

BLACK CANYON

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Ghillinnein Books

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FIRST EDITION

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ISBN: 978-0-9937646-5-3

THE PRESENT

I didn't want to kill them. I loved them. But sometimes you have to do what you have to do to survive. I think you'll agree with me after you hear my account of what happened twenty-five years ago. I had no other choice. It was either them or me.

A quarter of a century seems like forever ago. That would make the year in discussion the year the Berlin Wall fell, the year Iraq invaded Kuwait, the year *The Simpsons* debuted on television, the year the first webpage was published on the internet, and the year the Edmonton Oilers defeated the Boston Bruins to win their fifth and last Stanley Cup. It was, I guess, a pretty great year all in all—at least, a pretty important one. On a more personal note, it was the year I kissed my first girl, the year I got a mountain bike for my birthday, and the year I

broke my collarbone when I fell off that bike while biking where I wasn't allowed to be biking.

It was 1990. I was a grade-six student at Dry Creek Elementary School in Englewood, Colorado, and the people I killed were my parents.

When you say "Colorado" most people think of skiing. Some think of Mesa Verde, or Garden of the Gods, or Estes Park, or Cañon City. Not many think of Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. But they should. They should go there too, see it with their own eyes. It's a breathtaking gorge half as deep as the Grand Canyon, though much, much narrower, which, in my opinion, makes it all the more spectacular. I try to return there once a year, partly for the scenery, but mostly for the memories.

1990

Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument (it wouldn't be upgraded to national park status for another four years) was located in the western part of Colorado State, a bit south of center, making it a two-hour drive from Englewood, where I lived. My dad was behind the wheel of the eight-year-old Chevrolet Citation. My mom, in the seat next to him, was smoking a cigarette and reading one of those supermarket magazines that give you all the dirt on celebrities. I didn't have any brothers or sisters, so I had the backseat to myself. I sat with my back against one door, my legs stretched out so my feet almost touched the opposite door. I didn't have my seatbelt on, but my parents weren't the type of parents who cared about seatbelts and stuff. Occasionally I would glance out the window at the golden aspens and other turning trees. Mostly I played my Gameboy (with a pair of earphones so I didn't bother my parents). I was up to Abobo, the boss at the end of Mission 1 in *Double Dragon*, which I'd borrowed from my friend Lionel Smyth. The game wasn't so good on the tiny monochrome screen, but it kept me occupied.

It was Friday, October 24, a public holiday. I didn't have to

go to school, which was awesome. Yet with my parents around it didn't feel like a real day off, like when I got to stay home sick by myself. It felt more like a regular old Saturday. Even so, a Friday feeling like a Saturday was still better than a Friday feeling like a Friday.

We didn't leave the house as early as my dad wanted—in fact, we didn't leave until noon because my mom refused to get out of bed before ten—so it was midafternoon by the time we reached the southern rim entrance to Black Canyon. We followed a paved road through dark, somber evergreens that blocked out much of the daylight and stopped at a gate. My parents started arguing about something. I would have put my earphones back over my ears, but I'd already turned the Gameboy off and couldn't be bothered to start it up again.

“What if someone checks, Steve?” my mom was saying in the same tone she used when she was cross at me.

“Who's going to check?” my dad replied offhandedly, annoyed, like he thought my mom was overreacting. “Camping season is over. There's nobody here but us.”

“A ranger probably comes by.”

“It's a waste of money.”

“It's called the honor system.”

“What are you, a Girl Guide?”

“Don't be so cheap.”

Grumbling, my dad opened his door. “It's just going to sit there, you know?”

My mom didn't look at him or say anything; she already knew she'd won.

My dad climbed out of the car and stuck his head back in-

side. “Or some kids are going to come along and pilfer it.”

“Kids?” my mom said, raising her eyebrows amusedly. “Look around, Steve. We’re in the middle of nowhere. And you said there’s nobody—”

He slammed his door shut and circled the vehicle. He stopped before a little wooden box sitting atop a pole. He took his wallet from his back pocket—he got the wallet as a free gift with a case of beer he’d bought during Labor Day weekend—and produced several one dollar bills.

“What’s Dad doing, Mom?” I asked.

“Paying the camping fee, hon.” She kept her attention on my dad, likely to make sure he put the money in the box and didn’t fake it. My mom was right: my dad could be pretty cheap sometimes. I’ve been bugging him for a raise in my allowance a lot lately, but he wouldn’t negotiate. I got the same one dollar a week that I got when I first started getting an allowance two years before. It sucked. One small bag of salt and vinegar chips and a can of Pepsi wiped me out until the following weekend. My mom was a bit more generous. She usually gave me fifty cents, or sometimes a whole dollar when I asked her politely. I had to have a good excuse handy, like I needed to take the bus somewhere. Still, what I got from her added up, and I was no longer considered the poor kid by my friends. That dishonor went to Ralph Stevenson. His dad didn’t work either, and he was always begging everyone for a spare dime or quarter. We never gave him anything, but we often shared our lunches with him. All his mom ever packed him was a raw carrot and a couple pieces of buttered bread.

My dad stuffed the dollar bills into the slit in the wooden

box, cast my mom a you-happy-now? look, then returned to the car.

“Thank you,” she told him as he shifted the transmission into first and popped the clutch.

He grunted, and we continued in silence to the campground. I never said anything when my parents were fighting with each other. I’ve learned it was best to simply “zip it,” an expression my dad used a lot, and to wait the fight out. Otherwise chances were good I would become the focus of their anger and get grounded or spanked for doing nothing.

The campground, my dad had told me earlier, contained three loops of campsites. Loop A was open year round, while Loops B and C were open spring to early fall. Being late October, I figured we must be driving to a campsite in Loop A.

A few minutes later we parked in a small clearing and got out of the car and looked around at the crowding forest. “Smell that, Brian!” my dad said, inhaling deeply and clapping me on the shoulder roughly.

I sniffed. “Smell what?” The air was cool, brittle, reminding me that Halloween was next week.

“Nature!” he exclaimed. “You won’t smell that back in the city.”

“Worth four bucks, if you ask me,” my mom said. She was standing on the other side of the car and cupping her hands around a cigarette she was lighting.

“Bitch all you want, Suz, you’re not going to spoil my mood.”

“Dad,” I said, “can you open the trunk?”

“All I want,” he went on, ignoring me, “is a bit of peace

and quiet. That so much to ask? A bit of peace and quiet?”

“Dad?”

“*What?*”

“Can you open the trunk?”

He glared at me.

“I need my tent,” I said.

Reaching inside the car, he pulled a trigger that released the trunk lid. I went to the trunk, lifted the lid, and collected my tent and backpack.

The clearing was little more than the size of a baseball infield. The amenities included a vault toilet, a picnic table, and a grill. I stopped at a flat spot of ground a good distance away from the car and upended the nylon tent bag, dumping the poles and guy ropes and metal spikes onto the mat of spongy pine needles. There was no instruction booklet—or if there once had been, it had been long since lost—and it took me a solid half hour to set the thing up properly (and even then I wasn’t sure I had constructed it correctly as it seemed to lean drunkenly to one side).

Still, it wasn’t falling over, and that was good enough for me. I glanced at my parents. They had set their tent up next to the car and were standing with their arms around each other.

Happy they were in one another’s good books again, I joined them and said, “So what do we do now?”

“Huh?” my mom said. She’d been staring off into the distance with one of her thinking faces on.

“I said—”

“Sit back and relax,” my dad told me. He released my mom’s waist and snatched a bottle of beer from the blue

Eskimo cooler chest that sat on the ground, next to the Citation's front tire. He twisted off the cap, flicked it away into the trees, and took a long sip.

"I hope it's not going to rain," my mom said.

I looked where she was looking and saw that the sky had smudged over with dark storm clouds.

"It won't, baby doll," my dad said. "It'll blow over."

"Can I have a beer, Dad?" I asked.

"Even if it does," he said, hooking his arm around my mom's waist once again and kissing her on the cheek, "we'll just go inside the tent. It's waterproof. And I think we can figure out something to do there." His hand slipped off the small of her back to her rear.

She swatted it away. "Not in front of Brian, Steve."

"Dad?" I said.

"What?"

"Can I have a beer?"

"You hear that, Suz? The boy wants a beer."

"Can I?" I said.

"Hell no. You'll just waste it."

I frowned, but I wasn't disappointed, not really. My dad had given me sips from his beers before, and I didn't like the taste of them. I only asked for one to show him I wasn't still a little kid. He was always treating me like I was still in grade four or something.

"Have a Pepsi, hon," my mom said. "And bring me a bottle of wine while you're at it."

I removed the lid from the cooler. "Which one?" I asked. Three wine bottles floated in the icy water alongside brown

bottles of beer and blue-and-red Pepsi cans.

“You choose, angel.”

I selected the bottle with the fanciest label and brought it to my mom, along with a Styrofoam cup that had been in a plastic bag next to the cooler. Then I returned for my Pepsi and popped the tab before my mom changed her mind about letting me have one before dinner.

My dad’s hand, I noticed, had found its way down to my mom’s rear again, but this time she didn’t swat it away.

I said, “What are we having for dinner?”

“Hot dogs,” my dad told me.

“Yeah! Are we going to cook them on the grill or over the fire?”

I don’t think he heard me, because he was asking my mom where she wanted the folding chairs.

“Right over there,” she said. “By the fire pit.”

He went to the car’s trunk, which he’d left propped open so it resembled the mouth of a sunbaking alligator, and carried two slat-back folding chairs to the stone ring that formed the perimeter of the fire pit.

“Dad?” I said, following him.

“What, Brian?”

“Can we cook them over the fire? The hot dogs?”

“You can cook your wieners over the fire, if you want. But you’re going to need to find a sharp stick.”

“Can I go look now?”

“That’s a great idea.”

“Don’t go too far,” my mom called

I spent about an hour wandering the woods surrounding the

campground, looking for the perfect stick. I didn't know what characteristics the perfect stick entailed, but I figured it needed to be long enough so I didn't burn my hands in the fire, thick enough so it didn't snap beneath the weight of the wiener, and have a thin, pointy tip. In the end I found one that sported all these requisites, plus, as a bonus, it ended in *three* prongs, like a devil's scepter, which meant I could cook three wieners at once.

When I returned to the campground to show the stick to my parents, I found them lounging in the folding chairs, my mom laughing at something my dad was telling her. Loud music played from the portable stereo, some old-fashioned stuff, maybe Elvis, or The Beatles.

"Look at my stick!" I said as I approached them.

"That's lovely, Brian," my mom said. She had one of her funny smelling cigarettes pinched between her fingers. The filter was smudged with red lipstick.

"Dad? Look." Four empty beer bottles sat next to him on the ground.

"Let me see that." He held out his hand.

Beaming, I passed it to him.

He snapped off two of the prongs, then handed it back. "That's better."

I was too shocked to say anything. My eyes smarted with tears. I turned around and pretended to be interested in the stick.

"Brian?" he said.

"Yeah?" I said.

"Grab me another beer, will ya?"

Rubbing the tears from my cheeks—there had only been a couple—I opened the cooler and grabbed a beer. I considered asking my mom if I could have another Pepsi, but I didn't because I knew she would say no. I brought the beer to my dad, then sat on the ground a few feet away from him.

I listened to my parents' conversation for a bit. They were talking about their friends. My mom kept calling one of the women she worked with a skunk. I wondered if maybe she meant "skunk." Sometimes when she was drinking she didn't always pronounce her words correctly. And I could tell she was a little drunk already. Her face was flushed, her eyes filmy. My dad wouldn't be drunk, not after four beers, but he probably had what he called a buzz.

He cracked open the beer I'd given him, then asked my mom for the cigarette she was smoking. He didn't smoke, not every day like she did, but he would have the funny smelling ones every now and then.

I leaned back on my elbows and breathed deeply. Despite my dad breaking my stick, and despite shivering a bit in the chill autumnal night, a swell of contentment washed over me. I liked times like these, when my parents were drinking alcohol. It was weird because in the movies parents drinking alcohol always yelled at their kids, or hit them. But mine were the opposite. They didn't fight as much, and they became nicer to me, more attentive.

"Hey, is there electricity here?" I asked suddenly, wondering if I could charge my Gameboy. I glanced at the stereo. There was no cord; it was running on batteries.

"Nope," my dad said. "But there's water in case you get

thirsty.”

I knew that. I had seen the rusty tap poking out of the ground.

“By the way, Bri-guy,” he added. “We’re going to need some tinder and firewood to make the fire before it gets dark. How about you go find us some?”

“Do you want to come with me?” I asked.

“Not right now. I’ve had a long day. You go along.”

I went, even though I figured my day had been about as long as his had been.

Half an hour later I had built a good stockpile of tinder and kindle and firewood next to the fire pit. My dad came over and joined me and soon had a fire going. It was just in time too, as the last of the daylight was seeping from the sky, turning it a muddy orange that quickly bled to red, then to purplish-black.

My mom set the picnic table with paper plates and napkins while my dad got the grill going. I slipped two slimy Oscar Mayer wieners from the package and impaled one on my stick and stuck the other in my pocket. Then I extended the stick with the attached wiener into the fire and turned it slowly, like a rotisserie. When the wiener had blistered and blackened, I extracted it and took a bite.

“Ow!” I yelped.

“It’s going to be hot,” my mom told me from the picnic table. I could barely see her in the dark.

I blew on the wiener to cool it down, ate it quickly, then produced the second one from my pocket, stuck it on the stick, and repeated the cooking process. To my dismay, it slipped off the prong and dropped into the fire and ashes.

“Dad!” I cried. “My hotdog fell off!”

“Christ, Brian.” He was seated next to my mom at the picnic table.

“Can I have another one?” I asked.

“You already got your two.”

“But the second one fell off.”

“What do you think we’re going to eat tomorrow?”

“But I’m still hungry.”

“You can have a bun.”

My parents had lit tea candles, and I could see both of them in the jittery candlelight, chomping down on their hotdogs, shadows jumping on their faces.

“Just the bun?” I said, nonplussed.

“You can put ketchup on it.”

My mom giggled, spitting food from her mouth. This started my dad giggling too. I didn’t find that solution funny. In fact, now I knew what Ralph Stevenson felt like every day at lunch with his buttered bread.

Nevertheless, I was hungry, so I joined my parents at the picnic table and ate a bun with ketchup and drank the metallic-tasting water from the tap.

When we finished eating—my dad had had three hotdogs, I’d counted—my mom lit another one of her funny smelling cigarettes and shared it with my dad and talked about the stars. I looked up too. The moon was little more than a silver hook, but there must have been a gazillion stars twinkling down at us. I wondered what it would be like to get on a rocket ship and visit distant places in the galaxy. I decided it would be pretty great. I’d invite my parents and maybe one of my friends,

maybe even Stephanie, the girl I'd kissed recently. Maybe we'd run into aliens. Maybe we'd even find God hiding somewhere.

When my mom ran out of things to say about the stars, my dad told some ghost stories. They weren't very scary because my mom kept interrupting him, saying, "He's just a child, Steve," which effectively ended each one right at the gooey parts.

Later, when it was my bedtime and I had to go to my tent, I read an *Archie* comic book—a Betty and Veronica Double Digest—from cover to cover. Then I turned off my flashlight and lay perfectly still in the darkness. My parents had stopped talking and laughing some time ago, so I guessed they were asleep. The only sound I heard now was the chirrups of crickets. Then I made out a soft rustling in the leaf litter. It was quick, sporadic. I pictured a wood mouse rummaging for acorns, pausing every now and then to sniff the air to make sure nothing was about to swoop down from the black sky, or sneak up behind it. I ended up falling asleep reflecting on how crappy it would be to be stuck at the bottom of the food chain, living your life in constant danger of getting eaten by something bigger than yourself.

I woke at dawn. The fire had winnowed to nothing but a pile of smoldering coals. My dad was crouched next to it in the murky half-light, trying to set fire to some scrunched up newspaper pages by rubbing two sticks together really fast. He soon gave

up doing this and used my mom's bronze Zippo with the picture of a tiny airplane on it. He set kindle atop the burgeoning flames, then larger sticks.

He was whistling and seemed to be in a good mood, so I approached and said, "What's for breakfast, Dad?"

I almost expected him to tell me he wasn't made of food when he grinned and said, "Pancakes." He grabbed a box of pancake mix from next to his foot and tossed it to me. I caught it and looked at a smiling Aunt Jemima. "Don't even need eggs or milk," he said. "Just add water. What will they think of next?"

"Can I have three?" Two of anything was usually all I was ever allowed.

"Aren't you listening to me, boy? It's just mix and water. Have five if you want."

"Five!"

"Now come here and help me out."

I followed my dad's instructions, pouring half the box of pancake mix into a plastic bowl, then adding water from the tap. I stirred the mix until the viscosity became consistent. Then I poured three circles onto the oiled grill.

"All right, all right. Give me some space here, Brian," my dad said. "I'll tell you when they're ready."

I retreated to my stump by the fire and continued to watch my dad cook the pancakes. He was a handsome man, I thought. He still had all his hair, which I knew he was proud of, because he always made fun of bald people. When he combed his hair and shaved, my mom often told him he looked like a movie star. Now his hair was scruffy and unwashed, and stubble

pebbled his jaw. He wore a pair of Bermuda shorts and a red singlet with a picture of a setting sun on the chest. His feet were bare.

Sometimes when my mom wasn't around, and it was just my dad and me like this, I didn't know what to say to him. I was worried about saying the wrong thing, upsetting him. He wouldn't yell at me or anything, not usually, but he'd go quiet, or ignore me altogether. That's when I knew I'd annoyed him.

He used to be an air conditioner repairman, my dad. But then last month he was fired. He got in a big fight with my mom about this. They still argued about it a lot. My mom wanted him to get another job, and he said he was looking. Once he told her he was going to drive trucks. I thought that was neat. But she didn't want him to, because it meant he would be away for long periods of time and there would be nobody home at nighttime to look after me when she went to the bar where she worked. She told me she was a waitress there, but I think she was a dancing waitress because my dad was always talking to her about quitting her dancing.

He cocked an eye at me now. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing," I said.

"You ready for the hike today?"

"Where are we going?"

"The north pole, where do you think?"

I didn't know and got nervous.

"To the canyon!" he said. "Did you think we were just going to sit around here all day?"

"Awesome!"

"You bet it's awesome. You're going to keep up, right?"

“Yeah.”

“Hope so. Now come get your pancakes.”

I grabbed a paper plate and held it in front of me. My dad flopped three pancakes onto it. I doused them with maple syrup, then returned to my stump. While I gobbled the pancakes down, I noticed my mom stir in her tent. My dad had left the door unzipped and I could see inside as she kicked the sleeping bag off her, got up, and started to fuss through the clothes she had brought. She was wearing nothing but a pair of skimpy panties. I could see the tattoo of the unicorn on her thigh, and an ugly bruise the size of an apple on her left biceps. She was old, thirty I think, but she was still pretty. When we went to a restaurant for dinner, other men would look at her. Also, the waiters were always flirting with her, or at least my dad said they were. Some of my friends had weird crushes on her too. They told me she was hot. I told them they were gross.

A moment later she emerged from the tent dressed in a pair of short canary-yellow shorts and a tight white top that made it obvious she didn't have a bra on. Her hair was messy, and her face was free of makeup. I liked her face better like this. I thought she wore too much makeup sometimes. Without it she looked more like my mom.

“Hey Mom,” I said with a full mouth, smiling at her.

“Morning, hon. Mmm. That smells good. Did you help your father with breakfast?”

“Yup! And he said I can have as many pancakes as I want.”

“Hold on there, Brian,” he said. “Three's plenty. There's not as much mix as I thought. We need to save some for tomorrow.”

I glanced at the small triangle of pancake left on my plate and wished I hadn't eaten so fast now. My mom sat on a stump next to mine and lit a cigarette. She was rubbing the corner of her eyes like she did in the mornings when she drank wine the night before.

"Baby doll?" my dad said. "How many pancakes?"

"I'm not hungry."

"You have to eat something."

"Brian can have mine."

"All right!" I said.

"I just told him—"

"Please, Dad?"

He looked at me for a long moment, but I held his eyes, refusing to look away, and finally he shrugged. "One more, Brian," he said, turning back to the grill. "But that's it. What do you think, I'm made out of food or something?"

