



The Reunion

Some bonds go deeper than the mountains.

by DEVON O'NEIL

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MOUNTAIN HOME: FINDING SOLACE ON BRECK'S WHEELER TRAIL.

It would be easy to say I didn't know why I was going, but I knew, even if I still struggle to explain the reason. It wasn't because everyone had told me how much fun their 10-year college reunion was, and how much fun mine would be. Or because all my old friends would be there—the truth was, thanks to work and kids and whatever else keeps people from their past, only a few had committed. No, I went for a strange but undeniable reason: I wanted to revisit an era in my life that I know is dead, and was sure I no longer needed.

I packed a small duffel bag, watched the sun set behind the jagged Gore Range, then drove 105 miles to the airport, alone. It was the first Thursday in June. I had just returned from my third trip in two weeks and was already questioning this ticket purchase; I wanted to stay home, ski some corn, maybe ride my bike with my brother. Instead, I boarded a red-eye flight from Denver to Boston, then caught a four-hour ride to Vermont with an old pal named Dennis.

During the drive to Vermont, Dennis and I spent most of our time catching up on each other's lives. He told me about his infant son and his job as a high school teacher and football coach. It felt weird to hear myself say the words "writer" and "mountains" and "wife," given where we were headed, but I was proud, too. I had escaped a

bubble I once doubted I'd escape.

Dennis and I met as freshmen on the football team. He, a public-school running back from Massachusetts, was given No. 83, and I, a private-school receiver from the Virgin Islands, got 32. We promptly traded jerseys and so began our friendship. Senior year, we lived with four others in a farmhouse that faced the Green Mountains. Our most beloved roommate was a red-haired linebacker from Idaho named Andy Steele, whose surname made more sense once he leveled you in practice.

Both Dennis and I admired Andy for the way he led his life as well as the way he hit and played, though I never would have admitted all that back then. He was our team captain and the school's first All-American in more than two decades. He remains one of the only people I've seen inspire mass numbers to follow him without ever trying. Part of the reason I was so driven to attend my reunion is because Andy had died less than a year before it, and I missed him.

Ten years, relatively speaking, is not a long time. If you live to be 80, it's 12 percent of your life. But in the 10 years since Dennis and I had lived in Vermont, I'd shed a lot of skin. Back then, I was the definition of a meathead, lifting weights every day and running sprints to get faster.

My entire year, in fact my entire college career, revolved around team sports: football in the fall and baseball in the spring. I chugged beer like a whale and, no joke, read exactly one full book in four years of college. Most perplexing, I had no use for mountains, despite being surrounded by them.

A few days before we graduated, I still had no idea what I wanted to do, where I wanted to live, whether I could even support myself at all. After calling around, a friend's mom agreed to hire me as a landscape grunt in McCall, Idaho. Andy was driving home to Boise anyway, so he and I loaded up Ginger, his stick-shift Jeep Cherokee, and started driving west at a high rate of speed.

We took the northern route and drove through the night, getting all the way to the Badlands, in South Dakota, before pitching our tents. The next day we made it to Missoula, where Andy's brother lived. Seeing such funky towns and so much open space instilled a sense of freedom I'd never felt before. It made me think everything would be all right. And every time I looked at Andy, I could tell he'd been feeling that since he was born.

That summer was my first real immersion in Western life as I know it. One night, I followed Andy six miles up a gorgeous singletrack to a mirror lake outside McCall. We set up camp at 9:30 and hung out for the next three hours under a kerbillion



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THE CALL OF THE HIGH PEAKS: "WHY WOULDN'T WE JUST STAY HERE?"

stars, nipping a flask of whiskey and toasting people we loved. It was magic. Luckily, Andy had water-treatment tablets the next day, because I ran out of water and didn't have a clue.

I said goodbye to Andy after a month in McCall. Life beckoned. I rode trains around Europe for a while, taught P.E. in Costa Rica that fall, and eventually ended up in Washington, D.C., with my twin brother Sean. My first real job sounded awesome on paper: I designed and implemented counter-terrorism plans for state and local governments. It was heavy-duty cubicle life, though, and the road rage killed me. Working for a corporation that employed tens of thousands of people, I always wondered: Who was I to be providing counter-terrorism advice? And who was the small-town Indiana farmer to be receiving it?

Not making matters any easier, I spent much of that year wondering if the exhaust being coughed out of every white box-truck's muffler was anthrax in disguise. I also spent much of it on crutches with a broken foot, hobbling around open-air train stations, which in Washington, D.C., in October 2002 meant

you were prime sniper bait. Fed up with terrorists and pretension, Sean and I made a crucial decision. At the end of our lease, we'd quit our jobs (he was programming drones to collect smoke plumes from U.S. missile strikes and identify the substances in the plumes, to determine if it'd been a chemical weapons plant), and we'd move to Portland, Oregon.

I was elated to get out of D.C. (Of course Sean's car got stolen right before we left.) We took the scenic route and visited a few friends on our way, including an old football teammate I used to call The Bear. The Bear was living in Breckenridge for the winter and working as a 6-foot-2, 225-pound real estate secretary. On our breathtaking drive into town, he called with good news: 22 inches of snow was expected overnight. Sean did not own skis and I still had a broken foot, but we looked at each other while driving our van down Main Street and, at the same moment, said: "Why wouldn't we just stay here?"

It's been nine years since that night. I told the story at my college reunion a few times, and for the most part people appreciated its novelty and didn't think stopping in a ski town and ending up

a freelance writer was too dirtbag a move. Plus, it had only been 10 years, their smiles seemed to say. Technically, we were still in the relatively safe, trial-and-error stage of life.

Andy took his own life nine months prior to our reunion, ending a long battle with internal demons. I never was able to penetrate his guarded mind, despite how much we loved each other as friends. One of the reasons I went back to Vermont was because I wanted to be where he and I had grown up together, in the sense that we were boys when we arrived and men when we left. It was heartening to see the sadness and genuine depth of comprehension on my classmates' faces whenever Andy's name came up. People understood the reality, that sometimes even untouchables die young. I was stunned by how many truly got that.

Dennis and I talked a lot about Andy that weekend. We spent time with other close friends too, playing horseshoes, reminiscing, talking some hilarious smack. The afternoon sun glowed and we all just kept laughing, wishing for a pause button. It broke my heart when it had to end.

I shouldn't want that era back—not as badly as I did that weekend, anyway. I spent years searching for what I have now, the natural contentment and unconditional love, a home among big peaks, spending life in the grip of adventure unlike anything we sought back then. Yet there's something about those people we knew when we were young—who knew us.

Dennis and I drove back to Boston after inhaling a plate of blueberry pancakes Sunday morning. We had another deep talk on the way to the airport, and promised to stay in better touch. I wished I'd gotten to say goodbye to everyone, but upon reflection as I drove home to Breckenridge that night, it was enough to have seen them.

It has only been 10 years since I entered real life, but so far as I can tell, it is like a third-world bus ride. We pick up new friends and say goodbye to old ones; some of the roads are painful, others extraordinary; we can ride on the roof or hang out in the safety of the cabin. Despite the turnover and lurching changes that characterize our route, a select handful of people will be along for the duration, and they are the prizes. If we're smart, we never let them go. •

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GLORY DAYS: THE AUTHOR AND ANDY A DECADE AGO