

A Fireside Breakfast ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

By Larry Coglan

I slowly became aware that it was no longer night, unsure if this was due to the sun shining on our canvas tent, or the irritating racket coming from JD's mud encrusted mouth. With the exception of what he had managed to lick off in his sleep, JD's face and the entire side of his head, including his left ear was packed with now dry mud, leftover from the day before when we were swimming. Not so much swimming as in the sense of someone setting out in earnest for the far end of a pool, but rather more like a group of young boys playing in a lake, hurling great handfuls of mud at one another. JD had a dreadful fear of water and would only venture into the lake a short distance, no more than knee deep. From that position, he would bend over at the waist and swish his hands about in the muddy lake water. This constituted swimming for JD, but it had the distinct disadvantage of putting an invisible bull's eye on his head. The rest of us kept a low profile in the water, with just our head showing, ready to pop under the surface at the sight of incoming mud. JD had caught several missiles to the side of his head, packing his ear full, and he had no intention of putting his head under water to assist in freeing the mud from his ear. He had tried bobbing his head up and down, and shaking it from side to side, above water, but the mud adhered to his head as though it had grown there so he had just left it to dry in the hot sun.

At the rear of our tent was Yogi, a lad of rather large proportions. He was propped up on one elbow and starring at JD's open mouth. It seemed odd that a boy of JD's slight stature should emit such an annoying sound. JD was the anti-Yogi. His pale skin stretched tight over his small skeleton,

along with sunken eyes, wispy white hair, perpetual runny nose, and huge buckteeth, did little to help his masculinity. In stark contrast, Yogi loved football and wrestling, was very good at both, and had the charming, boyish good looks of Curley, of the 3 stooge's fame.

"I thought only fat people snored", Yogi said, as he unscrewed the lid from his canteen.

"Sounds like snoring to me." I shrugged.

"I bet this'll wake him up." Yogi said with a smirk, as he poured a good size stream of stale water into JD's volcano like oral opening. It looked like a volcano with the dried mud all around, as though he'd been suckling a muddy sow.

"Holy Jeepers!" yelled Yogi, as JD sat bolt upright in his filthy bed, coughing his head off, muddy water and spit flying from his mouth, tears tracing wet tracks through the dirt on his cheeks. JD had no idea what had just happened; the canteen was already stashed out of sight. The gasping and wheezing had not quite ended, when we heard the familiar deep voice of our beloved scoutmaster, Reverend Thompson.

"What the hell's going on in there? You guys quit foolin' around and get your asses out here and fix my breakfast, and be damn quick about it."

I pounded JD on the back trying to help him recover from his coughing fit. I pounded hard enough that some of the dried mud fell free from his head, but he recovered from the coughing and gagging quite nicely.

"You OK?" said Yogi, "You musta been dreamin' or somethin'."

"I'm fine," JD said, "I just choked, that's all, no big deal or nuthin'."

"Maybe you swallowed some dirt," I suggested, trying to be helpful. I had always tried to maintain the moral high ground by not picking on JD as badly as others picked on him. Because of this, JD liked to hang out with me, so I was careful not to overdo things. I did not want him hanging out with me. I considered him to be a little bit weird. Aside from his strange appearance, he was forever trying to impress everyone with his manliness, his great strength, his high degree of advanced intelligence, and his many brave deeds of heroic daring. It had the opposite effect on most people, however, and they tended to smile a bit, nod, and take a step backward, not wanting to provoke an argument, or for that matter, a conversation. It was difficult to imagine what he may do or say next, it was best just to agree, and go on about your business. No one wanted to be guilty of a physical altercation with JD, as winning would most certainly not be winning in anyone else's eyes, somewhat akin to a grown athlete pushing around a third grader.

“HEY,” came the insistent deep voice from outside our tent, “what the hell are you guys doing in there? I’m waiting for my breakfast out here, the sun is shining, and you’re not fixing my breakfast. Pretty soon, it’ll be dinnertime, and I’ll still be waiting for my breakfast. Get a move on, how about.”

Reverend Thompson was getting impatient. He would tolerate most anything, excepting a lack of food. He was in no immediate danger of floating away on the next breeze that came wafting through our campsite; at over 400 pounds, he, and his sturdy chair, were not going anywhere before a generous platter of hen fruit was served up, along with a package of bacon. His plate of bacon needed to be cooked just so, or perhaps more accurately, not cooked just so, as he liked it just barely warmed up, not really cooked at all, long before it had a chance to do any shriveling up, as he called it. He liked to get his money’s worth, and wouldn’t stand for bacon that had started to shrink and shrivel. He claimed that bacon cooked in this manner also lubricated the gullet, easing the rest of the meal into place. It was not fun watching Reverend Thompson eat. Intimidating might be a more accurate description.

“Coming Sir,” said Yogi, as he crawled over the top of both JD and myself. The job of chief cook went to Yogi and him alone. Reverend Thompson did not want, or trust, a skinny kid to serve up his breakfast. This arrangement worked out well, as my cooking skills were only mediocre, and JD’s were non-existent, while Yogi’s were quite advanced for a young boy of 14 years. This probably stemmed from the fact that he mostly cooked his own meals at home. Being an only child from a dysfunctional family and all, he had retreated into his own world, and cooking was a big part of it, that, and wanting to become a scout. Yogi, JD, and myself, were the first batch of kids that Reverend Thompson had rounded up, determined to make scouts out of us, in order to foster and guide us along the path of goodness and manhood.

We followed Yogi out of the tent, with JD bringing up the rear. Standing, and stretching in the morning sun, we each took our turn saying “Good morning, Sir.” Reverend Thompson thought this was a good idea, and would teach us manners, and the correct way to address an adult, but mostly he liked the way it sounded. With the proper salutations over, we set about the serious business of preparing our leader’s morning sustenance.

My job was to get the fire going and have sufficient wood on hand to insure that the fire didn’t become too feeble before the meal was fully prepared. This didn’t require much of a fire so far as the bacon was concerned, but there were eggs, sausages, pancakes, coffee, toast, fried

potatoes and so on that went along with the bacon. Reverend Thompson had a formidable appetite, and breakfast was a serious affair not to be taken lightly.

Yogi's job was that of head chef. He would demonstrate his culinary prowess in preparing a banquet suitable for a king. This should in no way be confused with cooking up an obscene heap of greasy food for a fat man too lazy to make it himself. He was, after all, our leader, and through his selfless generosity, he was teaching us to become men; no easy task for the likes of us boys.

JD's job was to prepare the morning coffee, enough to last the entire day. Reverend Thompson liked his coffee stout enough that a spoon would nearly stand up by itself, not having to rely on the edge of the cup for support; coffee that needed a little chewing before swallowing. He called this thick brew, 'cowboy coffee', but it was hard to imagine Reverend Thompson as a cowboy mounted on a steed, head held high in the early morning sun, shiny spurs on his boots, back straight, ready to command. Not with all the trouble he encountered just getting into, and out of, his chair.

With the big cast iron griddle heating up on a fine bed of hot coals, and the aroma of fresh brewed coffee filling his nostrils, our leader began to list off the day's activities for us. He began with instructions to Yogi on how to properly prepare a big pot of beef stew for the evening meal, the necessary ingredients and the amount of each that should be included. He gave JD and myself a project to share. It consisted of cutting poles and lashing them together with strips of bark to form a framework suitable to hold a canvas, in order that it might provide shade from the sun for our leader.

JD assured me he had ample knowledge in how to construct the framework and that I had no need for concern. I had my doubts however, and I was quietly bringing them up to JD while I prepared to split more firewood. Hoping to keep this from earshot of our leader, we were quietly arguing behind his back, and I was beginning to suspect JD's face was turning red underneath the dirt. It was hard to tell.

Of a sudden, we heard Reverend Thompson making the oddest noise. He was bent over the fire in what appeared to be the death throes of some mysterious disease. Yogi had left the fire and was gathering more sausages from the cooler, when he turned around to see what the strange noise was about.

"He's chokin'", yelled Yogi, as he came running back. JD grabbed a large chunk of firewood from the woodpile, and wielding it like a 'Louisville

Slugger' slammed Reverend Thompson across the shoulder blades with all his might. It's been said "what doesn't kill you, only makes you stronger" and I guess in this case that is true, because the blow across the back did not kill Reverend Thompson. Instead, along with his heavy black rimmed glasses and his ten-gallon cowboy hat that pitched into the fire, a large wad of bacon fat the size of a golf ball that he had been chewing, and then choked on, became dislodged and flew into the fire as well. The ugly ball of fat sizzled in the hot coals for a few seconds before bursting into flame, along with his melting glasses and ruined cowboy hat.

The rest of the morning Reverend Thompson sat in his chair recovering from his ordeal, too upset even to finish his breakfast. I applied ointment to the scrapes around the black and blue welt that now adorned his back, in an unsuccessful effort to make him feel better. Yogi cleaned up the mess from our unfinished breakfast, washed the dishes, and put things away.

JD spent the rest of the day telling us over and over how lucky we were that someone of his caliber was on hand to save the Reverend Thompson's life. Perhaps we were, but he still hadn't washed the damn mud out of his ear.

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