

Remembering by Fred Coppersmith

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When I was a Boy Scout, there always seemed to be communion in a campfire, a sort of brotherhood in the flames. The fire warmed our hands in deep December and drove away the frost that had turned our legs to lead. We poked sticks into its hungry mouth, almost taunting, and it breathed deep, licked the evening air, and sputtered smoke in our smiling faces. Plumes of ashen gray and gauzy white danced lazily around treetops while pale black soot painted the sky and blotted out pinpoint stars. The night was quiet, and the woods *were* lovely, dark and deep. We sat, on logs or on rocks and stones, telling jokes our mothers wouldn't approve of and laughing at others we would forget in a week. We swapped histories and ghost stories and recounted the past. "Do you remember when...?" we'd ask, or "How 'bout that time...?" I won't lie and say the fire made us equals or made each of us the others' friend. But for a time it kept us all connected, forged links that in some ways stay unbroken.

In the end, we are what we remember.

I remember those fires, the amber and orange-red tendrils and the fingers of smoke that watered our eyes and curled round our throats. I remember the scent of pine needles catching flame, syrupy-sweet like Christmas trees on the streets of New York or the citronella candles we brought with us each year to summer camp. Sap hung like wax on each sharp, straight blade, and cotton candy clouds of peppery gray smoke made us gag as each small droplet burned a dull, matted black.

I remember Novembers spent in cabins, wood-burning stoves and wool socks keeping us warm. I remember cutting firewood until my hands were numb with cold and my knuckles were as white as the light dusting of snow that lay on the ground. I remember cutting more, my shoulders and fingers aching, but remembering the promise of warmth later that night when I knew, wind howling against the windows and whistling in the trees, the cold would be worse and my wool socks wouldn't be enough.

I remember ghost trees with limbs like bare bones, lonely skeletons that looked nothing like the birches, pines and maples sketched in the pages of my Handbook. Their dead leaves lay underfoot, as did those exclamation-point pine needles that exploded in flame and left sap on the tips of our fingers. I remember the snap of a branch or a twig in the distance, a deer or a bear or something else unseen. At West Point, a caretaker told us a wild bear was wandering the grounds, had killed a cat the day before and was looking for food. We never saw it, only imagined we had or heard its growl disturb the still of night. But I remember that trip in such detail, like a slide show gone off in my head, that what I didn't see doesn't matter.

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I remember treading through snow and slipping on ice and waking to think that this must be how meat hung on the rack in a butcher's freezer must feel. The morning air was so cold I could have easily hid in my sleeping bag until the spring thaw had there not been so much to do and had April not been so far away. There were the helicopters that landed in the short-cropped, maize-yellow fields and the wargames that the soldiers played later that night. There was an old lifeguard chair standing sentry over an abandoned waterfront and whose wooden legs were splintered and flecked with chips of white. We carved our initials in its weathered base with our pocket knives and took turns climbing to its crow's nest top, like kings surveying the sea or the lay of the land. There were more jokes to be told and more memories to build, and somehow the cold didn't matter.

I remember summer camp, too, those seven days in early July not long after school had ended for the year. I remember duffel bags and footlockers that cut a ribbon down the center of our tents and the yellow citronella, sickly-sweet, that melted and pooled around the small candle wicks at the center of each metal

pail. I remember hiking boots and moleskin for blisters, merit badge classes and card games with friends. I remember pancakes like bricks on Monday mornings before our swim tests, fat flapjacks that hung in our stomachs like anchors and made even the backstroke a challenge. I remember these pieces, these bits and these morsels, but alone they add up to nothing. They are little more than anecdotes whose only common bond is that I remember them.

But that may be enough.

When I was a Boy Scout, that single week away from home crystallized everything that Scouting ever meant to me. Summer camp was a time to meet new people, laugh and share experiences with friends I had already made, and consider things about myself and about my world to which I hadn't yet given much thought. To me, that is all that Scouting has ever meant -- a chance to build new memories and retell the old.

And we are what we remember.

Summer camp was a time when Independence Day meant more to me than it does now, more than working until late afternoon and watching canned fireworks fizzle and die on television. Summer held promise then, not just heat and sweat and six dollars an hour. There were rowboats and fishing and mountain bike trails. There was softball and swimming and even a mudfight one year. When I was a Boy Scout, summer held memories, not simply routine. A new schedule meant changes in more than just times. And sometimes, I will admit, I miss it so much that it hurts.

At summer camp, we kept the same campsite for the last six of my seven years, hugging the lake and skimming stones across its surface. One morning, I remember, we found raccoon tracks dotting the shore, like some strange and secret code tapped into the sand overnight. We stood there along the beach, laughing and amazed, like we had unearthed some Pharaoh's tomb and these were indecipherable hieroglyphics, the remnants of some forgotten civilization. A plaster cast of one of those prints still sits on my desk at home -- a testament to something, I suppose. To me, it is just a memory or memento, a connection to the past and a reminder that what I recall actually happened and these memories are actually who I am.

I found a mouse curled up inside a tent flap, nesting in the canvas burrow it had found. I had always seen spiders, of course -- giant, eight-legged beasts that seemed as huge as my fist and out-of-place in the woods of Rhode Island, much less the top corners of our tents. There were also deer ticks out in those woods, lying dormant and thirsty for blood, and strange insects and snakes whose names I can neither recall nor could I pronounce. A mouse, though, was different, unexpected, if only for its size and its speed. It zipped past me and into the brush, the olive drab tent flap falling silent to the wooden-planked floor, and I had trouble convincing anyone that what I'd seen had been real.

Sometimes, to be honest, I have trouble convincing myself. Sometimes it *all* seems so unreal, like something I saw in a film or read in a Boy Scout Handbook. Almost three years separate me from those days in cold winter and Rhode Island summer, and at times it somehow all seems so faded. I'm left with fragmented faces and phrases, and the places I visited don't seem half as vivid as they once were. Friends don't keep in touch. I let others slip by. Sometimes I feel lost, eroded by time, forgotten as I too forget.

Yet those things that do remain, those small bits of images that I somehow recall, bind me still to the campfires and summer camps of the past. I remember details, seemingly unimportant and disconnected: a mouse, startled by the sunlight; footprints etched across the sand; bleak midwinter interrupted by dirty jokes and flickering flame. And there are countless others -- pages, I'm sure, stacked in my head, a life's history told in a million short bursts.

Life is built on these details, however trivial they may seem at the time. Life is made up of nuances, and the trick is to find the miraculous in the mundane, the forest among the trees. We are, after all, what we remember. What we hold onto becomes who we are.

I hold onto the Boy Scouts, the summer camps and winter cabins and the ghost trees whistling in the woods. I hold onto those seven short years full of campfires, snowfalls, and good friends.

And I remember...