

Chapter Eleven:

Why Because

From the Unfinished Memoir of Michael Florida:

‘The night had ended with a line of crank. I’d come home and, naturally, there was to be no sleep. I sat up watching TV in my room and fingered the widening hole in my molar. I was thinking also about Madison, the girl I’d met the day before at a baseball game. One of those Redding afternoons—where the Sun bleaches away color, heat boils oak leaves in the trees, and squads of practicing cheerleaders shout across the wide-open space. I’d sat in the bleachers and the pretty girl had introduced herself. “Madison,” she’d said. I’d recognized her from around. She’d already known who I was.

I mean, she didn’t know me, really...about how I was fucked up somehow, how there was something wrong with me.

She dressed the way a pretty girl dresses boyish. Her lips Coca-Cola red. Her eyes clean windows into a world of nothing gone wrong—where a boy might baptize his old self new. Carelessly perfect Madison.

I asked her to a movie. She said “Yes,” and, “OK,” I said. “Tomorrow. I’ll pick you up.” She left. I watched the rest of the game, because I was there to get drugs for a friend.

The knock on my door came at six-thirty in the morning.

Quick, I snapped off the T.V. and curled up in bed with my back to the door. I assumed

it was my mother, but a man nudged my arm and said, “Hey, kid, get up.” He was big and black. So I did. I was still dressed from the day before. Shoes on. “You need to dress warmer,” he said. I had a test that day. Math. I went for my books. “You don’t need to worry about those,” he said.

I followed him down the stairs. I expected to see my mother. I didn’t. Out the front door. Slipping—the frozen driveway pebbles. The rooster crowed in the neighbor’s yard. I cooperated peacefully. Maybe that would count for something?

The van door was closing...

I looked to my bedroom window—where I remained a boy perched somewhere above the shore of myself. The van moved. The tide took me—The house. The driveway. The yard. The oak trees along the fence. Curving away behind us. This was really happening. The vinyl seat was hard, unfriendly. My breath hovered. I could not explain this away. Where the driveway met the road, my father waved. He’d driven out from town, so early. Difficult to look at him, wondering—Am I going to jail?

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The man in the front steered to the right, the left, and back again.

There was a woman in the passenger seat who occasionally glanced my way. Her expression was tinted glass...all reflection.

I asked, “Where are we going?”

They conversed quietly. The man asked, slightly embarrassed, “Which way to the airport?”

“Left.”

The woman said, “We’re taking you to San Francisco.”

San Francisco...Two years ago, my dad and I at the Giants vs. Padres. Les Miserables with my mother, my sisters, and Ryland. An eighth grade field trip to Golden Gate, Pier 39, and Alcatraz. It came flooding.

Then I remembered. Madison. Tonight. Maybe I’d get one phone call. Maybe she’d understand. Madison—I was going to change for you.

“If it’s all right to ask, what’s going to happen to me in San Francisco?”

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‘SFO. San Francisco International. Our plane landed, and we went straight to gates A-22 and A-23. My escorts on either side of me.

The woman said she’d be continuing on with me and that her name was Shasta. They took a softer tack. “Do you want to know why you are coming with us?” “Where you are going?” “Who we are?” But I wasn’t talking. Playing it cool—I didn’t care.

There were two departing flights. Two possible futures. Gate A-22 to Idaho, Gate A-23 to Detroit. Yes. Detroit—Please Detroit.’

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‘BOI. Gowen Field Airport—Boise, Idaho. When our plane landed, we walked to another terminal and waited.

A kid with an overly tall Mohawk streaked through the gate pretending to be a chicken, screaming. Maybe he was retarded. Turns out he was on mushrooms. Two men tackled him. Big men. They brought him to us, me and Shasta. More arrived. We were loaded into van and

delivered to the middle of the Idaho wild-lands.

Vast.

They drove us to a small facility. Inside, we were grouped together in a plain room. The others took it lightly, joked and laughed.

A man stormed in. “No caffeine, no soda, no coffee, no nicotine, not even the patches. No alcohol, no whiphits, no huffing permanent markers, no dope. No sex. No porn mags. No bedroom doors and no locks. In fact, no bedrooms.”

“No candy, low rider pants, tight pants, belts, earrings, nose-rings, or gel for Mohawks. None of that bullshit, nor any of your bullshit can help you survive out here in the Idaho wilderness for four weeks.” He paused. “And that’s what you’re going to do. And that’s no bullshit.”

The man and the group of us, we sized each other up. There was no fucking way.

He said, “Great. Sit around here in a circle.” Reluctantly, we did. “Why are you here?” he posed to everyone. Silence was our answer.

Then a kid to my left with self-barbered, half-blond hair: “I’m Todd. My dad sent me here.”

Oh my god. Suddenly, it was so crystal fucking clear.

Kid with a shaved head and disfigured nose: “It was my dad sent me here, too.”

The man said, “Write it. There’s paper. There’s pens. Get writing.”

A couple of boys looked utterly confused. “You want us to write something?”

The man nodded. “The truth. Whatever you did to get yourself where you are right now. Write to whoever it is you think put you here.”

I took the pen. Dear Mom.’

Chapter Twelve: Wilderness

From the Unfinished Memoir of Michael Florida:

Day One in the Idaho Wilderness. The air was clean and hurt going down. There was no television. I badly missed coffee.

Our first hike. Packing our own gear made for a sorry display. Crazy George, who had been on mushrooms at the airport, had a pack that hung extremely to the left. His cooking equipment was tied to the outside with shoestring. Our guides were old, kind of, in the eyes and face but young in the body. The outdoors fit them in every way it didn't fit us. They were strong, their movements effortless. They were in perfect shape, which made me nervous.

“How big is Idaho?” asked a kid who looked like a pit bull.

The guide, “Hey, you listen here. No talking on the trail. Got it? It's big. If you want to run, you'll die before you find a road. And in case you didn't notice, none of us carry communication radios. So if you run, and none of us can find you, well...”

Pit Bull said, “No way. Bullshit.”

“Hey, feel free to get lost out here and try to prove me wrong.”

“You guys have radios.”

“OK, if you say so. But we don't.”

“You could get sued the hell out of,” I said. “You definitely have radios.”

Pit Bull and I were assigned to carry the water pumps and filter the rest of the day. We didn't argue about the radios anymore.

At the top of our first hill, we paused.

“This...,” said the guy whose huffer accent betrayed itself with every wheeze of air,
“...Is...Bullshit! Can we stop or something?”

The guide shook his head. “No stopping.”

Huffer said, “My head is going to sunburn.”

“We can’t stop. We have to get to water. No water—you can’t drink or eat—or live. So we never stop.”

When we hit some water, we ate lunch. Pita bread. With a thin layer of peanut butter.

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Our first night...

The guides made a fire with a bow drill, instructing us on its construction and use. I’m sure it was fascinating, but we promptly passed out from exhaustion. When the fire was going and the water hot, we were awakened for the occasion of our evening meal.

Our dinner’s ingredients: rice—bag of lentils—water brought to a boil—one bouillon cube which was to last the entire week.

We all boiled our entire bouillon cube that first night. Mistake. Next, tooth-cleaning sticks were whittled from small branches. A more advanced skill than you might think. There’s a way to do it right. And there’s a way to get a mouth full of splinters.

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Day Two:

We were still not allowed to speak on the trail. I was singing, not out loud, but in my

head—songs from Live in a World Full Hate by Sick Of It All. At night we sat in a circle, and I picked the splinters out of my tongue.

Eventually, one of them started talking, and then another. Like a campfire scene out of Lean on Me...but for morons. Crazy George (flipping his limp Mohawk from right to left) started with an inspirational stream of consciousness: “Bullshit. Fuck my parents. I hate lentils. Bullshit.”

Pit Bull went next, “Fuck. Dead Kennedys, man. I can’t believe they sent me here. My parents are dicks. It’s cool. Fuck.”

A kid with a crooked nose and a shaved head that had the kind of skull that really should have hair—no, but I mean, like, really. “I smashed my new iPod,” he said. “Fuck them.”

Huffer laughed, hysterically, then stopped entirely. “I signed up for this on my own. I thought there was going to be a cabin and we could lay back and get Taco Bell.”

Jill was a girl...kind of pretty but in a mean way. She hid behind her bangs like an armadillo. “Whatever. I’m 15. I’m here ‘cause I did stuff. My parents don’t like me. I guess my dad does.” She looked down at her hands. “My hands are all dirt.”

A skinny kid with Nirvana hair stirred a little. So fragile the wind could kick his ass. What was he doing here? “My dad smashed my mom up again. And told me I was a fuck face. He makes twenty million a year. I put a whole vial of acid into his coffee. That’s enough for a hundred people. He spent a week in an institution to come down. I don’t know if he’s better or not.” Nirvana Hair shrugged. “Whatever.”

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Days later: The guides loosened up a little and let us converse on the trail. On the last day of the

first week, Jill and I were assigned to gather wood and make the fire.

When we were away from the others, I said, “You don’t say much, do you?”

Jill said, “Neither do you.”

I thought about it. “I suppose.”

She said, “You’re smart.”

“Me? I guess.” I thought about it. I liked that she said it.

She asked, “Did you understand the bow drill?”

“Yeah, I think I just have to whittle a thing.” I started on the stick of wood, and she gathered tiny sprigs for the fire.

“You did drugs and stuff, hunh?” she said.

“Uhh...I did all kinds of stuff. It wasn’t that bad. I don’t know, I guess it was maybe.” I kept my eyes on my whittling.

“I’ve probably slept with more people than everybody here put together,” Jill said moving a little ways off.

“Really?”

“No,” she said, “I lie all the time.”

“Oh.”

“I lie to everybody.”

I said, “Well, that’s cool. I don’t care either way.”

“I don’t do drugs, though,” she said, and I wondered if she was criticizing me. She said, “I did used to do drugs, but not anymore. You ready for the twigs?” She came closer to see.

“Shit.” I’d broken the bow drill. “I got to carve a new stick.”

“All right,” Jill said, and maybe it was the way she said it.

I put my hand on her shoulder, and she turned around. I told her, “Don’t say anything.”

“Why? Are you going to kiss me?”

I did. And we got kind of into it—until the feeling kind of ebbed and then faded altogether. She cocked her eyebrow at me, and I feigned shyness and got back to whittling a new stick. After a minute, Jill said, “I hate the outdoors.”

“You hate...the outdoors??”

“Fucking depresses the shit out of me. It’s true, though, what I said. About all the sex. That was true.”

“It is?”

She nodded. “You know, all the usual reasons.”

The knife slipped, and I felt it. It was the kind of feeling where your gut tells you something bad just happened—but you don’t want to listen. I looked at Jill. “Shit. I just cut my finger.”

“You did?”

I said, “It looks kind of bad doesn’t it?”

She said, “Holy shit! Oh my god!”

I walked back to the group and up to the pretty guide named Topaz. “I think I cut my finger kind of bad.” Topaz fainted.

The other guides were a little ways off. They were running towards me. One of them was on an emergency radio.

#

Civilization!

I don't know if "hospital" is an accurate word for the place they took me. The building didn't look like any kind of institution, nor sterile. And the people who stitched up my finger were not like any kind of doctors I have seen before. Topaz waited with me while my hand was repaired, and then we got back in the truck.

I asked, "How bad would I have had to cut my finger to get out altogether?"

Topaz, suspiciously, said, "I don't know. Do you want to find out?"

"No," I said, "I thought I was maimed for life."

She nodded and smiled with genuine care and flashed me a wink, "You held together in there." Genuine praise. Topaz said, "I suppose you thought you'd get to stop at McDonald's or something like that?" I tried to make the saddest puppy dog eyes I could muster.

#

While I was away, the group was trained to build mousetraps, the implication of which had made them slightly edgy.

They were all convinced I had been to McDonald's. They begged me to tell them what it tasted like. Crazy George's dreams had been plagued recently by the smell of French fries, and he stood near me sniffing for the tell-tale perfume of grease.

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Going solo:

Topaz and another guide led me to my "spot". "This is you," she said. "This little area is your home base for the next five days. You're out of earshot of any other person. We'll check in on you, give you one meal a day. The rest is up to you."

They departed. Just...me. My little clearing. My trees. My little stream. And a rock.
“Hello there, rock.” Sitting rock, thinking rock, podium, apple box...rock.

Solo is an intolerable period of alone. A canyon echoing your head’s voices. A terrible stadium of quiet.

So I sat on my rock. And I sat. And I sat. Finally...

“I know,” I said, because my rock had that look on its face. “I know—martyr to my own rage.”

The rock’s look.

“Hammered to a cross of my own angst. Thank you. I get it.”

Good.

“Great.”

Good. Then quiet again. The air smelled like dried pine needles and warm dust. It reminded me of a childhood summer.

How does one grow beyond shame? I’m not sure which one of us asked it. But the answer flew down from the branches and hovered in the mountain air. Forgive. You must find a way to forgive yourself.

Ha!—my rock laughed. Because he knew that was quite beyond my skill.

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Second day of solo...Masturbation. Plenty of it.

In the morning, I was philosopher—round and round with Machiavelli, Bukowski, Thoreau, Kerouac, my freshman English teacher, Colonel Kurts, Carl Sagan, Henry Rollins, my brother Ryland, Bruce Springsteen, Dennis Miller, and even good ol’ honest Abe.

In the afternoon, I was Pantera—on tour performing Vulgar Display of Power, with Inside Out opening for us on my little dirt stage.

In Apocalypse Now I played Martin Sheen, then Duval, even Lawrence Fishburn. Val Kilmer in “Real Genius”—“Can you hammer nail through a six inch board with your penis?—Not right now—Girl’s got to have her standards.” I won an Oscar in Joe Verses the Volcano. Considered being Cruz in Jerry McGuire, thought better of it, did Hoffman in The Graduate and then acted out the Mrs. Robinson parts. I know that sounds weird. Naturally, I did a love scene with Winona Rider and starred opposite Pfeiffer in Frankie and Johnny. McQueen with MacGraw. Twice.

And last, Rumble Fish—Matt Dillon straight through to the end. Ryland gave me that movie.

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On the third day of solo...

I heard an indescribable, piercing scream. I could swear it was Crazy George.

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On the fourth day...

It works! Unfuckingbelievable! I built a mousetrap that actually caught a mouse. Amazing! We weren’t allowed to eat the mice. Not unless we wanted to contract the Hanta virus they’d been carrying for the last hundred years. So, I let the terrified creature out of its cage, and it ran off having learned its lesson.

When Topaz arrived to check on me, I told her, “I caught a mouse.”

Topaz stiffened. “Oh god. Why did you do that? You can’t eat them. And they’re so

disgusting.”

“You taught us how. I thought we were supposed to?”

She looked around nervously. “It’s not around here is it? I brought your food for the day.”

Bread, rice, and a few strips of dried meat. I inquired about the scream. She admitted that maybe we were not completely out of earshot. Turns out it was Crazy George. Apparently, he believed I had gone to McDonald’s. “He cut his thumb!!?” I was sick thinking about it.

Topaz, “Well...that’s one way of saying it. He nearly lost it.”

I couldn’t imagine it. “On purpose!?” I couldn’t stop imagining it. Shudder.

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On the fifth day of solo...my true love gave to me, FIVE GOLDEN RINGS!

Not really. But I did get something...pain. A lot of pain.

Surging emotion and regret—reshuffling-memories—revisiting-unclosed-confrontations—unstitching-once-closed-wounds—curled-up-beside-my-rock kind-of pain.

Truth. It remains unavoidable despite all effort.

#

No more solo. Only a few days left.

The guides brought us before another group of kids still in their first week of the program. They didn’t have much to say to us. We had plenty for them. We were encouraging, gave advice, wisdom. It went right by them. Useless as rain on the petrified forest. They were from another country, another world, planet. Had we been them only a week and a half ago?

We did a ropes course: climbing, running, crossing chasms on narrow planks. No one died. Of course Crazy George was no longer with us. They sent him back to the beginning—week one all over again. Shudder.

Then we aided some guides tracking down a runaway. Huffer and Jill went with the guides on point. Pit Bull flanked them. Crooked Nose chased the runners toward Nirvana Hair and Me. Exhilarating!

Jill was smiling. It struck me—What did I look like? Then I laughed. Smiled. I smiled at Jill. Hers was a real smile. I was envious. A little.

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Near the end:

Topaz took me aside. She said, “You’ve done exceptionally well. I want you to be happy with how far you’ve come.” I was. The breeze arrived like an old friend. Pine scents mingled with browning needles and sun-baked thistle. My mood was poetry. “You won’t be going home at the end of the week,” she said. And that wasn’t even the bombshell. “It’s been arranged.” She said, “You will graduate from a high school in the national forest outside of Bend.”

“What?” The sad in her eyes made me nervous.

“It’s year round. No summers off. And you’ll have no contact with family for four months,” she said.

“Why?”

Because.

I was shaking. “It’s not fair.”

She asked, “You want to know why I think you need this school?” But I wasn’t listening.

“I think you have low self esteem,” she said. I remember watching the dirt—the ants.

“Everyone likes you. But which Michael do they really like...the one you convince them of?”

A line of ants was carrying a dead mantis. “When I look at you, I see a boy huddled in the dark, as young as he was the day he got scared. Afraid no one will ever find him—but staying hid.”

The ants dropped their prize. But then...more ants came. “That little boy has a secret. He knows he’s never really going to be loved.” Ants and more ants, flowing down the tree and onto the dirt in a great puddle. “You gotta find him, Michael. Because you love him. And it will be light.”

The ants wouldn’t stop—they kept coming. They just kept coming. “Are you OK, Michael?” I heard her say. Then every ant there ever was streamed out.

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On the way to the airport...Topaz said she was taking me somewhere to eat. Me and her. Whatever I want. Anywhere.

Large chocolate shake, French fries, burger. And I’m proud of you, she said.