

## “Scout’s Honor” - Avi

Back in 1946, when I was nine, I worried that I wasn’t tough enough. That’s why I became a Boy Scout. Scouting, I thought, would make a man of me. It didn’t take long to reach Tenderfoot rank. You got that for joining. To move up to Second Class, however, you had to meet three requirements. Scout Spirit and Scout Participation had been cinchy. The third requirement, Scout Craft, meant I had to go on an overnight hike in the country. In other words, I had to leave Brooklyn, on my own for the first time in my life.

Since I grew up in Brooklyn in the 1940’s, the only grass I knew was in Ebbets Field where the Dodgers played. Otherwise, my world was made of slate pavements, streets of asphalt (or cobblestone), and skies full of tall buildings. The only thing “country” was a puny pin oak tree at our curb, which was noticed, mostly, by dogs.

I asked Scoutmaster Brenkman where I could find some country. Now, whenever I saw Mr. Brenkman, who was a church pastor, he was dressed either in church black or Scout khaki. When he wore black, he’d warn us against hellfire. When he wore khaki, he’d teach us how to build fires.

“Country,” Scoutmaster Brenkman said in answer to my question, is anywhere that has lots of trees and is not in the city. Many boys camp in the Palisades.”

“Where’s that?”

“Just north of the city. It’s a park in Jersey.”

“Isn’t that a zillion miles from here?”

“Take the subway to the George Washington Bridge, then hike across.”

I thought for a moment, then asked, “How do I prove I went?”

Mr. Brenkman looked deeply shocked. “You wouldn’t lie, would you? What about Scout’s honor?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied meekly.

My two best friends were Philip Hossfender, whom we nicknamed Horse, and Richard Macht, called Max because we were not great spellers. They were also Scouts, Tenderfoots like me.

Horse was a skinny little kid about half my size whose way of arguing was to ball up his fist and say, “Are you saying....??” In a threatening tone.

Max was on the pudgy side, but he could talk his way out of a locked room. More importantly, he always seemed to have pocket money, which gave his talk real power.

I wasn’t sure why, but being best friends meant we were rivals too. One of the reasons for my wanting to be tougher was a feeling that Horse was a lot tougher than I was, and that Max was a little tougher.

“I’m going camping in the Palisades next weekend.” I casually informed them.

“Scout Craft,” I replied.

“Oh, that,” Horse said with a shrug.

“Look,” I said, “I don’t know about you, but I don’t intend to be a Tenderfoot all my life. Anyway, doing stuff in the city is for sissies. Scouting is real camping. Besides, I like roughing it.”

“You saying I don’t?” Horse snapped.

“I’m not saying nothing,” I said.

They considered my idea. Finally, Horse said, “Yeah, well I was going to do that, but I didn’t think you guys were ready for it.”

They looked around at me. “If you can do it, I can do it,” Max said.

“Yeah,” Horse said thoughtfully.

The way they agreed made me nervous. Now I really was going to have to be tough.

We informed our folks that we were going camping overnight (which was true) and that the Scoutmaster was going with us – which was a lie. We did remember what Mr. Brenkman said about honesty, but we were baseball fans, too, and since we were prepared to follow Scout law –being loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent – we figured a 900 batting average was not bad.

So Saturday morning we met at the High School subway station. I got there first. Stuffed in my dad’s army surplus knapsack was a blanket, a pillow, a paper bag with three white-bread peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches – that is, lunch, supper, and Sunday breakfast. My pockets were full of stick matches. I had an old flashlight, and since I lived by the Scout’s motto – Be Prepared – I

had brought along an umbrella. Finally, being a serious reader, I had the latest Marvel Family comics.

Horse arrived next, his arms barely managing to hold on to a mattress that seemed twice his size. As for food, he had four cans of beans jammed into his pockets.

Max came last. He was lugging a new knapsack that contained a cast-iron frying pan, a packet of hot dogs, and a box of saltine crackers – plus two bottles. One bottle was mustard, the other, celery soda. He also had a bag of Tootsie Rolls and a shiny hatchet. “To build a lean-to,” he explained.

Max’s prize possession however was an official Scout compass. “It’s really swell,” he told us, “You can’t ever get lost with it. Got it at the Scout store.”

“I hate that place,” Horse informed us. “It’s all new. Nothing real.”

“This compass is real,” Max retorted. “Points north all the time. You can get cheaper ones, but they all point all different directions.”

“What’s so great about the north?” Horse said.

“That’s always the way to go,” Max insisted.

“Says who?” I demanded.

“Mr. Brenkman, dummy.” Horse cried. “Anyway, there’s always an arrow on maps pointing the way north.”

“Cowboys live out west,” I reminded them. They didn’t care.

On the subway platform, we realized we did not know which station we were heading for. To find out, we studied the system map, which looked like a noodle factory hit by a bomb. The place we wanted to go (north) was at the top of the map, so I had to hoist Horse onto my shoulders for a closer look. Since he refused to let go of his mattress – or the tin cans in his pockets – it wasn’t easy. I asked him- in a kindly fashion – to put the mattress down.

No sooner did he find the station – 168th Street – than our train arrived. We rushed on, only to have Horse scream, “My mattress!” He had left it on the platform. Just before the doors shut, he and I leaped off. Max, however, remained on the train. Helplessly we watched as his horror-stricken face slid away from us. “Wait at the next station!” I bellowed. “Don’t move!”

The next train took forever to come. Then it took even longer to get to the next stop. There was Max. All around him – like fake snow in a glass ball – were crumbs. He'd been so nervous he had eaten all his crackers.

“Didn't that make you thirsty?”

“I drank my soda.”

I noticed streaks down his cheeks. Horse noticed them too. “You been crying?” he asked.

“Naw,” Max said. “There was this water dripping from the tunnel roof. But, you said don't move, right? Well I was just being obedient.”

By the time we got on the next train – with all our possessions – we had been traveling for an hour. But we had managed to go one stop.

During the ride, I got hungry. I pulled out one of my sandwiches. With the jelly soaked through the bread, it looked like a limp scab.

Horse, envious, complained he was getting hungry.

“Eat some of your canned beans,” I suggested.

He got out one can without ripping his pocket too badly. Then his face took on a mournful look.

“What's the matter?” I asked.

“Forgot to bring a can opener.”

Max said, “In the old days, people opened cans with their teeth.”

“You saying I don't know history?”

Always kind, I plopped half my sandwich into Horse's hand. He squashed it into his mouth and was quiet for the next fifteen minutes. It proved something I'd always believed: The best way to stop arguments is to get people to eat peanut butter sandwiches. They can't talk.

Then we became so absorbed in our Marvel Family comics we missed our station. We got to it only by coming back the other way. When we reached street level, the sky was dark.

“I knew it,” Max announced. “It's going to rain.”

“Don't worry,” Horse said. “New Jersey is a who other state. It probably won't be raining there.”

"I brought an umbrella," I said smugly, though I wanted it to sound helpful.

As we marched down 168th Street, heading for the George Washington Bridge, we looked like European war refugees. Every few paces, Horse cried, "Hold it!" and adjusted his arms around his mattress. Each time we paused, Max pulled out his compass, peered at it, then announced, "Heading North!"

I said, "The bridge goes from east to west."

"Maybe the bridge does," Max insisted with a show of his compass, "but guaranteed, we are going north."

About then, the heel of my left foot, encased in a heavy rubber boot over an earth-crushing Buster Brown shoe, started to get sore. Things weren't going as I had hoped. Cheerfully, I tried to ignore the pain.

The closer we drew to the bridge, the more immense it seemed. And the clouds had become so thick, you couldn't see the top or to the far side.

Max eyed the bridge with deep suspicion. "I'm not so sure we should go," he said.

"Why?"

"Maybe it doesn't have another side."

We looked at him.

"No, seriously," Max explained, "they could have taken the Jersey side away, you know, for repairs.

"Cars are going across," I pointed out.

"They could be dropping off," he suggested.

"You would hear them splash," Horse argued.

"I'm going," I said. Trying to look brave, I started off on my own. My bravery didn't last long. The walkway was narrow. When I looked down, I saw only fog. I could feel the bridge tremble and sway. It wasn't long before I was convinced the bridge was about to collapse. Then a ray of hope struck me: Maybe the other guys had chickened out. If they had, I could quit because of them. I glanced back. My heart sank. They were coming.

After they caught up, Horse looked me in the eye and said, "If this bridge falls, I'm going to kill you."

A quarter of a mile farther across, I gazed around. We were completely fogged in.

"I think we're lost," I announced.

"What do we do?" Horse whispered. His voice was jagged with panic. That made me feel better.

"Don't worry," Max said. "I've got my compass." He pulled it out. "North is that way," he said, pointing in the direction we had been going.

Horse said, "You sure?"

"A Scout compass never lies," Max insisted.

"We lied," I reminded him.

"Yeah, but this is an official Scout compass," Max returned loyally.

"Come on," Max said and marched forward. Horse and I followed. In moments, we crossed a metal bar on the walkway. On one side, a sign proclaimed: NEW YORK; on the other, it said: NEW JERSEY.

"Holy smoke," Horse said with reverence as he straddled the bar. "Talk about being tough. We're in two states at the same time."

It began to rain. Max said, "Maybe it'll keep us clean."

"You saying I'm not clean?" Horse shot back.

Ever friendly, I put up my umbrella.

We went on – Max on one side, Horse on the other, me in the middle – trying to avoid the growing puddles. After a while, Max said, "Would you move the umbrella? Rain is coming down my neck."

"We're supposed to be roughing it," I said.

"Being in the middle isn't roughing it," Horse reminded me.

I folded the umbrella up so we all could get soaked equally.

“Hey!” I cried. “Look!” Staring up ahead, I could make out toll booths and the dim outlines of buildings.

“Last one off the bridge is a rotten egg!” Horse shouted and began to run. The next second, he tripped and took off like an F-36 fighter plane. Unfortunately, he landed like a Hell-cat dive-bomber as his mattress unspooled before him and then slammed into a big puddle.

Max and I ran to help. Horse was damp. His mattress was soaked. When he tried to roll it up, water cascaded like Niagra Falls.

“Better leave it,” Max said.

“It’s what I sleep on at home,” Horse said as he slung the soaking, dripping mass over his shoulder.

When we got off the bridge, we were in a small plaza. To the left was the roadway, full of roaring cars. In front of us, aside from the highway, there was nothing but buildings. Only to the right were there trees.

“North is that way,” Max said, pointing toward the trees. We set off.

“How come you’re limping?” Horse asked me. My foot was killing me. All I said, though, was, “How come you keep rubbing your arm?”

“I’m keeping the blood moving.”

We approached the grove of trees. “Wow,” Horse exclaimed.

“Country.” But as we drew closer, what we found were discarded cans, bottles, and newspapers – plus an old mattress spring.

“Hey,” Max cried, sounding relieved, “this is just like Brooklyn.”

I said, “Let’s find a decent place, make camp, and eat.”

It was hard to find a campsite that didn’t have junk. The growing dark didn’t help. We had to settle for the place that had the least amount of garbage.

Max said, “If we build a lean-to, it’ll keep us out of the rain.” He and Horse went a short distance with the hatchet.

Seeing a tree they wanted, Max whacked at it. The hatchet bounced right out of his hand. There was not even a dent in the tree. Horse retrieved the hatchet and checked the blade. "Dull," he said.

"Think I'm going to carry something sharp and cut myself?" Max protested. They contented themselves with picking up branches.

I went in search of firewood, but everything was wet. When I finally gathered some twigs and tried to light them, the only thing that burned was my fingers.

Meanwhile, Horse and Max used their branches to build a lean-to directly over me. After many collapses – which didn't help my work – they finally got the branches to stand in a shaky sort of way.

"Uh-oh," Horse said. "We forgot to bring something for a cover."

Max eyed me. "Didn't you say you brought a blanket?"

"No way!" I cried.

"All in favor of using the blanket!"

Horse and Max both cried, "Aye."

Only after I built up a mound of partially burned match sticks and lit them, did I get the fire going. It proved that where there's smoke there doesn't have to be much fire. The guys meanwhile draped my blanket over their branch construction. It collapsed twice.

About an hour after our arrival, the three of us were gathered inside the tiny space. There was a small fire, but more light came from my flickering flashlight.

"No more rain," Horse said with pride.

"Just smoke," I said, rubbing my stinging eyes.

"We need a vent hole," Horse pointed out.

"I could cut it with the hatchet," Max said.

"It's my mother's favorite blanket."

"And you took it?" Max said.



I nodded.

“You are tough,” Horse said.

Besides having too much smoke in our eyes and being wet, tired, and in pain, we were starving. I almost said something about giving up, but as far as I could see, the other guys were still tough.

Max put his frying pan atop my smoldering smoke. After dumping in the entire contents of his mustard bottle, he threw in the franks. Meanwhile I bolted down my last sandwich.

“What am I going to eat?” Horse suddenly said.

“Your beans,” I reminded him.

Max offered up his hatchet. “Here. Just chop off the top end of the can.”

“Oh right,” Horse said. He selected a can, set it in front of him, levered himself onto his knees, then swung down – hard. There was an explosion. For a stunned moment, we just sat there, hands, face, and clothing dripping with beans.

Suddenly Max shouted, “Food fight! Food fight! And began to paw the stuff off and fling it around.

Having a food fight in the cafeteria is one thing. Having one in the middle of a soaking wet lean-to with cold beans during a dark, wet New Jersey night is another. In seconds, the lean-to was down, the fire kicked over, and Max’s frankfurters dumped on the ground.

“The food!” Max screamed, and began to snatch up the franks. Coated with mustard, dirt, grass, and leaves, they looked positively prehistoric. Still, we wiped the franks clean on our pants then ate them—the franks, that is. Afterward, we picked beans off each other’s clothes – the way monkeys help friends get rid of lice.

For dessert, Max shared some Tootsie Rolls. After Horse swallowed his sixteenth piece, he announced, “I don’t feel so good.”

The thought of his getting sick was too much. “Let’s go home,” I said, ashamed to look at the others. To my surprise – and relief – nobody objected.

Wet and cold, our way lit by my fast fading flashlight, we gathered our belongings – most of them anyway. As we made our way back over the bridge, gusts of windblown rain pummeled us until I felt like a used-up punching bag. By the time we got to the subway station, my legs were melting fast. The other guys looked bad too. Other riders moved away from us. One of them

murmured, “Juvenile delinquents.” To cheer us up, I got out my comic books, but they had congealed into a lump of red, white, and blue pulp.

With the subways running slow, it took hours to get home. When we emerged from the High Street Station, it was close to midnight.

Before we split up to go to our homes, we just stood there on a street corner, embarrassed, trying to figure out how to end the day gracefully. I was the one who said, “Okay, I admit it. I’m not as tough as you guys. I gave up first.”

Max shook his head. “Naw. I wanted to quit, but I wasn’t tough enough to do it.” He looked to Horse.

Horse made a fist. “You saying I’m the one who’s tough?” he demanded. “I hate roughing it!!”

“Me too,” I said quickly.

“Same for me,” Max said.

Horse said, “Only thing is, we just have to promise not to tell Mr. Brenkman.”

Grinning with relief, we simultaneously clasped hands. “No matter what,” Max reminded us.

To which I added, “Scout’s Honor.”