

B.R. O'Hagan

Martin's Way



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Independence • Oregon

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For Natalie Elizabeth

I

THE FIRST TIME I BEAT MY DAD AT ANYTHING, I was fourteen. It was Independence Day, 1939. My best friend Patrick and I spent the day with our families and most of the citizens of Salem, Oregon, in a grassy field along the Willamette River. We encamped among the cottonwoods lining the riverbank, and when the whistle rang out to announce the first games of the day, Patrick and I grabbed a gunnysack and prepared to face off against our fathers in the three-legged sack race.

Our dads had the confidence of age on their side, but Patrick and I had an edge: every day for the past week we'd taken a burlap bag out into the alley behind the hardware store, tied our adjoining legs together, pulled the bag up around our waists and practiced until we perfected a hop, skip and jump technique that was half-bullfrog, half Olympic sprinter.

When Mr. Tilden fired his starter pistol, Patrick and I took the lead. Our dads quickly figured out that they were in a race they just might lose, and began to pour it on. My dad flashed me a victory grin as they matched our stride and started to pass us. Then, just ten yards from the finish line their gunnysack snagged on a rock, and our fathers tumbled to the ground. Patrick and I flew across the line to the cheer of the crowd—and the sputtering and colorful mumbling of our chagrined dads.

In the heat of the afternoon we feasted on platters of buttermilk fried chicken, sweet watermelon and red, white and blue potato salad, washed down with ice-cold root beer. Later we spread blankets on the cool grass beneath a great white oak and lazed until the breeze off the river brought the temperature down a few degrees. Then we played a final game of touch football in the gathering twilight and sat down to my

mother's fresh marionberry cobbler with vanilla ice cream. All around us, families waited for the night sky to darken enough for the Fourth of July fireworks to begin.

My Scout troop had been tapped to help set the fireworks launch tubes on the riverbank. Patrick and I placed dozens of preloaded tubes in launchers that had been dug into the sandy bank, and attached fuse cord to each one. Once the show was underway our job was to keep the firemen supplied with freshly lit sawdust punks to light their fuses. As the show neared its finale, the chief let me light off a few of the smaller pyrotechnics. One of my shots fired prematurely when the aluminum tube came loose in the sand. The tube canted to its side, launching the red and green projectile horizontally instead of straight into the night sky. It shot directly toward the west bank of the river, rocketing just a few feet above the water's surface.

It was a pretty sight, though the folks enjoying the fireworks from the deck of the barge anchored in the middle of the river didn't seem too tickled when the fireball screamed low across their bow and plowed into the rocky riverbank behind them in a shower of sparks. The crowd on my side of the river roared with delight, though, as the partygoers on the barge dropped to their knees and covered their heads. The fire chief was none too pleased, but Patrick and I chalked it up as a grand success, and conspired to do it again the next year.

By the time the last ribbons of colored light floated down and disappeared into the dark green water, I was smoky, sweaty, tired, and hungry.

So I was a little beat when I lugged my bags over to Patrick's house just after sunup the next morning to join my Scout troop for a week long hike into the Cascade Mountains. Patrick was waiting for me on his porch, haversack and fishing pole at his side. His father was nursing a cup of black coffee, and warming up his '37 Chevrolet pickup.

"You boys toss your bags in the back," he said. "We're late."

We rolled our heavy bags over the side of the pickup, and hopped into

the front seat for the five-minute drive into downtown Salem.



PATRICK'S FAMILY OWNED O'Hagan's Hardware Store on High Street, across from the Elsinore Theatre. It had sixteen-foot ceilings, creaky wooden floors, and a cantankerous wood stove whose care and feeding was our daily responsibility from fall through spring. In the summer we hauled seasoned oak, maple and Douglas fir from my dad's wood lot, and split and stacked eight or nine cords in the woodshed behind the store. We kept the crib beside the stove fully stocked, and cleaned out the ashes on Saturdays.

In 1939 the hardware store was about the most important business in town. It was also my idea of paradise. When you stepped off the sidewalk and through the double oak doors, the smell of varnish and sawdust hit you like perfume. Rows of wooden display shelves were packed solid with plumbing fixtures, kerosene lamps, and hand tools of every shape, size and design. You could buy a fifty-gallon iron kettle, one hundred yards of barbed wire, bear traps, rifles and ammunition, or a can of ether to kick-start your tractor when the ice hung thick on the viney maple.

In the display windows facing the street, Patrick's mother laid out tools and gifts according to the season. I liked Christmas best. An electric train wound through a landscape of snow-covered mountains and gumdrop forests in the display window. In one corner of the window were two giant glass jars filled with candy canes. The sign above them read: "Guess how many and win a prize." Six years running I had guessed, and six years running I had lost.



THE TRUCK ground to a halt at the bus stop. We unloaded our gear and went through it one last time on the sidewalk, making sure we hadn't missed anything—first aid kits, flashlights, compass, pocketknives and mess kits. We thought we were as ready as a couple of Second Class Scouts could be.

While we waited, Patrick talked of rank advancement. "I just need to get my fourteen-mile hike done, and make one meal from scratch for all of you in camp. That done, I make First Class. What's left on your list?"

"Hiking, just like you," I answered. "Plus, I have to demonstrate at least one practical first aid technique. Suppose I might get a chance to do that after we've tried your food."

Patrick tossed a pebble in my direction.

"You wouldn't mind falling down a rock ledge or something, would you?" I asked. "Break a couple bones, let me really get some first aid practice?"

"Well, sure," said Patrick as a bus pulled up to the curb. "Consider it done. In fact, I tell you what: I'll do my best to make sure everybody contributes at least one broken bone to the effort."

We tossed our gear through the rear hatch door, and climbed aboard the big, navy blue bus. The bus was built for thirty passengers, but today it would carry just eight Boy Scouts and one Scoutmaster over the Cascades and down into central Oregon.

We waved to Patrick's dad as the bus pulled away, and settled in for the five-hour drive. Hal Stannard and Gary Hartzell stretched out across two front seats next to our Scoutmaster, Nate Holden. At sixteen, Hal and Gary were the only First Class Scouts in the troop. At the back of the bus sat the two Tenderfoots. Scattered everywhere else were the fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds, including Patrick Michael O'Hagan, and yours truly, Martin Jacob Forrestal.

We had waited all year for the adventures ahead; seven days of hiking, fishing, stargazing, rock climbing, and swimming. Maybe we'd even discover some lost Indian village, or a fur trapper's cache of gold and silver. The boys of Troop 11 dreamed big.

High up on the slopes of the Cascade Range, meadow grasses were breaking through the melting snow, and black bears scoured brushy thickets in search of sweet, plump berries. Bobcat cubs wrestled on carpets of alpine wildflowers, and small mouth bass darted through the

clear, icy streams that tumbled out of the mountain vastness. The July sky shone brilliant blue from horizon to horizon, unblemished by so much as a wisp of cloud, as our bus ambled toward the wild.

My Grandfather Jake used to say that in life we seldom end up where we want to go, but we almost always end up where we need to be. Thinking back on that summer day from near seventy years on, I have no doubt that if we'd known about the cold, dark and danger that lay ahead we would have turned that bus around and high-tailed it home. Had we done that, though, each of us boys would have missed out on one of the greatest adventures of all: the opportunity to learn who you are, and what you are made of, under the duress of danger.

—w—

“MR. FORRESTAL. EXCUSE me—are we awake?”

Now, of all the indignities one faces while hospitalized—and they are legion, I assure you—it is the tiny ones that can most readily blossom like the barnacles on a ship's hull. One of the most irritating barnacles in my present circumstance was the way that nurses and lab technicians spoke to me in the royal third person, as if we were conjoined twins.

“I” was, for the record, perfectly alert. Just the same, it is a wise prisoner who does not upset his jailer.

“Oh, I'm awake,” I said. “How about you?”

“Wide awake,” Nurse Marsden said. She held an empty specimen bottle up to eye level, and gave it a little shake. “I wouldn't be carrying one of these if I were dreaming, not unless they could be used as currency on some tropical island.”

Judging from her pallid complexion and puffy eyes, I guessed that dreams were the only place my chief day nurse was getting much rest.

“Your temperature is a little high, and your last white count says it's time for you to make another donation to the cause,” she said. “ Shall we say a half-pint, in fifteen minutes?”

She handed me the container and whisked out of the room, closing the door behind her. I contemplated the deadline and the plastic bottle for a

moment, then tossed the bottle to the foot of my bed. Fifteen minutes? A half-pint?

She might just as well asked for me to do a handspring off the foot of my bed. I switched the digital recorder back on. The bottle could wait. My story couldn't.



“HEY, OVER HERE,” yelled Eddy Teachout.

Wade Gonzalez tossed the wide brim hat he had just snatched from Perry Young's head across the aisle. Eddy caught it between two fingers, snapped his wrist in a fluid motion, and sent the hat gliding through the air toward the front of the bus, where it landed next to Mr. Holden's foot. Holden didn't turn, or even say a word. He leaned down, grabbed the hat, and threw it back in Perry's general direction. The greenhorn put it on, and secured it with the chinstrap. Meanwhile, Toby St. Clair and Gary were arguing over whether Seabiscuit would heal from his injuries and race again.

Just one hour into the trip battle lines were being drawn, alliances were being forged, and a week's worth of general mayhem was being happily mapped out.

As the bus rolled past the fir and cedar forest bordering Lost Lake, I thought about our Scoutmaster. Nate Holden was still a mystery to me, even though I had been in his troop for over a year. We fished and hiked and helped with WPA projects around Salem, and I had spent hundreds of hours with the man, but I still didn't feel like I knew him very well.

Holden was in his mid-40s. He owned a hops farm along the river at Independence, where Patrick and I had worked the previous fall. He was tall, and whipcord lean. You'd say he was handsome were it not for the ragged scar that ran from his left ear, across his jaw and down his neck. He never explained it, and we didn't ask. My mother heard that he had been wounded in France in the Great War, and we left it at that.

Some said that Mr. Holden didn't like to talk; I say he was simply tight-fisted with his words. He doled them out sparingly, as if there were a finite,

irreplaceable inventory of sentences in his personal storehouse. Adjectives and adverbs didn't play much of a role in his vocabulary. When he spoke, it was pure Oklahoma prairie; firm and measured, never hesitant. A thing was what it was, no more, no less. And never once, even when we were in the thick of it, did he raise his voice in anger.

He wasn't given to ladling out praise, that's for sure. When one of his Scouts did well, he acknowledged it with a simple nod, or a slight, half bemused smile. Boys new to the troop learned his core philosophy on day one: anything that is worth doing is worth doing well.

I know it is popular these days to congratulate children for everything they do—even when they fail to hit the mark, even when they lose at something in the most miserable fashion—but the logic of rewarding a person for failure ran contrary to everything he believed. Learn it, remember it, and be able to demonstrate it on short notice—that was Mr. Holden's way.

It was commonplace for him to be hiking along in silence, and then, without preamble, to turn to the nearest Scout and begin rattling off questions. "What are the sixteen principal points of the Mariner's Compass," or, "How do you bake bread on a stick?" A correct answer earned at best a muffled "*hmph.*" Answer incorrectly, though, and you could find yourself lugging the cast-iron Dutch oven for the next mile.

Holden turned his head, caught my stare, and raised an eyebrow. Then, before I could think of anything to say, he shifted in his seat and gazed out the window. Maybe he could read minds, too.

A few minutes later the driver pulled into the gravel turnout at the crest of the mountain pass to check the radiator. He untied the canvas water sack tied to the front grill of the bus to top the radiator off, and we fanned out along the low granite retaining wall to take in the scenery.

The air was crisp and unseasonably cool. Eight thousand foot Mt. Washington, just to the south, was almost close enough to touch. Its upper slopes and granite crags were covered with snow year round. Hidden behind its silver and white mass lay our destination, the emerald

lakes and alpine meadows around South Sister, the southernmost of the dormant volcanoes known as the Three Sisters Mountains. Tonight we were going to bunk at the ranch of a Scout leader outside the small town of Sisters, and begin our hike at first light.



WE SLEPT IN A BARN near Sisters that night—or at least we tried to. Hal and Gary hung storm lanterns along the tack wall, and we spread our sleeping bags out on beds of sweet alfalfa hay. The fact that the barn had a loft that was perched directly above a huge pile of loose hay wasn't much of an invitation to rest, though.

One by one, we climbed the ladder to the loft, and then dove, cannon-balled, flipped or just plain dropped the ten feet down into the hay pile. Mr. Holden finally had to come down from the main house around midnight to quiet us down.

In the morning, after a pre-dawn breakfast of sausage and pancakes, we climbed onto the bus for the drive to the trail head. The bus did poorly with the twists and turns of the back country road, and it took a few hours to drive just twelve miles to the downed tree that marked the literal end of the line. We unloaded our gear and waved as the bus disappeared back toward town in a cloud of dust.

Mr. Holden lined us up, and then walked from boy to boy, checking the weight of each haversack, adjusting loads where needed, and shaking canteens to make sure they were full. The still, cloudless sky promised a scorching day ahead, and made the prospect of camping by a creek sound better by the minute.

The ground at the trail head was flat and rocky. There were a few lodgepole pines, and plenty of scrub brush, but not much else. We could see the snowfields and glaciers on North Sister, but low hills and trees blocked the view of her sisters and the neighboring peaks. We had a short hike planned for this morning—just three miles to Soap Creek, where we would spend the day setting up our first camp. Short day or not, Mr. Holden wanted to make sure everyone understood their responsibilities

along the way.

“Boys,” he said, “it’s going to be a hot one, and you’re each carrying at least 25 pounds. Your packs are that *light* because we’re going to pick up the rest of our food at the cache the local council left for us at Camp Lake. Today we get acclimated, and focus on the basics. I want you to drink when you’re thirsty, and I especially want you to pay attention to your feet. One blister can ruin an entire trip. If you feel one starting to chafe, let the Scout on point know, and we’ll stop to patch it up. You ignore the pain, and push on like a tough guy, and before long one of us will have to carry you.” He let that sink in for a moment, and then we were off.

I swung into line behind Hal. There were no signs for us to follow, but the trail incline was gentle, and we had plenty of visual markers to keep to a true path. After an hour of slow, steady climbing, we came to the crest of a hill dominated by the first Ponderosa pine of the day. Mr. Holden stopped us for a boot and haversack check.

He put another boy on point, pulled Gary and Hal to the rear to keep the line moving at a good clip, and pointed us westward. The trail narrowed, and grew a little steeper, and the landscape underwent a dramatic change. The scruffy lodgepole forest faded away, replaced by stands of Mountain Hemlock. It even cooled a few degrees.

As we climbed, we began to see patches of meadow grass, and occasional bunches of summer wildflowers. Eddy spooked a doe out of a fern patch beside the trail. She flipped her tail, scrambled up a hillside, and was gone in a heartbeat.

I heard the water before I could see it. Hal lit out first, and in a few seconds the entire troop was boiling over the rise toward the sound of rushing water. It was a pretty creek—forty or fifty feet across, no more than two or three feet deep, and cold as polar ice. The water was so clear you could count the speckles on the smooth rocks that covered the creek bed. Wade and Patrick had their boots off first, and by the time Mr. Holden caught up with us, we had our trousers rolled up to our knees

and were splashing around.

Mr. Holden dropped his pack, sat on a rock beside a patch of red monkey-flower, and pulled out his pipe. That was our signal to cut loose. Shirts and pants flew to the mossy bank, and we yipped and hollered and splashed and skipped rocks downstream. The hot sun beat down on our backs even as the frigid water chilled us through. It was flat out glorious.

By the time we made camp at mid afternoon, the sun was directly overhead. We set our pup tents in a straight line, with the creek in front and a cluster of hemlock and brush behind us.

Patrick's debut as chef wasn't scheduled for a few days yet, so Gary and the tenderfoots had the job. An hour later our mess kits were filled with canned chicken and noodle goulash, boiled potatoes and peaches. And after KP duty, it was time to stoke the fire and get on with the really important business for the evening—scaring the willies out of the greenies with our most finely tuned and drawn out ghost stories.



THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT a blazing fire, a star-strewn sky and the gentle swaying of tall trees in the soft night breeze that makes listening to a story you would yawn at in school seem as real as rain. Gary Hartzell told the first story. At sixteen, he'd been on enough campouts to appreciate that the darkness was his best prop. It helped to make his garden-variety tale of a half-man, half-beast who roamed the mountains and forests of central Oregon in search of children to eat all the more sinister.

As Gary wove his story in a quiet, urgent voice, Toby and Perry scooted closer to the fire. The payoff came when Patrick and Hal jumped out of the darkness and clapped their cold hands over the boys' faces while letting out a Comanche war cry. Toby and Perry flew a couple feet in the air. The rest of us laughed and hooted and slapped one another on the back, as much in relief, I think, that we didn't have to go through that initiation again ourselves as it was the sheer entertainment of watching the young guys get the scare of their lives.

When the laughter faded, Gary helped to salvage some of the boys'

dignity. “Gentlemen,” he said, “welcome to the troop. There might still be a black bear out there with your smiling faces painted on his menu, but I promise you this: from now on, it will take more than a ghost story to make you jump out of your socks.”

Each of us took a storytelling turn beside the fire that night. We even humored the greenhorns by letting them make up a story of their own. By the time Patrick acted out his tale of blood-soaked Irish banshees, the yellow moon rested just above the snowy peaks, and the fire had burned down to a bed of scarlet coals.

That’s when I noticed that Mr. Holden had disappeared. I stepped away from the fire, and let my eyes adjust to the dark. A minute later I saw the red glow of his pipe, down at the creek’s edge. He was always leading his troop—even when he stepped aside to let us lead ourselves.

