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Down in the Hole

I am surrounded by darkness. A small beam of light shining out from my headlamp reveals a path, no wider than a residential sidewalk. To the right of the path is a rough, rocky cliff. To the left, a sheer drop-off, descending hundreds of feet. I am not afraid; I am defeated. I stand still, even though I know I should keep moving forward. Going back is not an option. My feet are heavy, my legs devoid of strength. My lungs burn in the thin air, and my back strains under the weight of the fully loaded pack it supports. I cannot bring myself to move. I have failed. Suddenly, a loud, unfamiliar noise hits my ears. It sounds like it is above me, but I know there is nothing above my head but clouds. The tiny beam of light searches the darkness for the source of the noise. Finally, the object comes into focus. I smile.

Twelve months earlier. I am lying flat in bed. A highly-trained specialist has spent the last six hours drilling through my spine. A cut here, a staple there, some fluid drained from here and there, all in the hopes of relieving the compression on my spinal cord that is creating otherworldly amounts of pain and denying me the ability to do so much as sit in a chair. The surgeon tells me that the damage was reparable, and the operation was a success. I should see immediate relief. Under the effects of the morphine coursing through my veins, I am all-too-quick to agree.

I collect surgeries, you see. Four on my left knee, one on each wrist, and now my back. It has been this way since I was 16 years old. I play football with guys twice my size; I fight the biggest

dude in the place. Sometimes I win; usually I do not. The doctors fix me up as best they can, but I am never “as good as new”. Over time, I start to wise up and protect my body. That is to say, I begin a phase of my life where I give up. My fear of getting re-injured paralyzes my life.

I undergo extensive physical therapy to recover from my back surgery. The doctor is right; I have recovered substantially. In the months of my recovery, a new philosophy has taken hold within me. I am going to get back out there. I am going to do the things I’ve always wanted to, before my body breaks down any further. I have decided my first goal: to hike the Grand Canyon. I extensively research my options and decide on a four-day hike. In the local parlance it is known as a rim-to-rim-to-rim, which is to say you begin at one side of the canyon, hike to the bottom, to the top of the other side, and then back via the same route. The round trip is about 46 miles, with each crossing also including elevation gains and losses of over two miles.

The hike. On day one, full of determination, I go at it way too hard. I descend down seven miles of trail and five thousand feet of elevation in just four hours. I run out of water halfway down, and the temperature is hovering around 100 degrees. Finally, I make it to the bottom of the canyon. I watch the Colorado River surge by and get enough of an adrenaline rush to make it to a nearby tributary stream. I peel off my boots and slide my body into the nice cool water, nature’s ice bath. After recovering and hydrating for an hour or so, I set up camp for the night. Day one is in the books, however the most difficult day lies ahead.

Day two. Fourteen miles, uphill the whole way. An elevation gain of over seven thousand feet. Think fourteen miles on the Stairmaster, with 40 pounds on your back. What kind of idiot planned this trip? Oh, right. I begin the long slog up the side of the canyon, determined to pace myself and not repeat the mistakes of day one. I pass beautiful spring-fed valleys lined with bright

white flowers, and waterfalls pouring out from the rock as if from nowhere. The sun skitters across the rock faces, changing their appearance seemingly by the minute. I continue to climb the trail, so steep that at times I feel I am walking up a never-ending “down” escalator. One foot in front of the other, I channel the tortoise against the canyon’s hare.

It gets dark quickly in the Grand Canyon, a mix of the high cliffs surrounding the canyon and the high elevation. Many people think the rim of the canyon is at sea level and the canyon is a big hole in the ground, however this is not the case. My final destination is well over 8000 feet above sea level. And so, darkness falls quickly, and takes with it all sense of progress and location. I can follow the trail with my headlamp, but the seemingly endless switchbacks provide no motivation, no evidence of how far you’ve come or how much of your journey remains. I’ve been hiking for 12 hours today when I hit the figurative wall. I am exhausted. I take one step at a time; left foot, right foot, rest. I lean on my trekking poles, close my eyes, and nearly fall asleep on my feet. Then I do it again. Left, right, rest. Left, right, rest. The temperature plummets; I can see my breath. I become resigned to the fact that I am not going to make it, and begin mentally planning for a night sleeping under the stars, on a three-foot wide ledge above the biggest hole on earth, where the rattlesnakes and scorpions make their homes. I know I should worry about this, and yet the only thoughts I have are how I will have to explain to all the naysayers back home that they were right and I was wrong. I’d rather hang out here with the snakes than admit my failure.

And so, in this bleakest of moments, it happens. A noise from above, loud at first and then completely silent. A small gust of wind tickles the top of my head, and I sense that something is above me. I lift my head up and search the sky with my headlamp. Finally, on an aspen branch jutting outward from the cliff face, I see a pair of reflective eyes. A horned owl.

“What’s up man,” I say aloud, smiling. He just looks back at me, silent. Shy, I guess. I chuckle and continue hiking, walking toward him and then finally passing him and switching back the other way, leaving him behind me. “That was kinda cool,” I think to myself. I hike a dozen or so more yards, then hear the now-familiar noise, and feel the now-familiar gust of wind.

It seems I’ve got myself a hiking companion. A wave of relief washes over me as I realize I am no longer alone on the trail. Now, I’m a very logical person, some would say logical to a fault. I understand that this owl is not my friend, nor my guardian angel. I’m in his living room. He is used to hikers on these trails, pulling out handfuls of trail mix and dropping half of it on the ground. He is used to the rodents sneaking out from their rocky hiding places to feast on the peanuts and raisins raining down on them from above. To him, I am essentially a five-foot-ten walking Applebee’s. This logical realization does not faze me; in fact I am just happy to have the company. I feel one with nature, and am energized by it, to a degree that is difficult to explain without sounding ridiculous and using the word “spiritual”.

The story becomes uneventful from here. My new friend hangs with me for the next hour or so before the trail leads me away from the trees. I make it to the top, set up camp, and the remaining two days of my hike are completed without incident. My back and knees hold out for the duration, and I find myself filled with confidence and pride, feeling that I have truly accomplished something. Yet I know I wasn’t completely alone out there, that I had some help when I needed it most. When I get home, I get my hiking partner’s picture tattooed on my arm. I will go on to hike many more life-list locations with him by my side. People sometimes ask why in the world I have a tattoo of an owl on my arm. I smile, shake my head, and say, “It’s sort of hard to explain.” And then, they hear this story.