

A Field Guide To Losing Your Friends



Movie Script

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On July 11, 2010, a series of explosions erupted across Kampala, Uganda—terrorist attacks orchestrated by a Somali militant group looking to raise a little hell: one bomb gutted an Ethiopian restaurant while another tore across a rugby field where the men’s FIFA World Cup championship match was being shown. I guess I’m here to tell you the story of how these bombs brought me to nearly all the U.S. national parks.

You see, seventy-six innocent people were murdered that evening. One of them was Nate Henn, the muzungu, the white man, now, with shrapnel in his chest. He was my best friend.

Four days later I moved to Estes Park, Colorado to start working at a wedding chateau just outside Rocky Mountain National Park. I arrived as an infected wound, helpless to any form of healing, with my days so filled with rage I couldn’t see straight, my nights so filled with loss I couldn’t sleep right. Thoughts became cancerous. I was in Estes . . . but I wasn’t.

Evenings planned with friends to go bowling or see a movie were eclipsed by solitude at the river or unaccompanied drives into the woods. It was that or whiskey, cigarettes, and silence. I would drink till I puked. Then I’d drink some more.

I just couldn’t shake this strange new paradigm of darkness forced upon me and illuminating the age-old truth that life is only possible with loss, and loss only meaningful through love. But this loss was hardly warranted—with my heart not breaking, but bearing and bearing and bearing and bearing and bearing and bearing. I didn’t want to believe it. I just wanted my friend back.

But the more I withdrew, the more I explored. I began reading extensive books on the wonders of Rocky Mountain National Park, began going for hikes every free chance I had. It was the mountains that drew me in and offered the fundamental truths I needed. Because the more I learned about nature, the more I was learning about myself—it was exploring Rocky Mountain National Park that breathed this life back into me.

To prove this I wanted to hike Longs Peak, the highest point in the park—14,259 feet—the keeper of the rocky crown. I’d been told the hike was going to be dangerous, that people died on that mountain every year. In fact, a man had just fallen to his death weeks earlier. But I went anyway. Because if I could get over that mountain maybe—just maybe—I could get over my loss. Because I wanted to believe solace was a wild thing best fostered in a forest; that many tormented writers, all coming before me, had found refuge just the same.

My trek, therefore, become internal struggle made tangible, a high-altitude hike exchanging mental

torment for the palpability of physical pain. I wanted to sweat my sufferings. I wanted to seep all haunting memory from my mind.

So I went where people die—hoping to feel alive—only to face my own trials: I took a wrong turn, nearly fell off a cliff, and confronted a mountain lion. This is all to say, I didn't make it to the summit. I went home defeated, shaken by my own scares, and was now hoping there'd be another time for Longs, maybe when my heart, like the mountain, was more willing to forgive.

Out of all this came a different goal, however: to visit every U.S. national park. Because something was still missing and I needed to go further afield to find it, to move from the micro to the macro. To test this new resolve I made a five-hour drive to Great Sand Dunes National Park—it was equally as stunning as Rocky Mountain National Park yet unique in its own geological splendor. I needed to see more.

So that fall I moved to California and planned a new adventure for every weekend, filling my car with anyone curious enough to accompany me: to the Redwoods, Sequoia, Lassen Volcanic, Death Valley, Yosemite. The rougher the better. The grittier the better. Because I was chasing new experiences and letting the physical manifestation of pain and hurt and anger and dissidence transubstantiate into that tangible act of travel. This was me skinny dipping on the Channel Islands or reaching the base of the Grand Canyon at midnight using only the vibrant light of the circling supermoon or having sex in the back of my car at a Kings Canyon campground (sorry, Mom).

On business trips I'd find any excuse to detour: Saguaro, Zion, Arches, Capitol Reef, Crater Lake, Shenandoah, Mammoth Cave. I started learning that life moves in seasons and that patterns are replete—in the soil, in the stars, in ourselves. That it's the unknown complexities that make this life so simple. That the middle of nowhere is always the beginning of somewhere. That humans, despite what I'd been shown, are inherently good. I learned to say yes to every odd opportunity that came my way. To keep goals like promises. How to be alone. But most importantly, I learned how to give people a chance—how to invite others on this journey with me.

The parks kept coming . . . but so did the deaths. There was Carlsbad Caverns, but there was also John mixing a lethal dose of chemicals together while locked inside his Jeep Liberty; there was Haleakala, but also Shane drowning in a bridge jumping accident; Big Bend, and Janice contacting hantavirus; Dry Tortugas, and Terry putting a gun to his head and pulling the trigger.

All the while, I kept perpetual motion, still haunted, still searching, and silently hiking across this nation as well as others—through the backcountry of my own curiosity and consciousness—writing and rewriting, in my head, the rough draft to all of my damage, a field guide to losing my friends.

Four years later, on July 25, 2014, and after visiting nearly all fifty-nine of the U.S. national parks, I returned to Longs Peak. It was time to put a capstone on a half-decade of hurt. To give a four-year curse back to the heavens. To say: I will forever miss the way that you smiled, I will always love you, and goodbye.

And guess what? I did it. I made it to the top.



Born and raised in Montana, Tyler Dunning developed a feral curiosity at a young age. This disposition has led him around the world, to nearly all of the U.S. national parks, and to the backcountry of his own creativity and consciousness. He's dabbled in such occupations as professional wrestling, archaeology, social justice advocacy, and academia. At his core he is a writer. Find his work at tylerdunning.com.



Chad Clendinen has been a non-profit/social-good filmmaker for over ten years. He has a wide range of experience in design, animation, and production, all giving him the holistic understanding to create successful campaigns.

After traveling abroad at age eighteen and realizing how storytelling influences cultures, he received an AS in digital media/television production and became the director of media for a non-profit. For four years he then did web, design, and video production in seventeen different countries.

This brought Chad to the San Diego area, where he was the lead animator for Invisible Children, later becoming their cinematic director. He worked in their art department for five years, creating media for campaigns, films, and events. Chad is now focused on how media can influence people to pursue change for the better.