

## Hiking through the Nets

The Nets was a place mothers warned their children about. Michael, Wade, and Jeremy planned to hike the spot after school, but Wade was grounded for scalping his sister's Barbie dolls. Or moreso: allowing his Apache Chief action figure to scalp them.

Gritty sandstone was striped with clay. The hills screamed high into searing yellows, then dove into stream-smoothed valleys. From a distance, shadows carved by the ranges' crests were black and blue, forming the ghosts of rivers.

There was no water there. Not now. Those occasional dips into smoothed valleys forced Mike and Jeremy to respect the terrain. Sure footholds of gritty sandstone crumbled. Steep trails of soft sand faded into sharp drop-offs. Wild grasses covered man-made tracks.

Time passed. Mike came home. Jeremy Didn't. Mike didn't know where his brother went. Somewhere in the intensity of sage and the narrow-vast of Simi Valley, Jeremy disappeared. He was always the prankster. He was an Eagle Scout. He gave his brother the slip to teach him humility. Yes. That's it.

Jeremy's body was found in a crag by a hiker. It was said he broke his leg, then starved to death over the course of two weeks.

Present day: Wade became my father. He told me this story after I came back from the Nets around midnight. It was December 23<sup>rd</sup>. I hadn't seen Ron in four years. He was among my closest friends. He got around a lot. He was the only Slazinger to leave the LDS Mormons and went to work for Meta in San Jose. Every now and again, he visited the carpet-less floors of his family home:

the same one our old friend group treated as a Pleasure Island when we were kids. All those kids grew up. Some got addicted to meth. Others stayed home in fear of the former.

"Yo. Let's go hiking." Ron shot me text at 2 pm.

Being winter, I knew it was too late to start a reasonable hike.

"I'll be right there. You at your parents' place?" I replied.

I didn't want a reasonable hike.

One week before Ron's message, I visited some friends at their apartment. They begged me to never join a camp or hiking trip planned by the Slazingers, Ron or his younger brother Seth. These warnings unraveled from my asking about a camping trip they once had off-shore. Ron said it was great. They said it rained constantly, they couldn't get the weather covers on the tents properly, and that cooking wienies over the camp's griddle was a multi-person endeavor.

Striking image: The elderly Slazinger parents' tent collapsed and stretched like taffy from the pulling weights of the campers inside. Ron Sr. kept sleeping with nylon stretched over him. Mora complained.

Another old friend stopped by from Bakersfield. Once the subject of Ron's trips came up again, he, Jake - the former marine and hot-headed sado-prankster youth - raved about a Slazinger-planned hiking trip to the Punch Bowl; how it started much too late, and how he and ten people drove out and waited at the base until stopping the mountain hike a fourth of the way through because it was midnight.

I accepted the trip to the Nets anyhow.

I accepted it because I was used to manning the dates and details and post-cancellation hotels of every flight and GPS-guided roadtrip set upon me, then led through suicidal, computer-planned routes. I followed these paths myopically to poor ends. It's better to stay on the interstate highways than dirt roads flanked by abandoned cars.

I was used to turning off stovetop gas burners left hissing by roommates, and cleaning vegetable slop and microwave-safe plastic wrappers from the honey-marble countertop Dad spent sixty-thousand dollars on. I was used to running dishes on low settings, so California's drain shredding, calcifying water didn't ruin them and to lower billing in the face of another drought.

I vacuumed my roomies' cat litter and puke and dried hairballs from the living room and dining table.

Sometimes, I wondered on the point of it all. I looked to the livingroom carpet, on all those brown splotches. I remembered living in a house of five day-workers and waking up to our golden retriever's diarrhea explosion. We looked on to the wretched mess, then left to our shifts starting at 7-and-9 am.

The liquid gallons of filth steeped permanently over that day. It remained no matter what we did, and we did a lot.

Dad complained about the electric bill being too high. I offered to pay it. He refused. He complained about it to Great-Uncle Bernie in Missoula. My roomies closed their door. They both played videogames while browsing Discord and listening to youtube gaming letsplays over a PS3.

The phantom whispers of a jazz announcer's voice playing through Bubsy 3D in a single sitting echoed through my brain as I shambled for a 4am piss.

I packed several water bottles, a first-aid kit, and my late grandpa's Korean War knife, not that I expected to use it, then visited Ron at the Slazinger family house for the first time in five years. After four of their five children moved to Utah, served the church, and got hitched, Ron's parents saw fit to wander food drives and the local pier, where they'd scoop up crack bums and the disabled to let them rent rooms and leave charred pipes in their side-yard. They did this before all the kids moved out, too.

A bum named Cody once got mad at Seth, age six, and broke his shoulder by slamming him into a wall. This shocked Jake so bad he stopped daydreaming of lining toilet seats with hot sauce packets and smashed his face in.

Seth didn't remember this ever happening.

This same Cody later cried to visiting Mormon bishops. He claimed no one loved him. I don't know what happened to the guy after he moved out, but good riddance.

Other crackheads came and went. Most of them friends of Ron's infamous mother, Mora.

On my visit to the Slazinger house, the guilt of a decades' worth of pranks hit me as hard as the home's internal musk. This house was so old and under-kept it was supposed to be repossessed once. Ironically, it was unsellably bad, so the powers that be let the family keep it.

Ron was on the couch in the living room. He watched videos about Japanese vending machines. He was also helping a guy with

a speech impediment file paperwork. I asked what they were doing, and the answer was a pile of words alluding to contradictory due dates and forums for other forums, and how the guy's car was somehow linked to a now inaccessible phone, rendering said car inoperable.

Such details were fit for the modern age, or a Philip Dick novel. It was unfit for this story.

We - Seth, Ron, and I - took to the road in the family sedan. The sky was humid and overcast, with occasional glints of the malicious desert sun. It was storming mere days ago: odd weather for the sunshine state. Ron and Seth avoided the front entrance to the Nets, if there was one. We instead parked before a gated community full of Puebloan mansions and entered a gap between fences. Not a hole in the chain links, mind you, but a neat gap between property lines.

We skirted so close to one of these mansions we saw through all their giant sun windows. Their TVs were on, but no life stirred.

We zigged and zagged the wooded bunny slope trails. Then the trails disappeared into grassy roughage. We dipped into a ravine and wedged between split mounds of sandstone. Ron and Seth and I caught up on things. Ron asked me about movies. I didn't watch many. He described a film called Four Lions, then claimed a movie called Civil War was coming out: a standard-faire alternate timeline flick about America balkanizing. At least, that's what it sounded like. The detail I fixated on was Ron claiming John Lennon starred in it as a minuteman with a cool machinegun and rose-tinted sunglasses asking, 'what state are you from?'

Seth almost believed Ron. I was surprised he knew who John Lennon was. Lennon was a corpse before Seth was a globule of cum.

Seth also led the way to our trip's objective: the caves. He assured us he knew his way around.

Through the sandstone valley, we started uphill through narrow walkways and heavy brush. I wondered if there were wild cats here. Dad once told me most of the Simi Valley cats were shot down before they could hunt mooks like us. Dad also added they 'may be coming back'. It was an ominous line. It was NPC dialogue from an RPG hometown before monsters burned it down.

A branch cracked.

A couple of backpacking teenagers appeared. They were heading back to the hill's base.

"It's getting late. Be careful," one of them said.

"Thanks for the concern. We will," I said.

"What are you guys doing here?" the other asked.

"Duuude. We're going rock climbing," Ron exclaimed.

We had no heavy packs, harnesses, or equipment aside from the bare minimum. I wore a Hawaiian shirt over a tee.

The teens looked at us, then left wordlessly. They probably thought we were retarded. Ron laughed.

Halfway up the hill, the air grew moist. Massive clouds passed through us. The sun rapidly set over the mountains. Highway 118 and nearby housing blocs flickered like Christmas lights. It anchored us northbound, toward civilization.

"You sure you know where you're going?" Ron asked Seth in a familiar, semi-facetious twang.

"Uh. Yeah." Seth said.

It was all uphill grasslands here. There were splits where the trail fractured like puzzle-pieces. We climbed. We stopped. We waited for Ron to catch his breath. We waited for me to catch my breath. I shared water with everyone. Ron shared gummy snacks and granola bars.

We turned on our phone lights. The fog and dark formed alternating walls. It was so heavy we couldn't see past our lights. The reflective tape on Seth's backpack led the way.

Ron and Seth kept jabbing each other over being lost or most-certainly not being lost. They never got angry, only twangier in their jabs. I have only seen Ron angry once, or at least revealing that expression with his face. Seth was like Ron, only smaller. They argued jovially. Their voices were almost the same.

Ten years ago, it was a June-gloom night in Ventura. Two-liter bottles of off-brand soda were only eighty-cents. Ron, his little sister; Rene, Marv, and I carried a few while wandering the night, post-curfew. We were twelve. Rene was eight. Cop cars passed us on dead roads.

None of them ever stopped us.

Next to Kyoto Sushi laid an intersection. There were pin-sized headlights in the distance and nothing more. We jaywalked. Rene refused to cross with us. She stood under the light of a lamppost until red turned green. We waited on the other end

for her in the dark, near the overgrown hedges bordering a gated community.

Marv mocked her for valuing law over reason: that obeying a red light on an empty street was pointless. It was true, but I couldn't blame a child - a younger child - for sticking to her teachings. They kept her safe. They served as a foundation until the faculties of reason were built.

Marv wouldn't've considered this, I'm sure, because his mom didn't teach him anything. She slung meth and heroin. We innocently thought she was a witch who collected 'glowing rocks' from the desert and let dogs shit all over their house until our late teens, when she suffered a heart attack and was arrested for possession of a sawed-off shotgun.

The headlights screamed. A black Lexus stopped next to us. A tinted window rolled down, revealing a suited man and leather upholstery.

"Look at you kids! That little one waited when you didn't. What are you doing out this late?" the man scolded us.

Our expressions soured. We said nothing. We learned it from Ron. Even under threat from his parents, he never budged. The world bent to his will.

"How about I call the cops? I'm a lawyer, you know!" He fired another volley.

As usual, Marv or I were the ones to step in. With Ron, there was often a pull of forces: whether to stay stolid and let things fall apart on their own, or to speak up and crumble under threat. One of us always spoke up. Marv and I sometimes reflected that Ron indirectly forced us to step in for him, that he'd get in trouble without someone else to speak, but he never



lost with his strategy. I never saw him punished for it, at least.

"You're a gay guy." Marv said, choosing chaos.

That left me to remedy the situation.

I apologized profusely until the 'lawyer' was satisfied and drove off.

"Some Samaritan. He just wanted his ego-dick sucked," Marv hissed.

"Who was that scary guy?" Rene asked innocently. I didn't know how long she was standing next to us.

"Was it right or left here?" Seth asked himself. We followed the bobbing glow of his backpack's tape. Tall grass and smooth, porous formations of rock surrounded us like pillars of melted vinyl. There was still no cave to be found.

"You know we won't find the cave, right? Even if we do, it'll be too dark to go in." I said.

"Seth, are you sure you know where to go?" Ron jabbed.

"Yes!" Seth said.

I laughed, buzzing with a strange energy. I should've been tired. I was jovial, but not carefree. Concave openings in the rocks' faces revealed temporary camping sites. I gripped the wooden handle of grandpa's combat knife, but reminded myself there's no way a frog-bodied office man like me could fight a mountain lion. Stray thoughts and giggling hypotheticals faded into sharpened pragmatism: We'd sleep the night out at worst,

then set for home at first light, assuming the fog gave way, to follow the urbanized sprawl home.

Any semblance of a path was gone as we hit the hill's peak. Seth mumbled. He ambled over a large stone. His footsteps squished wetly against a moisture which consumed all of us. All was fog.

Hundreds of croaks swelled. The wet land dipped into a small puddle. We didn't see a single frog on the Nets. Now, we saw hundreds. We heard them even more. Their croaks vibrated the wafer-thin articulating bones of our skulls like wind chimes.

We stood there for a while. The frogs were a throng of shimmering movement.

We made jokes about old videogames Seth didn't get. Ron and Seth bullied each other. We managed to slowly, blindly, descend the hill. We recognized the contours of certain shrubs and black splotches and rocks, or thought we did. We wanted to follow the same steep trail we took on the way up. Everything then leveled out as we stumbled onto a service road. It was wide and well-graded. We convened and argued, but decided to follow it: to hit the base of the mountain, or at least see the city's lights, before searching for the car.

A bench revealed itself, along with a sign marking the major trails.

I checked the battery on my phone, then noticed I had a signal. The GPS worked. The entire area was neatly mapped, down to every snaking path.

We were retarded.

We were nowhere near the cave, which was the proudly displayed cover-photo of the Net's official website.

The descent was easy after we decided to cut between two major trails. Seth was the GPS guy. Ron and I bushwhacked down narrow slopes until we found the trees and quaint natural landmarks of the bunny trails once again.

I decided to ask Ron more about Mormonism. I didn't ask much in the past, and he didn't answer much when others did. He told me every area with Mormons had a Ward, with their own emails and shared-lines where they could convene. He said it was full of gossip. I asked about his older brother and sister, the ones who moved out a while ago. They're both married off. The once conservative Danny was pushed into a drag show by his wife. His sister was told off by her former best friend for talking only of herself too much.

Alex, someone I didn't know, became Ron's centerpiece for this discussion. Alex once posted a picture of himself flipping off the camera with the word 'nigger' attached via text. This spawned a wild flame war. It was one both Ron and I saw hundreds of times over forums and chatrooms as kids, but within a controlled group of close-knit adults: it was much more amusing. Some didn't care. Some cared a lot that the former didn't care. Some of the latter flipped out and disappeared altogether.

It was 8:46pm. Headlights funneled down Highway 118 like blood through a vein. Neighborhoods sparkled like stars. We took an embarrassing group picture under the light of our phones.

We found the fence gap, then returned to the car and took to home. We chatted freely until the car's dashboard rang.

It was a phone call.

"Ron? Seth? Are you there?" the wispy voice of Mora Slazinger spoke in her Louisiana plus pill-addled twang.

Ron and Seth clammed up. Our frivolity evaporated instantly, and their faces were stone. They weren't just pranking their mother. They tuned her out.

I waited too, dreading what was to come.

"Hello?" she asked.

Nothing. Time passed. The road hummed.

"I'm calling the cops..." Mora threatened. She meant it, too. I was surprised any one still listened to her, given she's eloped with the county's most wanted at food donation lines, or called the cops on Marv for 'breaking her leg' when she just fell into a hole dug by a previous dog. Yes, Officer Dumbo did believe her, and Marv called me crying after he came to his house, slinging accusations.

This wasn't the first time she put out search warrants.

"Hello?" I replied, masking my voice.

"Who is this?" Mora asked.

"This is Ortega. Who's calling?"

"Have you seen Ron and Seth? They were supposed to be home by now."

"I run the observation tower here for the Nets."

"Are you Jake? Nick?" Mora asked. She was still wary of being pranked, namely by the names mentioned.

"Ranger Ortega. Who's Jake? Do you hear me?"

"Yes! Please. Find my sons. They took the damn car and I need it for makeup shopping with the girls!" Mora pleaded.

"No problem, missus. Let me just activate my radar scope. Bing! Bing! Bing! Wheeee! Brrzzzt!" I performed all the sounds by mouth. Seth snickered.

"Bullshit! This is Jake! I'm calling the co--"

"Okay okay." I said normally. I knew when gig was up, and wouldn't push it any further. "No, It's not Jake. We're driving home right now. We just got lost for a bit."

"You're bringing the car back?" she asked.

"Yes. The car will be back." I said.

Aside from Mora's shopping run, Ron Senior needed the car to help clean the local LDS church. Why he did this so late at night as a man in his seventies, we didn't know, but he was ardent on scrubbing the walls.

"The church has my dad as a useful tool," Ron said flatly. One of my roomies' parents, before the divorce, was and is still a devout Mormon. I chatted her up about it. I told her I found those cartoon VHS tapes explaining Mormon cosmology, and that while they shy away from some of it stuff now, it's still an idea that black people were descendants of fallen angels, and that God had a wife, and when you led a family, they were given a whole planet to rule after death.

"The heaven's janitor thing's true too. It's all based on peer pressure," she said.

I thought about heaven's janitors, and asked if I could help him clean the church. He politely declined. I politely

sighed with relief. I didn't want to scrub the church, but felt bad for Ron Sr. We pranked him constantly as kids, but the ones of us who evened out as adults came to protect and revere him. Jake even paid him thousands of dollars for a room to stay in while he worked the local Pizza Chef after a messy breakup.

Part of me fought the notion that Ron Sr. would be a janitor in the afterlife, but I was still conflicted on how he tolerated Mora and the dangerous environment they provided their family. I wondered how much of Ron Sr.'s perseverance was based on a dream of reward, or the fear of persecution from his peers.

I then dropped it. Mora badgered Ron Jr. repeatedly until we were set to grill everyone hot dogs and cans of chili over the backyard grill.

The oven was busted again.

After a late dinner and Ron Sr.'s departure, we set to wrapping Ron's 5.45 AK-12 rounds so the metallic jingling wouldn't set off security. Turns out, he can fly with ammo so long as the packaging was unopened. We split the holding plastic for the rounds and lined them between rows of loose bullets as padding. It worked perfectly. We taped the ammo boxes back up and they seemed good as new.

Ron Sr. returned just as Ron turned up more videos on Japanese vending machines. The man filming these tours went into detail over per-minute rental cars and a famous vending machine gallery located at a former auto-supply shop. He then paid fifteen-hundred yen to sit in a soundproofed booth with a desk. He said it was for privacy, even though it had a glass door peering out into the bustle of Akihabara's streets.

I claimed it was a 'crying booth' meant for stressed businessmen. Ron Sr. laughed.