

Liz Caile Essay Contest 2008 FIRST PLACE

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**Silver Linings**

The blazing sun beat down on my back, making sweat pour off of me. The smell of sweat and dirt hung in the air. Every muscle in my legs and shoulders screamed from hours of exertion. Mosquitoes swarmed in clouds around my face, which was already red and puffy from the presence of hundreds of bites. Several large blisters made my feet throb. This trip was supposed to be perfect. But so far, it seemed that nothing was going right. I felt like the unluckiest person in the world. Little did I know that by the end of the trip, my perception of luck would have changed completely.

It was my family's annual backpacking trip to the Wind River Mountains in Wyoming. The trip had been the highlight of my last few years, and I had been eagerly looking forward to this year's trip for months. But a long series of ill-timed events had begun to crush my hopes of another incredible experience. The previous day, my mom and dad, our two dogs, and I, had gotten a late start, piling into the overstuffed car at the crack of noon for the seven hour drive that would take us to Willow Creek Guard Station trailhead. Along the way, several unsuccessful last minute errands set us back several more hours and put us all into bad spirits. At around ten at night, when we were still hours away from the trailhead and didn't have everything we needed, we resolved to spend the night at the NOLS ranch, shop in Pinedale the next day, and attempt to reach the trailhead before the hottest part of the day. We finally arrived at the ranch at around 11:30, and crashed in the tent without bothering to

organize our backpacking gear as we had been planning to.

The dogs woke us up well before sunrise the next morning, giving us a total of less than five hours of sleep. Even better, we soon discovered that despite our careful planning of backpacking meals, we had forgotten to bring breakfast food for the car camping segment of our trip. So after gagging down an unsatisfying breakfast of cold tortillas and cheese, we piled back into the car, drove to Pinedale, and bought the last few overpriced items on our list. Finally, we were ready to make our way to the trailhead. By our estimations, Willow Creek Guard Station was no more than half an hour away. Unfortunately, however, our luck was only going to deteriorate even farther.

A few miles outside of Pinedale, we turned off of the main road and began bumping along a small dirt road through the sagebrush. But only a few minutes later, we found our way barred by a locked gate accompanied by a large "no trespassing" sign. Convinced that we had made a wrong turn, we backtracked to the previous junction and took the other path. The next hour or so consisted of unsuccessfully attempting to navigate through a network of tiny country roads. Eventually, we stopped and inquired at a farm we passed, where we were informed that the first road we had tried was the correct one but the access land had recently changed hands and been closed off.

By now completely discouraged, we made a quick decision to head to Scab Creek trailhead, a much less pleasant starting point, but one that we were at least sure we could find. By the time we arrived at the trailhead, the car had fallen into an extreme state of disorganization, and as a result, it took an additional hour to pack our backpacks and finally get on our way. It was already 2:00 when we started hiking, and the sun was beating down on the dusty, exposed hillside. I had begun to wonder whether anything on this trip was destined to be fun.

In spite of the rough start, however, our luck finally began to turn. We

encountered no more serious problems for the rest of the day, and my parents' moods began to brighten. But for me it was one of those moments when I was determined to stay irritable forever. As my parents began commenting on the beautiful scenery, I kept my mouth stubbornly shut. Unfortunately enough, my negativity made all of the trivial discomforts such as mosquito bites and muscle soreness seem infinitely worse than they really were. Despite myself however, I gradually began to cheer up. By the time we reached camp at Lightning Lake after an eight mile hike, even though I was drained of energy, I was fully content.

Spending time in the wilderness has always had this sort of invigorating effect on me, for more reasons than I can fully understand. One of the biggest reasons is that there is a complete lack of time restrictions in the wilderness. Backpacking enables me to escape from my hectic schedule and be controlled for a while solely by my own internal clock. There is also a lack of social pressure and obligations, and with nobody with myself and my family around me, I can be nothing but myself. Additionally, there's the thrill of being completely self sufficient, and although this can be challenging, I also find it inspiring to become acquainted with my full potential. And laying aside all of these internal reasons, the natural beauty alone is truly incredible. The full effect is that when I go backpacking, I feel massive amounts of stress slide off of me and I find it impossible to stay in a bad mood for long.

The rest of the trip glided by as smoothly as we could have hoped. Even though the food wasn't exactly gourmet and the mosquitoes were terrible, no serious misfortunes befell us and we enjoyed ourselves immensely. The third day of the trip was the most memorable for me. We took a day hike to Middle Fork Lake, a mile or so away from our base camp, where we spent about an hour fishing, eating, and relaxing. We soon became slightly bored, however, and decided to venture a little farther, up to Lee Lake. After hiking through the trees for another mile or so, we emerged above treeline and were met with one of the most spectacular views I have ever seen. Lee Lake sat in the middle of a

breathhtaking cirque comprising three incredible mountains. To our left sat Nylon peak, a mountain so pointy, it looked as if it would hurt to sit on top of it. Directly across the lake from us was Mount Bonneville, a long, craggy ridge. To the right, Dragon's Head, a massive, curving peak, loomed impressively over the lake.

As much as we would have liked to sit and stare at the view for an eternity, the weather to the North began to darken, and we decided to head back to camp. On the way back, our attentions were drawn to a gigantic plume of smoke far in the distance, which was turning the sky to the south a dark, menacing reddish brown. Thankfully, the smoke blew away to the East and didn't affect us, but we were still curious to learn what the source was.

The trip was far too short in my opinion, and before we knew it, we were hiking back down the baking hillside to the trailhead. After the hike out, we returned and stayed another night at the NOLS ranch, where we decided to inquire about the source of the smoke we had seen. To our surprise, we were informed that there was a massive fire at Willow Creek Guard Station, the exact place where we had unsuccessfully attempted to hike from in the first place. The unfortunate closure of the access property had been a real blessing in disguise, saving us at least a great deal of discomfort, if not our lives. Upon hearing about this bizarre twist of fate, I looked back on my negativity on the first day and suddenly realized just how irrational I had been. I had been so busy wallowing in self pity that I hadn't even considered the fact that the change in plans could work out all right. As it turned out, our backup plan had been not only a satisfactory one, but a vastly better one than our original plan would have turned out to have been.

The backpacking trip that had started out so miserably had taught me a valuable lesson in the end. I learned that no matter how unfortunate something may seem at the time, things will eventually work out. A simple change in plans is hardly ever as bad as it seems, and never worth

wasting happiness over. From that day on, I resolved not to become overly absorbed in my negativity and to always look for a silver lining. I can nearly always find one, and even when I can't, reality always turns out better than contrived self pity ever could.