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The Trail

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The Trail · *Tim McGinnis*

"At seventeen, he had already read Nietzsche, at forty he still read fairy tales and the Czech Boy Scout Magazine." Ernst Pawel, The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka

August 2. I chafe at the tyranny of the buddy system. Why should I be concerned about the fate of Herr N.? Our afternoon swims in Lake Sudenfalles make me yearn for liberation. This afternoon our patrol leader reprimanded me, "Work on your trudgen, Kafka!"

August 3. Tonight, Herr N. crouches in the corner of our tent. I stare at him malignantly as he gnaws on an onion. Herr N. also keeps stale pretzel rods in his haversack. He smells like a stable boy and constantly fails inspection. I am smarting with unhappiness. Soon the whole camp will be talking about the two imbeciles in our tent.

August 4. I continue to sleep fitfully. I wake in a cold sweat and rack my brains trying to remember how to purify drinking water. Slowly, sleep returns. Then the pain-wracking anxiety dream begins. My two hard-earned merit badges, bugling and insect lore, consume themselves on my sash. Another recurrent nightmare: My father's stern voice bellowing at me from the window as I leave for a troop meeting, "Stay away from woodworking!"

August 5. This morning, at mail call, I tear open a letter from Prague with dread. Father is upset with me again. He found out that I played a field mouse in the camp play.

August 6. Today Schnassvogel demagnetized my compass. The big hike is just four days away. However, nothing seems to upset Herr N. He shows me his prized possession, a tattered piece of shed snakeskin. N. thinks that old socks make good kindling. I take pains not to be seen with him when we police the area after breakfast.

August 7. A scout is brave, that cannot be argued, but the others don't have to answer to *my father*.

August 8. I make a checklist for the big hike.

- toothbrush
- matches in tin box
- ground sheet
- flashlight
- poncho
- eating kit
- notes for "The Great Wall of China"

August 9. My heart aches for my fellow scouts. I hunger for brotherhood, anything to escape the forlorn, mad life of a second class scout. But no amount of compassion can compel me to practice mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on Herr N. I watch him carefully as his dull eyes glaze over during our discussion of the Morse Code.

August 10. I tremble, because in a few days, my father will want to know where the Big Dipper is located. And what of the swimming merit badge he wants me to earn? Was this a test devised by Sisyphus himself? How can they expect me to inflate my trousers while treading water? Herr Scoutmaster barks at me: "Tie a half-hitch, Kafka." But all I want to do is read Kleist on my cot. That, too, is nearly impossible as Herr N. babbles constantly about the sweeping changes he is planning for his ant farm.

August 11. I neglect to practice my surface dive. My axmanship suffers. A mounting repulsion toward these endless hike checklists. The hike is tomorrow. Scoutmaster Werrmann has just delivered his talk on the universal distress signal. I don't know if I could bring myself to shout for help three times. How can a plight so intimate be reported on such a public scale?

August 12. The hike begins. At first, all is merry and full of good fellowship. We sing "Edelweiss" and talk about ham radio operation. Then a harsh-faced patrol leader tells us to recognize roots and tubers. The chickweed at lunch was inedible. It looked fine in the *Scout Handbook*. The heat

in this remote valley begins to take its toll. The regimentation is appalling. Werrmann strides back toward the end of the column. "Let's go, Kafka, you're lagging behind."

Later, as we ford the stream at the foot of the highlands, Werrmann tightens the slide of my scout neckerchief until I'm choking beet red in the face. "Wear your uniform properly," he snarls, "we don't want word of this kind of behavior getting back to Prague."

I decide to escape. Werrman returns to the front where Herr N. plies two tenderfoots with off-brand soda crackers. I dawdle for a second, fiddling with the laces on my hiking boots and then dive headfirst into a briar patch. My throat fills with screams but I dare not loose them. Scratched and bedraggled, I wander in the darkening woods. Without a compass, I try to keep two landmarks in a straight line in front of me. But I know I am circling.

August 13. Will they send a search party? Perhaps, but only after I have ruined the family name. I can't bring myself to use the universal distress signal. I can hear the scout authorities discussing my disappearance. "Look here, men, Franz was not mentally awake. He was not clean, thrifty and reverent. Only these cold nights will prevent him from having heat stroke."

August 14. I am condemned forever to walk this trail, endlessly demonstrating the scout handclasp with myself until they unclench my fist after my last moments on earth.