterity to roll a very damp cigarette. I think i managed a very unsatisfying drag on it before the moisture overtook the feeble paper. It was consumed by water. I threw it in disgust, fought my way back into the wet gloves and headed off after my friend.

It wasn't long before i caught up with Andrew, the yellow tip of his pack a beacon in the green and grey of the day. He looked very unhappy, but more than that, he looked thoroughly fed up. We joked around for a moment, trying to avoid the reality of the situation. As most hikers will know, these conditions are very dangerous. Cold, combined with damp, add to that exertion, which induces sweating. Not good at all. The general consensus was that we needed to get out of the rain, and soon. I managed to extract the map from my pack without taking it off, a trick i'd taught myself over many hundreds of miles of hiking. It told me that we had hiked 4 miles so far that day, it was another 15 to a road. A road that out of season would be very quiet. Thats what happens when you hike in the Sierra between the summer and skiing seasons. Thats right ,there is no autumnal crispness, not like back east. Only three seasons exist in the Sierra, Summer, Winter, and this very strange no mans land between the two. This no mans land just happens to be the perfect hiking conditions, usually.

I thought perhaps it would be a good idea to try and set up our tarps, if only to get out of the weather briefly. A grove of small pines that stood alone in the barren landscape seemed like the ideal spot. We decided to use only Andrews tarp as one would be big enough to shelter us. At this point i noticed out of the corner of my eye that the rain on the tree's shined in a really odd way, like ice. I dismissed this and carried on with the task at hand. It took a while to configure the tarp in such a way that we were semi protected. Of course it did nothing for us really. The freezing rain drove into the tree's and found its way into every line on our faces. Andrew was sitting down, his expression blank. I looked at him again closely, he was rocking. Not a rocking that looked pleasurable. I asked if he was alright, his slurred response that he was miserable and cold rang alarm bells in my head. I didn't want to entertain the idea that he may have succumbed to the H word. Immediate action was called for. At that very moment i heard a sound, not the sound of rain, or wind, or my own squeaking pack. It was a voice, no wait, it was two voices. Voices interwoven with a sound i had not heard in a very long time, horses hooves. A figure emerged from the rain, a man on horseback, face hidden by a tipped hat, leather poncho shedding the water. Behind him was a steady train of mules, each carrying a cargo of heavy boxes, counter balanced by equal weight on each side of their backs. At the very end of the train was another figure, much the same as the first. It was not quite real. I didn't think that this kind of transport still existed with the invention of the combustion engine, but apparently so. I stood to the side of the trail as they passed, the lead rider tipping his hat at me as if we were passing each other on a sunny 1920's middle american street before church was to begin.

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I stared blankly. My mouth opened and words came out. It asked where they were heading. The reply came while still in motion, moving away from me. They were heading to a pack station 14 miles away. I didn't have the presence of mind to tell them that we were in trouble or needed help. In fact I was worried that my mind was not working as well as usual. I decided we would follow them to safety. I quickly roused Andrew from his state, he did not respond. I insisted that we must keep moving, if only to keep somewhat warm. His senses returned, he agreed. It was then that i realized how dire the situation was. My hands no longer worked, not at all. They felt like these two numb stumps that were an impediment, more than the usual digits that functioned perfectly well, the things that made me human. It was impossible to untie the tarp knots i had tied only 15 minutes previously. The only alternative was to rip it from the tree's, which worked. This is when my survival instinct kicked in, and the word adversity finally graced my vocabulary. I was far too incapacitated to fold the tarp, so i somehow managed to do it with my elbows. Andrew looked terrible. I felt that the H word would take over and do for us both if we didn't move away as quickly as possible.

The pack train now had a good start on us. All i wanted to see, at this moment in my life, was a horses ass, that's all i focused on. Not at any other time in my life have i been so happy to see the rear end of a horse. It finally came into view. The hiking was tough going, and the sweat poured from my brow, or was it just rain? I couldn't tell anymore. The beautiful Sierra unfolded before us. Even in the face of this situation, it was hard not to see the beauty of the place, hellish beauty. The pack train had no idea we were behind them, they didn't even look back. It was as much as we could do to keep up with them. We followed them around the edge of a lake to a "V" shaped notch in a colossal wall of granite, a point at which the water left the lake, flowing onwards and downwards to the east. A sign appeared on my horizon. The trail we had been following was about to branch off and climb the granite cliff. I noticed that the pack train continued on course, towards the notch. I made the decision to follow them, they knew where they were going, trail or no trail, I looked around at Andrew for his acknowledgment that we were not following the marked trail anymore. He seemed to know what i had gestured with my eyes, he nodded.

When we arrived at the notch what unfolded was astonishing, amazing beyond description. It was like the whole world had opened up below us, almost as if we were about to drop from it's heights and descend at breath taking speed into a sea of green. A vast vibrant forest sparkled, even though the air was gray with an icy mist, i swear i saw it sparkle. The train negotiated its way along a path, not more than 18 inches wide cut into the granite. I dared not look down to my right, except to peek reluctantly at the waterfall leaving the lake and dropping many hundreds of feet to a green canopy below. I was grateful at this point to be on foot, i think i may have filled my pants if i had been on a horse on that path. I did look down a few times, half expecting to see a speck at the bottom, some horse's remains slowly being consumed by the landscape, thankfully i did not. We played frontman tag at various points. One of us would follow intensely while the other took a back seat to lag back for a while, taking it easy. This was great, for a while, but it meant having to hike extra fast to catch up again. The pack train certainly liked the rough terrain. I began to lose count of the streams we forded, rivers we waded through, too tired, wet, and too exhausted to stop and contemplate. On two occasions we followed the train away from the rugged path, bushwhacking down muddy slopes and appearing at a rivers edge. We would watch the horses cross the fast flowing, wide river submerged to their belly. We'd walk right in and follow as we had before. The water was over my waist and difficult to stay upright. I looked to my left and notice an old wooden foot bridge, big enough for people, but too big for horses. If we'd known there was a bridge we would most certainly have used it. About all we could do was follow the horses in the distance and keep going, thats all, keep going.

Andrew glanced around at one point and took a double take. His face brightened for the first time since we had broken camp that morning. He told me to take a look down. I did this and discovered something terrible. My hiking trousers were wrapped firmly around my knees, my red raw legs looking back up at me. I stopped to pull them up, a task that was harder than it would have been usually, seeing as my hands were still not functional. My legs were also numb. I had not felt the trousers slip down at all, not even from the waist, which was also numb. I think i'm also lucky to still have the ability to father children. We moved onwards, always

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moving, always fast. After an absolute eternity a welcoming sight showed itself to us amidst the forest, we had arrived at the pack station. I almost wanted to fall over and cry, but it was not over yet. I think if i had been thinking properly i would have said something along the lines of "Excuse me, we're almost dead, could you please help us?". Instead i asked how much further to the road. Two miles further along, two long miles. Without the pack train to follow you would think that our pace would have slackened, it did the opposite. We really stepped it up, lets get to the road because...we must.

The road appeared in the distance, a very quiet road. Not one car to be heard or seen. Was this where it would end? Making it all the way, roughly 18 miles, 15 miles of that a non stop speed hike. Would we perish by the side of our best link to civilization? I did weep a little, and wept openly when i heard a beautiful sound, the low rumble of a gasoline engine making its way steadily along the precarious roadway. Not a car, but a bus, a damn bus, a huge bus, a huge empty bus. The bus stopped, the door opened. We both looked at the driver like he had just offered us a night of passion with his 18 yr old daughter, and a million dollars to see us on our way afterwards. He asked if we had tickets, my heart leapt. I told him we didn't, but i think he took pity on us and told us to get on, just don't tell his boss is what he told us. We both sank into the seats of a warm bus, grinning at each other, glazed eyes, not feeling the hot air blasting onto our frozen extremities, just grinning. We had made it, we didn't care where the bus went, but we had made it, lived on, battled, and struggled.

The bus driver told us that the tail end of a hurricane from the gulf had made its way through the mountains. Of course it had, that would be just out luck. As it turned out we were very lucky indeed. We managed to find a small motel just after dark, it could have been the Hilton or a flea ridden dive, we didn't care, it was inside and warm. We both emptied the contents of our backpacks on to the motel room floor. Turns out that the rain had penetrated everything, including the black plastic bags. Everything was sodden, our sleeping bags, clothes, tents, and general equipment. The only thing that was dry was the food tightly sealed inside our fiberglass bear proof canisters. That made us all the more grateful for having the grit to get out of there. If we'd had to make camp that night we would have died for sure. I didn't regain feeling in my hands, feet, or legs for hours, an excruciating few hours. Blood slowly recirculating is one of the most painful experiences i've ever had, and it seemed to last forever. When it was over...we went to the pub. I don't think i have ever appreciated slowly sipping a nice beer as much as that night.

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