Switchback

by Brenda Bishop Blakey

He probably thinks he'll get sex tonight, but I'm beyond exhaustion. He asks me what I have in my backpack and I tell him. And I further tell him it's torture. At seventy-five pounds it is easy to lift once, but, after carrying it up and down the switchbacks, blisters are forming on both heels. Now it may as well weigh five hundred pounds. He's mad because I'm lugging a bunch of girly stuff like hand lotion, hair spray, and my diaphragm.

“Unnecessary weight. No wonder you're kicking your own butt,” he says.

“You're the one schlepping bacon, beer, syrup, and paper ware,” I say.

Now I'm really pissed and I'm thinking, no sex tonight. Technically, we haven't had sex. We met on campus last quarter and this is the ‘get to know each other' date. Hiking was his idea.

I'm a city girl and he's a mountain boy and proud of it. We're at the end of day one of our three day hiking trip. He tells me about plants I shouldn't touch and what to do if we encounter a bear. I ask him how many bear encounters he has survived. He doesn't exactly answer that question.

Instead, he says, “You know, wearing two pairs of socks and lacing your boots tighter would have prevented your blisters. See, you want your friction to be between the two socks, not the sock and your foot.”

He is hiking in front of me but I'm pretty sure he's smiling when he says this.

“Spending the weekend at the Holiday Inn and dialing room service prevents blisters, too,” I say. I don't even want to discuss friction.

We keep on climbing. Tears involuntarily flow down my cheeks as we crest the last rise into camp. This had never happened to me

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before. Crying from exhaustion. Unable to stop. Feeling unable to breathe. I wanted to be right for him. I wanted to be that natural woman, earth mother, one with all things green. I wanted to impress him.

What I say is: “This. Is. Incredible.” What I think is: I can't wait to get away from this guy.

He lets his pack slide off his arms and drop against a tree. “After a couple of days you'll hit your stride. That's when you'll get it.”

“Oh, I get it right now,” I say.

“No, you don't. This is stage one, the physical trial. The payoff comes in stage three, you'll see.”

What I say is: “Whatever.” What I think is: Caveman.

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We're setting up the tent in what is supposed to be the most sought after campsite in the Smoky Mountains and the crickets are doing most of the talking. We unroll the sleeping bags and build a fire. By the light of our fake lantern flashlight, I apply a sweet apricot lotion to my blistered heels while he gets steadily drunk. I start wondering if the acid in my stomach will go away if I get sick and throw up.

I'm sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree and staring off into the night gloom. The fireflies are out and easy to spot in the inky darkness. I think back to dad setting up the tent in the back yard. Marty, the girl from next door, and I wanted to go camping. We were seven and the idea of sleeping outdoors was a complete adventure. It seems childish now. The tent was in our fenced backyard and our house was on a cul-de-sac and dad was going to sleep on the hammock on the back porch to make sure we were safe. But to us, it was a wild night.

We had convinced ourselves that the fireflies were fairies with flashlights and they were looking for monsters. As we snuggled down into our sleeping bags we told each other we were safe. Safe, that is, unless the lightening bugs landed on the tent. If they landed on the tent, that meant monsters were just outside the fabric wall of our nightly shelter. Then we would have to run for our lives. We

were perfectly adorable at that age, always creating our own little dramas.

Marty and I couldn't sleep for watching. And sure enough, a firefly landed on the outside surface and lit up. We began to scream and tore up and out of the tent in the direction of the house. Marty and I spent the rest of the night sleeping inside and never asked to camp out ever again.

That was fifteen years ago.

I feel silly having this memory. Then, I have a passing thought that maybe; just maybe, the lightening bugs have trouble discerning between monsters, bears, and cavemen. The memory fades and I realize the campfire is making me sweaty.

“I'm going to pee now,” I tell him.

He says nothing. I find an area off trail and undo the flap of my jean shorts, pull them down and start to take a leak and I hear a low growl in the bushes. I freak out. Running, I pull my foot out of my underwear and shorts on the way back to the campfire. Laughter erupts from behind the trees and he wanders out deliriously pleased with his little prank.

“What the hell were you thinking?” I shout.

He tries to look serious but he is laughing and can't stop. I realize I am standing with my hands on my naked hips, my panties and shorts are clumped around my left ankle.

“I'm sorry. I just…” He bursts out laughing again.

I pull up my clothes and stomp off.

As I go in search of a safe place to pee, I hear him half apologizing and half laughing. Now I'm thinking how victorious I feel. It's probably from the adrenaline rush, but I feel as if I know what life with this guy would be like. After however many years together, I would pull my pants up and wander off into the wilderness leaving him half laughing, half apologizing. Note to self: Must have wilderness excursion with any and all potential mates before settling on final marriage partner.

Back at the fire, I stare at the flames and stubbornly wait for his apology.

He comes and sits on the log beside me and takes my hand in his. He's close enough that our hips touch and I smell hints of the wood fire emanating from his hair and shirt. But, it's like he is someone else. He's not joking or laughing or lecturing. He looks me in the eyes and I see him, really see him, for the first time.

“Jaycee, I will never hurt you again. I'll never let you be in danger, not real danger, ever. For as long as I am able, I will protect you and love you, if you will let me.”

Something stirs in me. Glenn's words are more than words. In that second I see all the times to come in which he would be true blue to us, and to our children and even to their children. His off-beat humor, at first irritating, is a surface shine, but underneath is gold and steel which will last longer than these mountains.

We talk for hours. The woodland is a vast, wall-less cathedral and the moon is a great god blessing all the things we reveal about ourselves. Even though he is not rich and even though I'm a chick who cries while hiking and carries her diaphragm everywhere she goes, seems we are perfect for each other.

That night we have the best sex either of us has ever had. To make matters more interesting, we fall asleep in that afterglow moment and wake up with our, supposedly fire-retardant, tent on fire. Naked, we run around dousing it out and laughing hysterically like two deranged teenagers.

When we calm down I say, “I wonder how that happened?”

Glenn stars at me, his face fixed in a deadpan, “Probably that damn bear took a torch to it ‘cause he didn't get invited to a three-way.”

What I say is: “You're such a troglodyte.” What I think is: Yep, that's my guy.