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English 1102/01

Not One Minute To Waste

(Winner of a Recoulley Award, Fall of 2000)

The big brown wooden sign read Skilak lake campsites, next left, so dad and I turned off the only paved road that led south out of Anchorage onto the only other road we had encountered along the way. It was dry dust billowing from beneath the tires of our rented Ford Taurus that made it hard to believe there was a drop of water within a hundred miles of this place. Only a few scattered houses, with some old pieced together 4 X 4 trucks sitting in the front yard, dotted the endless groves of scrubby pines. As we drove on a little further the pines opened up to reveal a landscape that had previously evaded our perception. There were enormous snow-capped mountains that seemed to be within my reach although they mingled with the clouds like Jack's beanstalk. The snow that flowed down their cliffs looked like the marshmallow swirls in rocky-road ice cream. The sickly looking pines were a meager forefront for such a heavenly backdrop. Just as promptly as the pines had separated, the forest of endless pines sprung back up and once again shrouded our view.

A while later we came to the first campsites. There was still no water in site. The only water took the form of a few stagnant pools that were the breeding grounds for Alaskan militant mosquito squadrons. This was the name dad and I had given to the incessant swarms of mosquitoes that had been our plague at all the previous campsites. It looked like there had been a concrete pad poured at one of the sites particularly for

camping. I guessed it was to keep you and your camping gear out of the mud in case of rain. From the look of the cloud coverage it would be raining soon enough, and would warrant a need for such accommodations. It suddenly occurred to me that what we were planning to pitch our tent on was the capped over remnants of one of the many waterless outhouses. There was no way my dad or I would trade our pride as campers and outdoorsmen for the possibility of spending the night on a dry pad, so we were back on the seemingly endless dirt road heading into our twentieth mile of dirt and dust, and still no sign of Skilak Lake. As we drove I popped in the Aerosmith's Greatest Hits tape I had bought at the Wal-Mart in Anchorage. Dad and I had learned the words to every song on the album, and it was really great, dad and I singing Sweet Emotion together. "Talkin' 'bout things that nobody cares... wearin' out things that nobody wears." That's the way the song starts, and that's the way our trip went; dad and I talking about his childhood, and how his father could never have afforded to take him to Alaska. There was one experience he didn't want me to miss out on. Not that we have voices that any sane human being would recognize as music, but the feeling of joy that emanates throughout one's body when you are sharing something enjoyable with someone as close to you as a father, who at some time can feel like the most distant human on earth.

Finally we reached the lakeside campsites. We just toured the campground observing every important quality that the campsites had to offer a couple of wayfaring strangers seeking a reasonable night's rest and a decent place to fix a good meal. We found a very nice campsite that offered some shelter from the lake. It was level, and the rocks we had to move were smaller in size and fewer in numbers than most other campsites. The tree break between the lake and us would be a suitable shield for us from

the near freezing wind that blew down from the mountains across the icy water of Skilak Lake. Dad and I settled into campsite number 9 at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

My first priority was dinner. The salmon and halibut steaks we had picked up at the small fish cannery and freeze drying company, known to the locals simply as The Fishy Place, were going to be a welcome meal after two days of cereal and peanut butter sandwiches on dry wheat bread. I got started setting up the flimsy little charcoal grill we had picked up at Wal-Mart. If not weighted, the grill could easily be overturned by the gusting winds blowing off of Skilak Lake. A light sprinkle began to fall upon my head just as I set ablaze the pile of lighter fluid soaked charcoal briquettes. This trusty little grill had been our kitchen stove and oven for the past week and would continue to serve us for the next two weeks. While I waited for the charcoal to be reduced to something suitable to cook on, I soaked the steaks in a lemon herb marinade, wrapped up a couple of our big baking potatoes in aluminum foil, and cut up some lettuce, tomatoes, and carrots for salad. After the coals had been reduced to a pale glow and the steaks were through marinating, I gently laid the tender fish fillets across the grille. The sizzle they made when they hit the red-hot grid gave off the wonderful smell of fresh herbs along with the sweet flavor of the meat. I had to protect the delicate flavor of the marinade with little aluminum foil tents to keep the seasoning from being washed away by the torrent of rain that was now pelting our campsite. I eventually had to cover the entire grill with aluminum foil to keep our flames from going out.

While I had been preparing our dinner, Dad had been making provisions for a good night's rest in the form of a thick blue tarp on the ground with all four sides folded under so the water would run under the tarp instead of into our tent. Our tent could be set

up in less than sixty seconds thanks to an ingenious design that employed hinges with automatic locking mechanisms on the poles. A vast green tarp that was strung between two of the pine trees protected us from all the rain falling from above. Previous experience had taught us that several good size stones wrapped in the excess tarp at it's edges were necessary to keep the tarp from blowing away during the night. Just as dad was finishing up with the tarp we heard a loud scream from deep in the woods behind where we were camped. Only it didn't sound like a human screaming. It sounded like a bird. It was getting closer, and in a period of only a few seconds two of the biggest birds I had ever seen flew into the trees just above our campsite. It was a pair of bald eagles. They were enormous. The branches of the pines they were sitting in bowed under the weight of the birds. The screams that emanated from their beaks were loud enough and shrill enough to crack crystal. Dad and I stopped what we had been doing so that we could take in what we were seeing. It was the first time either of us had seen a bald eagle in the wild. Then both birds simultaneously swooped from the limbs and were gone out across the lake. Dad handed me the camera and I took off through the trees to the edge of Skilak Lake, but by the time I got there, there was no sign of the eagles so I snapped this shot of the lake.

(Originally there was a picture of the lake here.)

You can see how wide the lake is, and the rocks that line the bottom. The receding glacier that cut this gouge out of the mountains left behind these rocks that you can see lying along the shoreline. The same glacier that made this cut millions of years ago still feeds this lake with the beautiful blue water that fills its depths.

Dad finished setting up the tent a long time before the food was ready, and he had found a radio station that was clear enough for us to listen to some of the local and national news. I still remember a couple of the stories that we listened to as we sat there in the middle of Alaska. A tall, skinny man in his early thirties had robbed a local convenience store. The driver of the getaway car was not given a description, and Jewel was giving a concert in her hometown somewhere in Alaska. The most memorable thing I heard on the news; this was the day that Mike Tyson bit Evander Holifield's ear while they were boxing. Dad and I laughed our heads off in disbelief as we listened to the fight announcers describe the scene as it was being played out in the ring.

When dinner was ready we ate from the same blue plastic Dixie plates we had become so accustomed to. The campsite did have a big concrete picnic table, but because of the rain that was still falling we chose the comfort of our mid-sized Ford as our dining hall. I usually don't like to eat fish. I'm afraid of choking on a bone. Even though I love the taste of fish, this fear usually deters my eating habits. Dad had convinced me to try a halibut steak tonight while he had chosen the fresh salmon. We ended up halving both steaks so we each could enjoy the different tastes of Alaska. Dad and I sat there in the car talking about all the things we had seen like the snow-capped mountains, the bald eagles, the miles and miles of endless highway with no place to turn off, and we both concurred that if what we had already experienced was any indication, the next two weeks were only going to get better.