**Animas Mountain**

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**Abstract:**

It was last spring when I got lost up on Animas Mountain spending the entire night trying to find my way back to my tent. Spooked from the presence of mountain lions, fighting the frigid cold, what I experienced, will stay with me for the rest of my life. I believe experience is what shapes our sense of place; the feeling when you see your house after a long trip, how you are drawn to your favorite camping spot, or the scenery that takes your breath away. All of these feelings, must come from somewhere? What you experience in that special place, shapes how see that place. From my experience on Animas Mountain, it shaped how I viewed that place into something new. Every time I drive around Durango it looms above me, calling my name. And even the scary stuff still stays with me, sometimes reminding me in the darkness of night. Animas Mountain means so much to me now, and as civilization grows expanding to every corner of the earth, I never want that place to change. Never forgetting the trees swaying peacefully in the wind.

It was the month of March and spring break for the Animas High School students. My dad and I were hiking up Animas Mountain finding a good camp spot where I could stay for the next two days. My dog Hobbit excitedly followed as he sniffs unfamiliar smells.

My dad and I found what looked like a good spot and began setting up the tent. The tight fabric molding itself to the flexible tent poles. I sat by my recently pitched tent reflecting the dying hours of the day. My dad and Hobbit trotted down the hill. Hobbit, with his little ears forward, happily scampered ahead of my dad seeking the car below. I saw Durango spread out below me like a chessboard with too many pieces. The houses and buildings aligned with the grid-like streets and with power lines draped above them. I looked around, remembering all the past memories I’ve had exploring this mountain.

One time, my friend Elliot and I were spent a late afternoon clambering up some lichen filled boulders as we stumbled upon a fox sitting at the top of a particular boulder. Its eyes stared curiously into mine wondering what a buffoon like me is doing at this hour. The climbers that spend many hours of the day here were long gone, which is probably the reason why this fox was wandering about. I tensely stared back at the fox marveling at its soft coat and elegant long bushy tail. The red orange tinge of its fur camouflaged perfectly to the trees and oak brush that makeup its home. With a nervous yawn it turned and scampered off, leaving Elliot and I looking at each other elated.

But now I sat at my camp a couple of years later, anticipating what new memories were to come. A sudden desire to get up and wander beyond the confines of my camp filled my heart. I got up, checked the time, I had 30 minutes before I needed to be back and to make dinner, plenty of time.

Every step I took was one step closer to pure freedom because this was my first time camping solo. I liked the responsibility and independence. The large ponderosa pines stood like giants watching over me as if guarding me from the outside world. The sun reflecting on their thick bark provided a beautiful golden glow. The fresh seedlings sprouted beneath my feet, with such vibrancy only found in the season of spring. I found a good spot and sat down to marvel at my surroundings. I peered up the hill and saw a small herd of deer grazing peacefully, unaware of my presence. A breeze sifts through the trees making a swooshing sound as if the trees were talking to each other. A feeling that cannot be described in words arose within me. I trembled in the grandeur of the moment and the place.

The sun was setting, the darkness creeping up like a cat creeps upon it’s prey. I sat there a moment longer as the sun fell behind the La Plata Mountains, the darkness hiding the path back to my tent. I walked back in the general direction trying to find it.

After what seemed like an hour, thoughts raced through my head as I walked with frustration. *Where the hell is my tent?* Everything looked the same up there. I knew that I had to find a landmark, but the darkness hid my path. To the south, I saw the sea of lights that was Durango. To the west, lay the La Plata Mountains, laden with melting snow. To the east was a maze of trees shaded by a cloak of darkness. North was up hill, south was down. I knew that my tent was somewhere on the west side by the cliffs, but those cliffs suddenly filled me with fear. My dad forbade me getting anywhere near those cliffs because of his dealings with people falling off and dying. I had to respect my father’s wishes because he graciously let me go on this grand adventure. I had to listen to him.

I wandered up and down, searching for my tent. . After some time I knew that there was no hope. I was lost and I had to accept it. People always told me when you get lost just stay where you are, don’t move, let people find you instead of you finding people. I reached in my pocket assessing what I had for survival. It was March, so the temperature was dropping steadily. Out of my pocket I pulled out two headlamps, a lighter, and my cell phone. I was tempted to just give up and call my dad, but my goal for this trip was to have no other human contact, just me, alone for two days. No big deal, I knew I could handle this.

I gathered some sticks and wood and dug a small fire pit. I didn’t want to burn the forest down so I collected some snow and spread it around the pit. As I struck the lighter a small flame bit into the kindling growing with life as it spread to the rest of the pieces of wood. After a minute or so I got a steady fire going, providing some warmth. I laid there curled up beside it and tried to go to sleep.

My eyes opened wide and the trickling flames captured me. I stared at them waving back and forth as if they were dancers giving a performance. My mind suddenly super clear as I refrained from thinking. Those flames where the only thing in my mind, nothing else. Then suddenly the fire grew smaller and smaller until there was nothing left. I laid there until cold stretched its arms and constricted me. The cold, brought me to my senses. *I have to find my tent!* I have to find it! I got up and began my second search. I peered into the darkness imagining the orange fabric staked tightly to the ground like a turtle resting on a beach. The moon began to rise above the trees, giving the shadow filled forest light. I could see a lot more clearly than before. I needed to get to high ground so I could better see my surroundings and I began to hike up the never-ending hill stretching to the sky filled with glowing stars.

I was so driven I hiked upward not noticing my suroundings. Unexpectedly, a leg with tattered fur connected to nothing but bones came into view. A pile of dirt hid the rest of the carcass as I looked at it wondering what possibly could have done this. I thought of the herd of deer I saw earlier remembering how happy they looked as they grazed upon the endless expanse of shrubs and grass. It was sad to find death. A sudden end to the greatest miracle on earth: life. But death comes with this great Gaia, it gives life to the other organisms, making them strong and healthy. I moved on, aiming for the top of the mountain.

Finally I reached the top of the mountain. Durango’s lights were so far away now that they seemed as if they were disappearing in the horizon. The La Platas glowed brightly in the moonlight like a lingering ghosts watching the world below them. The cold was getting worse. I clasped the lighter in my pocket and drew it out. As I continually struck the flint only sparks came out of it. Frustrated, I worked for what seemed like hours. My hands became stiff from the cold and I could see my breath. I got up defeated, ready to move on.

With my frozen hands nesting in my pockets, I started down, hoping that I may eventually run into my tent. Once again I look around me. The tall ponderosa pines stood over me, sheltering me from invisible demons. They comforted me as I walked down the face of Animas Mountain. The air was still, except for my footsteps, clunking away as they carried me down the mountain.

I remembered my tent had reflectors on it and I pulled out the two headlamps in my pocket. One headlamp on my head and the other in my hand. I waved them back and forth trying to find the reflectors on my tent.. I started seeing little rabbits sprinting away as I came too close, their eyes reflecting green.

Down the mountain quite a ways, I felt like I was getting close to my tent. Glancing around me, all I could find were trees and shrubs, no tent. Hunger nagged my stomach. My energy drained, every footstep felt like I was heaving 100 pounds. As I started up a small rise something caught my eyes. A brief reflection bounced of my headlamp. Excited that I finally found my tent, I flashed my light a second time. A set of eyes reflected back at me. Two green orbs stared back at me. I froze, not moving a muscle, hoping that this must be some illusion. I flashed the light another time across those unnerving set of orbs. They reflected once again. I thought to myself that this couldn’t be real. It might just be me imagining things, and it could be my tent. I began to walk toward the two lights thinking about the food hidden in my tent. But as I walked closer, those two orbs suddenly disappeared.

An obvious fear rose up within me. Something was not right. I turned around and started walking in the opposite direction, hurriedly getting away from the area were I saw those looming eyes. That was not a rabbit, nor a deer. The eyes acted like a predator, waiting for the perfect moment to make a kill.

I kept getting this feeling as if something was following me, stalking in the shadows. Sweat rolled down my spine as I trembled with a shaky fear within my bones. My eyes kept glancing to every corner of my surroundings. I slowly walked thinking that this might be it. I know that it would be quick. It would target the back of my neck imbedding it’s teeth into my vertebrae severing my nervous system, making me instantly paralyzed. Death would come to me in a matter of seconds while my body would never be found, only my bones partially buried in the dust filled earth, but I didn’t want to go without a fight. I imagined myself in a violent wrestling match with the daunting hunter, rolling around as it tried desperately to rip me apart. With that sudden visualization, I picked up a stick and tried to make myself look big. As I continued to walk, I began to scream in a desperate attempt to survive.

Of course nothing happened, but it provided me with some comfort. There was no way I could safely find my tent at this time. I looked around for another place where I could rest and await the sun to rise. A lonely tree was just standing there calling my name. It’s weird how the trees feel like your friends. As if they know me, and are there to protect me. This place was having a strange affect on me that I have never experienced before.

I walked up to the base of the tree and sat at its roots. The cold was getting worse. I didn’t notice it as much when I was wandering around, but now as I sat, I was freezing. I curled up my legs and my arms putting them inside my jacket, trying to keep everything warm. After about 30 minutes it was just getting too much, I had to get warm. I dug another pit and tried a third time to make a fire. After striking over and over again with the lighter I got nowhere. Frustrated and sitting idle, fear began to creep in, I needed to feel safe. I glanced upward and saw a climbable route up the tree. At least I would be safe up there. So I climbed.

I found a nice branch to sit on and checked the time, 1:00am. Only six more hours before the sun would come up again! I sat on the branch and tried to think positive thoughts. Over and over again in my head I would repeat “just stay positive, just stay positive…” The tree branch dug into my legs cutting off some circulation and I sat clinging to the tree just staring at the moon, watching it slowly get closer and closer to the horizon, then it seemed like it stopped. The constant decline of the moon was the only source of hope that helped me make it through this never-ending night. *What possibly could happen next?* I dealt with so much already, all I wanted was for this endeavor to be over. As I sat in the tree, I suddenly heard a noise, like something was desperately calling for help. A decrepit old man moaning after he fell down a flight of stairs. And as the moaning went on, it abruptly stopped. My heart stopped also, the breath within me froze. I was listening, fear rising up yet again. Too afraid to come down from the tree, I sat there for about an hour more, waiting for the sun to rise as my body began to chill to the bone. My suffering was beginning to be too much for me, then I remembered that I still had a cell phone. I wondered why I didn’t think of this before? Reaching in my pocket, all that I found was just a couple of dead pine needles. My phone must have fallen out of my pocket when I was climbing the tree. I was to afraid to go down and search the base of the tree. My exhaustion, fear and the cold was taking a toll on me. I knew that I had to move.

I reluctantly climbed down. I needed my tent. In the morning I would retrace my steps and look for my phone, my lighter, and the headlamps. I walked, scanning for anything that looked like a tent I remembered that it was not far off the trail. I had to find the trail. After a while, I found a wash looking thing that could potentially be a trail.

Knowing that daybreak was near I decided just to wait. A small shrub lay beside the path and I crawled under it hoping that is could hide me from wandering animals. Curling up, and tucking my legs in my jacket, I tried to fall asleep. Time went by, my mind finally began to turn itself off, and I fell asleep, a well-deserved break from the dealings of the night.

I woke up and the faint light of dawn was beginning to lighten the forest. Excitement and motivation rose within me as I got up and began to search once again for my tent. The sun was starting to peer out shining a welcomed vibrancy on the chilled forest floor. As soon as the sun rose, I could see the orange fabric waiting for me. Exhausted, I walked to my tent and collapsed inside. . Finally, I could rest..

This experience could have been a lot different if I had not gotten lost. Even though at the time it seemed like a disaster, my connection to Animas Mountain strengthened. Everyone has a special place, and has the responsibility to protect and respect it. Whenever I drive by it, it looms above me and calls me back. Even the scary stuff, sometimes haunts me but doesn’t cause me to have bidder feelings. Animas Mountain means so much to me, and as civilization grows expanding to every corner of the earth, I never want that place to change. Never forgetting the trees swaying peacefully in the wind as they communicate to each other. This place is my special place, and I know that others value it as well. It is my desire to preserve and protect it. What is your special place?