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Reading Article GP2

Article #20: Brian's Return

by Gary Paulsen

Brian awakened just after dawn, when the sun began to warm the tent. The sky was cloudless. He flipped the canoe, and when he went to lower his packs he saw the bear tracks.

One bear, medium size. It had come in the night so quietly that Brian hadn't heard it—though he had slept so soundly his first night back in the woods, the bear could have been tipping garbage cans.

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Your teacher can send you the complete material.

Please ask them to send the complete version of this material before the lesson. He slid the canoe into the water at the edge of the lake and loaded all his gear, tying everything in. He took time to gather some bits of wood and leaves to use as a smudge in a coffee can to fend off mosquitoes, then jumped in. It was still early but already warm, and he quickly stripped down to shorts.

He kept the map in its clear plastic bag jammed beneath a rope in front of him. He knelt to paddle instead of sitting on the small seat because it felt more stable. He was not as confident in the canoe as he wished to be. He'd taken it to a small lake near home to practice and rented canoes in other places, but he was very conscious of the fact that he had much to learn. By staying low and on his knees he had much more control.

He had only a mile to go in the present lake and then he would enter the river. He had the compass in one of the packs but didn't truly need it. The lakes were well drawn on the map and he could see where the river flowed out.

All that day he felt as if he were in a painting, a beautiful private diorama. He worked through a sheltered narrow lagoon and then out into the open to cross a small lake, then back under the canopy through the still water.

He had never had a day pass so quickly nor so beautifully and he nearly forgot that he had to find a camp and get some food before dark. He wasn't sick of boiled fish and rice yet, so in the late afternoon he took time to move back along the lily pads and drop the hook over. He caught a large sunfish immediately and took three more small ones, dropping them all over the side using a short piece of nylon rope as a stringer, running the nylon through their gills and out their mouths.

He took his time looking for a campsite and picked one on a flat area five or six feet above the

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The storm hit in the middle of the night.

It was not that there was so much wind—certainly not as much as he'd been through before with the tornado when he was first marooned in the wilderness—and not that there was so much rain, although there was a good amount of it.

It was a combination of the two.

He had cooked dinner and eaten, boiled water for the next day's canteen, pulled his packs up in a tree, set up the tent and arranged his sleeping bag and weapons. Then he'd sat by the fire and written to his friend Caleb about the day in one of his journals, using tiny writing so he wouldn't waste the pages. He would have to give the letters to Caleb when he saw him again—there was no mailbox out here.

When he was done he put the book back in a plastic bag and crawled inside the tent to go to bed.

He was awakened by a new sound, a loud sound. Not thunder—it never did thunder or lightning—and not the train-like roar of a tornado. This just started low, the hissing of rain driven against the tent. He snuggled back in his bag. He was in a good shelter, waterproof—let it rain.

Except that it kept coming and *kept* coming. It went from a moderate rain to a downpour and finally to an outright deluge. And with the rain came wind. Not violent, but enough to break off branches and push the rain still harder. Soon Brian found his bag wet as the rain came in under the tent. He lifted the flap to look out but it was far too dark to see anything.

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He landed in a heap and felt an intense, hot pain in his left leg at the upper thigh and reached down to feel an arrow shaft protruding from his leg.

Great, he thought. *I've shot myself in the leg*. He hadn't, of course, but had rolled onto an arrow that had fallen out of the quiver just as the tent rolled off the embankment.

He couldn't get his bearings, but he knew where his thigh was and grabbed the arrow and jerked the shaft out of his leg. There was an immediate surge of pain and he felt like passing out. He didn't, but then he heard a strange *whump-thump* and something crashed down on his head. This time he did pass out.

He came to a few seconds later with a sore head, a sore leg and absolutely no idea in the world what was happening to him. He was still wrapped in the tent and his bag was in his face and his bow and arrows lay all around him and he seemed to be in water, almost swimming.

All right, he thought, take one thing at a time. Just one thing.

I poked my leg with an arrow. There. Good. I pulled the arrow out. My leg still works. It must not have been a broadhead because it didn't go in very deep. Good.

My tent collapsed. There. Another thing. I'm in a tent, and it collapsed. I just have to find the front zipper and get out and climb up the bank. Easy now, easy.

Something hit me on the head. What? Something big that thunked. The canoe. The wind picked up the canoe, and it hit me.

There. I've poked my leg, rolled down a bank and been hit in the head with the canoe.

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He dragged the tent back up the embankment onto the grass, wincing as the pain in his leg hit him.

It was too dark to see much, but he could make out the shape of the canoe lying upside down. It had moved a good feet from where he had left it, and had he not tied it down loosely with the line it would have blown away across the lake.

He had forgotten the most important thing about living in the wilderness, the one thing he'd thought he would never forget—expect the unexpected. What you didn't think would get you, would get you. Plan on the worst and be happy when it didn't come.

But he had done one thing right: He had tied the canoe to a tree. He dragged the tent to the canoe, crawled underneath and lay on the tent the rest of the night, listening to the rain, wincing with the pain in his leg and feeling stupid.

It was a long night. The next day was a repair day both for the equipment and for himself.

Dawn was wet and dreary and it took him a full hour to find dry wood and leaves and get a decent fire going—all the time castigating himself. Had he forgotten *everything*? He hadn't made a secure camp, hadn't brought in wood so he'd have dry fire starter in the morning.

He limped through the woods around the campsite until he found a dead birch log with the bark still intact. Birch bark was nearly waterproof—it was what American Indian used for canoes—and beneath the bark he broke off slivers of dry wood. He took a double armful of bark and slivers back to the campsite and after three attempts—he should have needed only one match, he told himself—he at last got a sputtering flame going.

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The wind had dropped and the rain had eased to a few sprinkles now and then. He saw clear holes in the clouds. He spread the gear to dry. His sleeping bag was soaked, and the tent was a sloppy mess.

He had to stay put, so he set the tent back up, this time pegging it down and using the small shovel to dig a drainage ditch around the sides with a runoff ditch leading down to the lake.

The wind had tangled the packs in the tree limbs, but they were still intact. With effort, Brian lowered them to the ground.

Again he dried arrows and the quiver and checked his bow. Then he launched the canoe and took about 15 minutes to catch six good-size bluegills.

He cleaned the fish, put them on to boil with a teaspoon of salt, put rice in the other pan and

then suddenly found that all the work was done.

The sun was out—he could actually see steam coming up from his sleeping bag as it dried—and he lay back on the ground by the fire and went over what had happened. His leg throbbed in time with his thoughts as he learned yet again: Never assume anything, expect the unexpected, be ready for everything all the time.

And finally, no matter what he *thought* would happen, nature would do what it wanted to do. He had to be part of it, part of what it was really like, not what he or some other person thought it should be like.

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