

Fire

Travis A. Wittwer

"Dad, can I light the fire?"

"This is the summer for you to do that isn't it?" I said drawing the answer out.

"Yes. You promised last summer that it could be my job this year."

"Yes I did, didn't I?" I replied avoiding a quick answer. "But are you ready?" I trailed off with this last question. My son knew I was putting him on, but you could still see the anticipation and frustration on his face. Perfect.

"Dad!"

"Hey, I'm just checking to make sure you're ready."

"I am. I am."

"Do you know the three reasons for a fire?"

He gave me a puzzled look. I knew he didn't know, and neither did I, but I was enjoying the moment and wanted to drag it out. "Are you ready for the--"

I was cut off by a quick, "READY!"

Thinking quickly, I stated with authority, "The first reason is heat."

He pretended like he was writing it down using an invisible pen and pad of paper. "Got it Pop. And the second?"

"Safety."

"Third?"

"A way to cook your food."

"Got it: heat, safety, and food. Check, Check, and double Check. Can I set up the fire now?"

"Yes. Yes, you can," I said with a smile on my face.

He grabbed the small bundle of kindling we chopped that morning and ran to the circle of rocks. This would be the trip's first fire. This would be the first fire my son created.

My son will probably carry on this tradition when he is a father. I look forward to the time when I can sit at the worn wood picnic table and sip coffee while my son and his son build a fire.

I can have an effect on the future through my son. My name, my history equals his future. Every family has at least one tradition. The campfire is mine. There is something primal about fire. Something mysterious about its hidden power.

My first time building the family fire was an important moment for me. It was like I was in charge of the well being of my family. Sure, we were in a national forest, at the end of a logging road, connected to a highway, but it still felt like I was crucial.

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Every summer, for as long as I can remember, we would load up the dusty brown Ford van and head to the Giford Pinchot National Forest. One summer sticks out among all others.

It was summer vacation and school had been out for two weeks by this point. It was just long enough that we were starting to drive our parents mad with claims of boredom. My parents were planning and packing and generally making sure everything would be ready for our trip this summer. Out in the garage, my father and mother stacked the cardboard boxes of various sizes. The boxes had been on many trips which was evident from the duct tape bandages on the edges. Each box had a small mailing label with the contents of the box spelled out neatly in blue pen.

I had a part in this planning but it was small. My job was to wash the dogs to give them a good cleaning before they got real dirty. I suppose this was so the new dirt would show up better. You know, for dramatic purposes.

The ride was an agonizing two and a half hour drive in cramped quarters with sleeping bags exploding from their stuff sacks and the clink and clank of the silverware each time we went over a bump. There was always the fear that the pile of gear in the back of the van, more than any family would need for a week in the woods would cascade down and drown us kids in the back seat. The only saving grace was the memory of last year's trip.

Something was needed during the trip; the radio cut off around exit 110 and the remaining selections were less than desirable.

By the time we arrived at camp, darkness had arrived.

"Son?"

"Yes dad," I replied.

"Where is the lantern?"

I searched my mind for where in the pile in the car I saw it. "It is in the back by the sleeping bags."

My mother and younger sister took care of all of the food and started preparing dinner for the evening. While the smells from the bubbling food on the camp stove mixed with the mist, I walked around doing a little of this and that, trying to be useful.

I saw what my father had started and asked if I could help him.

"That would be great," he said as he pointed with his hands to a pile of wood. His hands were large and rough from years of working with them.

I stacked the wood as I had seen my father do many times before. Carefully, each log on top of the next, from thin dry kindling to larger branches the circumference of a can of beans.

I held the match in my hand surveying my creation in wood, double checking everything one last time. As I dragged the match slowly across a rock in the fire pit, my fingers tingled. I lit four areas at the bottom and threw the match in. The next five minutes would decide the life of the fire.

At first it was a sickly fire, burning out and giving off a thick black smoke. My father showed me how to blow on the fire to give it life.

I sat down on one of the split logs that served as a bench and watched the fire slowly grow. The crackle of pine and the flicker of the flames was my sign that this fire would make it.

I felt my father's heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Son, this was your summer to build the fire," my father said before he took a deep breath, "and you did a great job." A warm smile appeared and moved as the shadows and light from the fire danced on his face.

My father's face, illuminated by the fire, seemed to float in the darkness. The delicate lights flickering in his eyes. The night surrounded us but would not approach the area around the fire for fear of losing to the light. We were safe here. Coals glowed bright white and orange. Thin layers of ash on top of the coals were produced, then fell off. Some clung to the undersides of the logs until their time to fall. Fire always amazed me. Each fire has its own personality. Some are quiet and peaceful. Others are energetic. This one danced. The colors jumped around inside the circle of grey rocks. Red, orange, yellow, and white. Each finding a partner then switching. I would stare at the fire convinced that I could find a pattern, but there never was.

During this time, the stars would poke from behind the black curtain and the temperature would drop. The fire would keep us warm. My family would share stories while gathered around the fire, each of us taking turns--mom, dad, sister. And sometimes we just sat there quiet, enjoying the silence and allowing the warmth to spread over us like a blanket.

I value these times. There was something special about them. Sure, we could do the same at the supper table, but being in the woods with a fire made it different. We were not burdened by the stresses of home. In front of a fire in the middle of the woods, surrounded by darkness, we could just be who we are, not what a week at work or school makes us. Sitting there feeding on the cool night air, I cherished our time.