

Back to Where You Began



Joey felt something move in his sleeping bag. At least, he thought he did.

Dawn cowered behind distant mountaintops as if afraid to disturb the dark silence of the Montana night. The boy stirred, trying to remember the details of a fleeting dream about someone he used to know in East Village. He and this person had been running down a dirty Manhattan alley; afar off, a police siren wailed.

The other boy was Darick Tanner, and for the life of him, Joey couldn't figure out what they were running from. But it seemed that whenever he and Darick were together for more than a few moments, they usually ended up with at least one reason to be running, and it was almost always from the law.

Joey wiggled his toes cautiously. Perhaps a cool breeze had ruffled a piece of loose cloth by his feet, or maybe a falling leaf had struck his heel as it drifted in the half-light of dawn. Darick Tanner. He let his mind wander back to the fading dream.

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What was his friend doing, right this moment?

The boy blinked a few times and waited for his vision to clear. Eyes closed in sleep for nine and a half hours take a few seconds to adjust, even when they belong to a 17-year-old ex-New Yorker working as a horse wrangler in Montana.

Then he felt the movement again, deep in the dark recesses of his warm sleeping bag. It was more of a rub than a bump, like something was moving slowly past the sock-covered toe of his right foot.

Joey's breath caught in his throat and beads of perspiration formed instantly above his eyebrows. The unthinkable was happening. He just knew it. Sometime during the night, while he was being chased by unseen cops in a city he'd left two years before, a forest creature had decided his sleeping bag had room for two.

It was a snake, Joey was sure. Probably a mountain rattler with a short temper, oversized glands brimming with poison, and two sharp fangs ready to transfer the beast's lethal load to a camper's unsuspecting foot.

The movement ceased, as if whatever was down there had found a spot to its liking and settled for a short—or long—early-morning nap.

"Mr. H!" The words whistled from between quivering lips. "Mr. H, you awake?"

There was no response.

"Hey, Mr. H? Grandpa Hanson? Anybody?" The boy strained not to move as he spoke. The last thing he wanted to do was disturb the sleep of whatever

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was cuddled against his feet.

“Hey. Somebody wake up!” Joey whispered aloud, desperation forcing his voice into rough, uneven tones. “I got a problem here!”

“What are you hissing about?”

Joey blinked. “Wendy? Hey, Wendy, is that you?”

“No. It’s Bigfoot.”

The boy closed his eyes. “Wendy. Listen to me. I’m in trouble. Big trouble.”

“What’s the matter, Mr. Dugan? Can’t get your sleeping bag unzipped?”

An 11-year-old girl wearing hiking boots, a yellow sweatshirt, and a well-worn pair of blue jeans loomed overhead. A faded leather jacket covered her shoulders as short, blond hair framed a youthful, grinning face.

“DON’T COME ANY CLOSER!” Joey gasped.

“Hey, it’s just me,” the girl giggled. “And I promise I won’t hurt you if you behave yourself.”

“You don’t understand,” Joey responded, his teeth locked together. “I think there’s a snake in my sleeping bag.”

“A WHAT?”

“A snake. Maybe a rattler. I can feel it down at my feet.”

The color drained from Wendy’s face. “Oh, dear. Oh, dear!” she cried, backing up and stumbling over a prone figure nearby. A scream echoed from the campsite as she sprawled across yet another sleeping form.

“What in the world?” Mr. Hanson shouted as he

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threw back his blanket and sat up. Then he looked down and added, "And Wendy, why are you lying in my lap?"

The girl pointed in Joey's direction. "Snake!" she called breathlessly.

Mr. Hanson shook his head. "No, Wendy. That's Joey. He may be a lot of things, but he's certainly not a—"

"There's a snake in his sleeping bag," the girl interrupted.

The man quickly jumped to his feet, tossing his youngest daughter onto the ground once again. "What kind of snake?"

"Hey, what's all the noise about?" Grandpa Hanson rose on one elbow and surveyed the campsite, his snowy white hair sticking out in unusual directions from his tanned head. He saw his oldest granddaughter, Debbie, lift her nose out from under her sleeping bag.

"What's for breakfast?" she asked, yawning broadly.

"Joey thinks there's a snake in his sleeping bag," Mr. Hanson announced.

"I'm not eating a snake." The girl was about to turn over and lay her head back on the rolled-up jacket that served as her pillow when the meaning of her father's words struck home. In seconds, she was standing beside the man, searching the ground around them for any sign of the unwelcome guest. "Don't let it out," she called in Joey's direction.

Joey rolled his eyes. "Would you guys kindly

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help me decide what to do? This may be a rattler in here with me. I'm afraid to move. He may bite my foot or something."

Grandpa Hanson lifted his hand as he rose on one knee. "Yes, Joey, don't move. Lie very still." The old man stood and walked cautiously toward his young ranchhand friend. "Just don't panic," he encouraged. "If it *is* a snake, it doesn't know you're a human. Probably thinks you're a log."

Wendy nodded. "Yeah, Joey. That rattler just thinks you're an old rotting log with bugs crawling all around—"

"Give me a break, Wendy!" Joey snapped. "This is serious. I don't want to get bit."

The girl brightened. "Good news," she said. "You're lying in a bed of plantain plants. Red Stone said Indians used it to heal snake bites. Works like a charm."

Grandpa Hanson knelt slowly at Joey's feet. "The boy's right," he warned. "This could be serious if the creature feels threatened in any way."

"So what are we going to do?" Mr. Hanson asked, sitting down on a nearby log. His two daughters joined him, their faces shadowed with concern.

The old man rubbed his stubbled chin and thought for a long moment, staring at the bulge by Joey's feet at the base of the bag. "I read a story about this very thing happening some years ago to a man in South America. His friends tried smoking the creature out, but that made life miserable for the poor guy in the sleeping bag. Then they put

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some smelly food all around, thinking that might flush out the snake, but it just made the man hungry and his stomach began to growl.”

“So,” Debbie asked, “what worked?”

“Waiting.”

“Waiting?”

Grandpa Hanson nodded. “Wild creatures usually don’t stay in one spot for very long, not during the warmer months, anyway. As soon as whatever’s down there finishes his nap, he’ll leave on his own accord. I think that’s all we can do since we’re not sure if Joey’s in real danger or not. Better play it safe.”

“So we’re just going to wait for it to leave?” Wendy questioned. Grandpa Hanson nodded.

The girl looked at Joey, then at the remnants of last night’s campfire. “Can we at least have breakfast?”

“Wendy Hanson,” her father sighed. “You have the compassion of a wounded grizzly.”

The girl folded her arms. “Hey. I don’t want anything bad to happen to Mr. Dugan. But let’s be practical. If whatever’s in there decides to come out and chase one of us, we’d better have lots of energy to run away, know what I mean?”

Debbie stood slowly to her feet. “Well, I for one will wait with Joey.”

“Thanks, Debbie,” the boy in the bag whispered. “You’re a good friend.”

Mr. Hanson looked out across the expanse of meadow toward the towering mountains to the east.

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The sun was just beginning to peak above the horizon, sending long, straight shafts of light through a scattered layer of high clouds. "Don't worry, Joey," he said softly. "We'll get you out of this situation as best we can."

The boy seemed to relax a little and even allowed himself the hint of a smile. "Thanks, Mr. H," he whispered. "Seems you're always gettin' me out of tough spots."

The man grinned. "Seems so," he answered, his voice gentle. "Remember the warehouse in East Village?"

"Or the hospital?" Debbie added.

"And how about when your brother was in jail?" Wendy asked.

"Like you remember that?" Joey breathed. "You were too busy looking for treasures at Merrilee."

"So? You do stuff your way and I do stuff my way."

Grandpa Hanson chuckled. "I think all you youngsters bring your own share of excitement to Shadow Creek Ranch. Even Wrangler Barry and Debbie got in on the fun last winter, in case you've forgotten."

Debbie shivered. "No way am I ever going to forget," she said somberly. "That's why Barry didn't come on this camping trip. His physical therapist said he needed a little more time to heal before he started wandering off into the wilderness of northwest Montana. And I agree." She sighed. "But Barry insisted I come along to protect you guys just in case it snows or something. Wanted me to have some fun."

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He's such a thoughtful man. Handsome, too."

Wendy groaned. "I think I'm going to be sick. You and Barry run around all day whispering into each other's ears and smiling and laughing like idiots. It's enough to make me want to be a monk."

"They're in love," Grandpa Hanson grinned. "I think it's beautiful. Sorta reminds me of Grandma and me a whole bunch of years ago."

"You were like that?" Wendy gasped. "I don't believe it."

"Oh, we were kinda mushy, writing each other notes and buying cards at the drugstore, exchanging gifts for no reason at all. One time she gave me a set of screwdrivers for Groundhog's Day."

"How romantic," Debbie sighed.

Mr. Hanson nodded. "Ellen and I used to be romantic." He paused. "I gave her a Crock Pot once and it wasn't even her birthday."

Wendy looked over at her dad and smiled a sad smile. "She was wrong to leave us, wasn't she?"

"Yes," the man said softly. After a few moments he added, "Maybe I should have given her an alarm clock instead."

Debbie giggled, then laughed out loud. "I think the Crock Pot was the perfect gift. Mom just didn't know a good thing when she saw it."

"Yeah," Wendy added. "She got Connecticut and we got Shadow Creek Ranch. I'm happy the way things worked out."

Joey stiffened. "Hey, you guys, it's moving again."

The four campers cautiously encircled the young

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boy and his sleeping bag. Yes, there was definitely something moving down by his feet. The bag material rose and fell like ripples on a mountain lake. They watched as the unseen creature zigzagged slowly to the left, then to the right, as if searching for something.

"I can feel it on my legs, through my pants," Joey groaned. "It's awful."

Grandpa Hanson knelt beside the boy. "Hang in there, son," he encouraged. "Looks like your guest is planning to leave. It's at your knees now."

Joey gritted his teeth, his chin quivering slightly as he forced himself to overcome the almost overpowering urge to wiggle out of his sleeping bag. Sweat poured from his forehead and fell into his eyes, causing him to blink.

"What's it doing now?" he asked in a trembling whisper.

"It's by your waist. Yes, it's definitely moving upward."

Wendy leaned forward and watched the mysterious bulge shift with heartstopping sluggishness past the boy's stomach. She reached down and picked up a large stick and slowly raised it above her head.

"HEY!" Joey gasped. "What're you doing?"

"I'm going to get that sucker," Wendy whispered back confidently.

Mr. Hanson took hold of the upraised weapon and brought it back to the girl's side with a smile. "Why don't we let whatever's in there return to the

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wild unharmed, OK?"

"Yeah," Joey breathed. "And let me return to Shadow Creek Ranch in the same condition, if you don't mind."

By now the bulge was passing the boy's chest and all eyes were fixed on the opening to the bag by Joey's shoulder.

"Patience . . . patience," Grandpa Hanson repeated as his young friend struggled to remain still as the creature made its way along his prone body. "It's almost out. Almost there."

The cloth lining at the top of the bag shifted and a long, black nose emerged into the early morning light. It was moist, encrusted with dust, and sported a set of whiskers.

"Whiskers?" Debbie gasped. "Hey. Rattlesnakes don't have whiskers."

Two beady eyes slid out from under the bag and blinked. Then a narrow head covered with brown fur followed. The creature's mouth opened wide revealing a bright red tongue, rows of white teeth, and pink gums. It let out a series of clicking, chirping sounds as if to say, "What's everybody standing around for? Don't you know it's morning? Time to get out and see the world."

With that, the animal moved the rest of himself past Joey's ear and scurried over the fallen leaves, disappearing into the underbrush.

"What was it?" Joey gasped, eyes closed tightly in terror.

"It was a rattler, all right," Wendy said somberly.

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“’Bout five feet long. You’re lucky to be ali—”

Mr. Hanson placed his hand over his daughter’s mouth. “It was just a little weasel, Joey,” he chuckled, relief lifting his words.

“A weasel?”

“Yup,” Grandpa Hanson grinned, struggling to his feet. “I guess we can be glad it wasn’t a skunk, or worse.”

Debbie patted Joey on the top of his head. “Sorry ’bout that, cowboy,” she said. “Bet it scared you, huh?”

“Scared me? Scared me? I’m never going camping again!” Joey kicked back his sleeping bag and jumped to his feet. “I’m going to buy a metal box with a lock on it and movement sensors all around. And I’ll only sleep in it after it’s suspended five feet off the ground.”

Mr. Hanson laughed. “Don’t blame you. But don’t give up camping just yet. Gotta get home, you know.”

“Then I won’t sleep,” Joey retorted, lifting his chin and grinning slightly. “I’ll just sit by the fire and guard you guys. Man, oh man! That about scared me clean out of my hide. Wait till I tell Dizzy. Wait till I tell Barry. They’re not going to believe it.”

Joey’s smile faded as he suddenly spun around to face Wendy. “And you . . . you . . . get-up-before-everyone-else Wendy Hanson. You wanted to eat breakfast while I was dying here. Then you were planning on beaming me with that stick. You’re a real pal. I hope a whole gang of creepy, crawly crea-

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tures decides to nest at your toes tonight.”

The girl stood her ground. “Calm down, Mr. Dugan. I was only trying to protect you.”

“Like phooey you were. You were just thinking of yourself, like you usually do. You don’t care what happens to me. You’re just worried about your stomach or your own safety.”

“Take it easy, Joey,” Grandpa Hanson called, his voice carrying a hint of concern. “She’s only 11 years old. Wendy hasn’t lived as long as you have. She hasn’t learned what you’ve learned about how to treat other people.”

Joey stood staring at the girl for a long moment.

“Yeah, Joey,” Debbie said softly. “She didn’t mean any harm.”

The boy softened a little. “Well, she’s always causing me grief, not only here but back at the ranch, too. It’s time she learned some compassion for others. That’s all I got to say.”

Wendy’s hand trembled slightly at her side. “Hey, I got compassion. I take good care of Early. And Mrs. Dawson says I’m a fine young lady. She told me that just last week.”

Mr. Hanson walked over and laid his hand on Joey’s shoulder. “Why don’t we just forget about what happened and fix breakfast, OK? You must be hungry. We all are. Maybe after the excitement of the last half hour passes, things won’t look quite as unpleasant. Whatta ya say?”

Joey nodded slowly. “OK. You’re right.” Turning to Wendy he added, “I shouldn’t have blown up like

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I did. You do take very good care of Early, and I gotta watch my big mouth. Guess I was just scared.”

Wendy shrugged. “I forgive you.”

As the group busied themselves with the task of preparing breakfast, Wendy slipped away and moved to the edge of the meadow, far from the others.

She stood looking out across the yellow-tinged grasses to the mountains beyond. Even though it was September, their proud summits were still streaked with white, reminders of the harsh winter that had held this part of the country in an icy grip months before.

The girl watched an osprey drift high overhead in the morning breezes. The call of a songbird whistled from a nearby spruce. *You were just thinking of yourself like you usually do.* Joey’s harsh words echoed in her thoughts. *You don’t care what happens to me. You don’t care. You don’t care.*

“Yes I do,” Wendy said aloud, knowing no one heard. “I do care about stuff. I . . . I just don’t know what to do . . . how to show somebody what I’m thinking.” She walked a few paces and sat down on a stump. “I don’t know what words to say.”

She thought of her horse Early. Even now the animal was grazing just beyond the outcropping of rocks to her left. He was surrounded by other horses from the ranch, including Tar Boy, Joey’s big, black stallion.

Wendy sighed. She never had any trouble talking to Early. She’d tell him things she’d never tell anyone else.

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And Mrs. Dawson—she could talk to her, too. They spent many afternoons working the old homestead's mountainside garden, discussing important things, like, you shouldn't hit a boy who's wearing glasses . . . you should always ask permission when you take stuff, especially from Joey's tack house. That last part was proving particularly hard to remember. After all, Joey usually said yes. So why ask?

Because if she didn't ask, Joey'd get all bent out of shape and blow off steam, kinda like he did a few minutes ago. But somehow it'd been different this time. The girl sensed her friend had been downright angry, not just upset like before. It scared her a little, although she wasn't about to admit that to anyone.

Was she really such a bad person? Was Joey right?

"Wendy? Hey, Wendy. Breakfast." Her father's voice carried from the distant campsite.

"I'm coming," she called back, rising to her feet.

As she walked along the edge of the forest she thought of her mother. Strange how that woman's memory kept popping up at odd times. Wendy knew she wasn't mad at her mom anymore. And she'd learned it wasn't her fault her mother had left the family for some bank president in Connecticut. That was history. But it was something her mother had often said that crowded her thoughts this cool September morning. "You gotta watch out for yourself," the pretty woman with soft,

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blond hair had repeated over and over, especially the last year she was with them in Manhattan. "No one's gonna do it for you."

That's all Wendy had been trying to do—watch out for herself. Isn't that what she was supposed to be doing? Isn't that what everyone did?

The aroma of hot pancakes and fresh maple syrup blended with the sweet fragrance of autumn grasses, quickening Wendy's pace. Forget Joey. Forget Mother. Forget troubling thoughts and angry words and advice from a woman she hadn't seen for more than three years. It was time to eat.



The sun hung well-established in the eastern sky before everyone was ready to depart for lower meadows. The group planned to travel westward along the Spotted Bear River, following its flow until they reached the ranger station near the waterway's junction with the South Fork of the Flathead. It would be a hard day of riding for animals and humans alike, but all were eager to see new sights, experience more adventures, for soon their week of trailriding would draw to a close.

Grandpa Hanson steered his big mare, with a packhorse tied behind, in the direction of the mountain trail. Joey quickly followed, urging Tar Boy to quit nibbling on the hindquarters of the packhorse.

Debbie and Wendy fell into position next, and Mr. Hanson's mount and packhorse brought up the rear. In all there were five people and seven ani-

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mals in the party.

After a few moments, conversations ceased as each rider quietly began drinking in the awesome beauty that waited at each bend in the trail. The jagged line of mountains, bold towers of granite, stately stands of pine, meadows brimming with colorful waves of grasses, vied for attention as the miles slipped by. Only the clip, clop, and occasional snort of the horses disturbed the serenity.

Often the trail dipped down to the very edge of the river as if checking to make sure it was still there. Here the travelers were treated to visions of clear water turned white. Melted snows from hundreds of tributaries tumbled and splashed over buried sinkholes and timeworn outcroppings along the banks. Often the animals were allowed to pause and drink deep of the pure, untainted liquid. Riders refreshed themselves as well, marveling at the cold, sweet, wholesome taste on their tongues.

"Nature sure has a way with water," Grandpa Hanson would often announce, his hands, chin, and cheeks wet and rosy red from his visit to the river. "No city processing plant will ever match this stuff for downright good taste."

Other wet and rosy faces would nod their support of his declaration, and hands would once again dip into the icy waters.

"We had some rivers in New York City," Joey recalled as the group seated themselves on a large rock overlooking the sparkling current. It was mid-afternoon. The horses had been safely tethered

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nearby, happy for the rest and the chance to sample the soft green salad bar that grew by the trail. “Do you think they were ever as beautiful as this one?”

Mr. Hanson chuckled. “It’s hard to imagine that the Hudson River *ever* was this clean. It even has its own smell.”

Grandpa Hanson bit into a ripe, red apple and chewed thoughtfully. “Many years ago, Grandma and I took a trip into the central part of New York State, up past Albany and Glens Falls, into Saratoga County, right at the base of the Adirondack Mountains. We followed the old Hudson the whole way. And guess what? The closer we got to the source of the river, the cleaner the waters became. Most good things begin in a good place.”

The old man watched the river swirl and roar past the rock where they were all sitting. “But then something happens, and it’s not even the river’s fault. People start dumping pollution into it—factory wastes, chemical runoff from farms, unregulated garbage dumping, carelessness—these all change a river until it becomes a mere reflection of what it used to be.” Grandpa Hanson sighed. “The Hudson flowing by New York City is nothing like it is far upstream, where it springs pure from the mountains and begins its journey to the sea.”

Joey nodded slowly. “Happens to people too, don’t it?”

“Yeah, it does,” the old man agreed. “We all begin as a miracle of God. Then, like the river, we get polluted by sin and selfishness.”

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Debbie watched a leaf float by and disappear into the swirling current at the base of a boulder. "Too bad we can't just keep living where we began."

"Oh, but we can," Grandpa Hanson announced firmly, stretching his legs and stumbling to his feet. "We'd better hit the trail if we want to get to the ranger station by dark."

"Wait," Wendy called. "How can we do that? How can we keep living where we began?"

Her grandfather turned and smiled. "It's not easy, Wendy, but it's possible."

"But—" The question died in the young girl's throat. She knew better than to press the old man further. Experience had taught her that when her grandfather made such a challenging statement, conversation ended. There was a lesson to be learned here, and he wasn't about to reveal any more clues. If Wendy wanted to know the answer to her question she'd have to figure it out for herself.

As the group ambled back in the direction of the animals, Wendy lingered by the waters. *Living where we began*. What did that mean? She didn't want to return to New York City, where she was born. Besides, her mother was married to someone else now. And other people were living in her old apartment overlooking Manhattan. There was no way she could return to life as it was. Everything had changed. She'd changed.

But there were things about her she didn't like. When stuff didn't go her way, she'd get angry. And hard as it was for her to admit, Joey had been sorta

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right earlier. She was selfish from time to time. And when she was, it bothered her. It bothered her a lot.

A gentle nudge broke her reverie. Turning, she stared into the big watery eyes of Early, her brown-haired horse with the star on his forehead. Wendy smiled and tenderly patted the animal's soft whiskered nose. "What do you want, you old bag of fleas?" she asked.

Early snorted and shook his mane as if to say, "Unless you're planning on taking up residence on this spot, we'd better catch up with the rest of the group."

Sure enough, everyone else had left. There was no one in the clearing except Wendy and her horse.

"Oh, all right, all right," she teased, grabbing the reins and saddlehorn and hoisting herself onto the back of her best friend in all the world.

As the pair approached the edge of the clearing, Wendy looked back over her shoulder at the receding river. Its roar still rang in her ears. "How do you get back to where you began?" she asked. "And what if that place isn't there anymore?"

The forest swallowed them up, leaving only the breezes to disturb the swaying grass and the river's song.