

Ron Carlson

## The Splinter

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We turned at the Carmel Junction by the big parking lot [...], and we drove west about halfway to Zion<sup>1</sup> and then Damon turned off the two-lane onto a dusty track that crossed through a two-strand<sup>2</sup> barbed-wire fence and came to a T, one way east, one way west. I can't say which way we went. Damon said not to tell. [...] Sometimes he finds such places from his Cessna<sup>3</sup> and then he returns to them with one of his girlfriends. It's like being rich, he says, which he doesn't understand is a mute<sup>4</sup> comparison, because he is rich. I manage one of the four software outlets he has along the Wasatch Front<sup>5</sup> and we've become friends because I have adequate camping gear and I can fish. I've been wondering why he's invited me on this adventure into the sand dunes and the lost canyon, as he described it; I've been wondering if it is a gesture of pity.

Damon was driving his big black jeep and I was following in my old Corona wagon, the car that would not die. My son Rick sat up when we dropped off the asphalt<sup>6</sup> as he knew the adventure had begun. He had been sulking most of the way from Salt Lake because I wouldn't let him ride with Damon in the open-air vehicle. Veronica, whom we met early this morning, was riding in the passenger seat of the jeep, hunched up, with her hair tied in a bandana and secured under a baseball cap. [...]

The road ahead became a narrow rock shelf along the cliff side and we could see the jeep rocking along the one-lane track. [...] Veronica was standing out of the car on the white stone road, cinching<sup>7</sup> her hair in a ponytail. She walked back to us and said, "This road is just crazy enough. I'm going to walk down. You want to walk down, Rick? Lord Damon has given his permission." [...]

Rick looked at me and I nodded and he got out of the car. Damon had already honked and he was rolling down the road calling out from time to time as if skiing. In the rearview mirror, I saw Veronica and Rick go to the cliff edge and look over and then begin to follow along. Rick was limping now, unaware that I was watching him. [...]

We'd gotten through the fifth grade okay, and god bless the school year. God bless geography [...], and god bless the presidents, all of them, and the way these things passed the weeks after March 14, the day Amelia died. We got through the summer with a week of camp, even with the crying phone calls every night, and then three weeks at my folks' in Sioux Falls<sup>8</sup>, and now four days in this lost place with Damon, who promised Rick he could be Fire Master the whole trip and who gave him a special green box of wooden matches. We were going to see some magical canyons and recast the size of things<sup>9</sup>. I was glad to be out of town.

Now Veronica and Rick walked round the canyon wall, down the road toward me, and I felt the warmth in my chest to see him waving his arms in a gesture as he told some story. He was limping but he was talking and happy in the afternoon.

"All aboard," I told them, [...].

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<sup>1</sup> Zion National Park i Utah

<sup>2</sup> dobbeltrådet

<sup>3</sup> lille flyvemaskine

<sup>4</sup> (her) meningsløs

<sup>5</sup> *Wasatch Front*: byområde i Utah, bl.a. Salt Lake City

<sup>6</sup> *dropped off the asphalt*: (her) forlod asfaltvejen

<sup>7</sup> (her) samlede

<sup>8</sup> *Sioux Falls*: by i staten South Dakota

<sup>9</sup> *recast the size of things*: (her) få et nyt perspektiv på tingene

35 We dropped into a small valley and it narrowed to a grove of big cottonwoods and at the edge of this thicket we found Damon's jeep. He'd put up his big yellow-and-red tent and was walking around it with a wooden mallet.

"Pioneers!" he said. "This is the place." He might be right. We were camping at the edge of the magnificent trees on a sandy shelf overlooking some tributary<sup>10</sup> of the Virgin River as it cut through the big sandstone boulders and the leafy valley. [...]

40 Damon helped me and Rick with our tent, and then Damon said to Rick, "I'll show you a secret. Go over to that tree and walk back here twelve big paces." Rick stepped off and Damon stabbed a branch in the sand. "Now twelve big paces from this tree toward me." Rick marched and Rick stabbed another branch. Damon dropped to his knees between the branches and started to dig with his hands, scooping the sand back in a mound. Right away, he called, "Aha." He pointed to a round rock. "Help me find this, Rick."

45 The two dug in a circle, uncovering a ring of blackened rocks. "This is the fire ring. I used it two years ago, the first time I ever came here. Then, I was Fire Master. Now, Rick, it's all yours."

"Cool," Veronica said. "I'll get some wood where? Down there?"

"Perfect," Damon said. Then he said, "Rick, what's wrong with your foot?"

"Nothing."

50 "Really."

"He's got a sliver<sup>11</sup>."

"You do?" Veronica said. "I wondered. Let's see."

55 I wondered what was going to happen. We had a horrid fight last night when I tried to look at it. He showed me the red place on his arch where it was embedded but he wouldn't let me, absolutely wouldn't let me, get a good look.

"It's okay," Rick said. "I think it came out already."

"You want me to look?" Veronica said. "We've already walked the killer cliff road together."

60 "No. it's okay." Rick said. I stood and went back to the car. There was nothing in the car and no reason, but his voice saying, no it's okay, was something I'd heard before.

"Well, let's gather wood so the Fire Master can work his ways. You got those matches?"

65 "I do," Rick said. He sounded almost happy. How I wanted this trip to go well. How I wanted each hour to go well. [...]

The wood we gathered was oddly like driftwood thrown up the beach, smooth and barkless desiccated<sup>12</sup> branches, half-buried in the sand. This was a special place. I envied Damon all his places.

65 "You've built a fire before, oh, Fire Master?"

"Yes." Rick stood before the tangled stack of firewood.

"You want a little help?" Damon said.

"Sure."

70 "Okay, then, let's start small and feed the baby<sup>13</sup> first." They both were on their knees breaking sticks.

Veronica had taken her shoes off and was sitting on a round rock over by the jeep. Her toes were working in the sand. I walked over.

"How are you guys doing?" she asked. "Damon told me about your wife. I'm sorry."

"Thank you. We're afloat<sup>14</sup>," I said. "Did he say anything walking in?"

"He's very happy about going into the sixth grade. He said that you can cook."

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<sup>10</sup> biflod

<sup>11</sup> tynd splint

<sup>12</sup> udtørrede

<sup>13</sup> *feed the baby*: (her) tænde op

<sup>14</sup> *We're afloat*: Vi klarer os

75 "It was a great pleasure to see the two of you talking on that crazy road."  
 "His foot's a worry," she said.  
 As if on cue<sup>15</sup>, Damon stood and brushed his hands off and looked at their modest teepee of twigs and branches. "Before we launch," he said. "Let's look at your foot, oh, Fire Master."  
 "It's okay," Rick said.

80 "I know. But it is a rule. No fire without everyone's feet being inspected. Look at Veronica." He pointed.  
 "Any trouble spots<sup>16</sup>, Vee?"  
 "Just you," she said back.  
 "Take off your shoes," Damon said to Rick. He grabbed a camp chair so the boy could sit, which he did. His eyes were going around the place and settled on me for a moment. Damon had taken his heel and  
 85 pulled the sock off and thumbed the arch and Rick cried out as Damon said, "Oh shit."  
 "What?" I said.  
 "When did you get the splinter?" Damon asked.  
 "Night before last night," Rick said. "I climbed on the equipment box in the backyard and..."  
 "Check," Damon said to me.

90 When I'd seen last night there was a red area in the arch, but I could not see the splinter. Now it was a purple knot not quite as big as a dime and the inflamed area spread up in a line through Rick's ankle. [...] Damon put two fingers on the red skin and said, "It's warm. This could be staph<sup>17</sup>." Before I could stop him, he went ahead. "It's what killed Calvin Coolidge<sup>18</sup>'s son. One day he got a tennis blister and the next night dead by blood poison."  
 95 I could see Rick shrink. [...]  
 There are plenty of times I haven't known what to do. It feels bad being a man and then suddenly wanting your father or your wife, people who are not in the world.  
 "Dad," Rick said. I could see Damon's grip on the boy's foot was firm.  
 "Let's do this, Damon." I put my hand on his wrist and he let go and Rick thrust his foot into the sand.  
 100 "Let's let the Fire Master do his duty and use the fire to heat up some water and pack that splinter with hot rags."  
 "If we don't get that out, you guys are going to have to drive up that road in the dark and head for Kanab<sup>19</sup>."  
 "I know," I said. I was sorry to jeopardize our trip but there it was.  
 105 "We didn't need the history lesson, Damon," Veronica said. She said it softly but it was scolding<sup>20</sup>. [...] My son Rick knelt and struck a match and touched it to the hairy ball of tinder they'd prepared and in a moment a smokeless yellow fire cut the twilight. [...]  
 I held washrags as hot as Rick could stand them on the arch of his foot for the hour before dinner. When I asked him if they were too hot, he said no. They were too hot but he'd heard Damon's story. [...]  
 110 Damon lifted my shirt sleeve and walked me out of the firelight and said, "If it's worse at dawn, we'll drive out and get the camping stuff later." [...]  
 In the tent, I refreshed the compress, and Rick got in his sleeping bag. He whispered to me. "Dad," he said, "I'm sorry. I got scared. I'm scared."  
 "Does it hurt?"

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<sup>15</sup> *As if on cue*: Som efter aftale

<sup>16</sup> *trouble spots*: (her) ømme punkter

<sup>17</sup> (her) en bakterieinfektion

<sup>18</sup> *Calvin Coolidge*: amerikansk præsident 1823-1829

<sup>19</sup> by i Utah

<sup>20</sup> skarpt

115 “You can look,” he said. It was like a gift. I crawled out of the tent and retrieved the lantern.  
The pustule<sup>21</sup> was darker and risen a little but in the angry skin I could see the black sliver for the first time.

“It hurts,” he said. “Can you get it?”

“Are you sure?”

120 “Yeah,” he said, he was nodding rapidly. “How old was the little boy?”

When I pressed on the side of the inflammation, Rick shuddered. I used my thumb and placed it against the side of the sore behind the black sliver. I wasn’t going to have to use my knife. “Hold on, Ricky,” I said, and I pressed both thumbs into that spot and the sliver’s tip appeared and then rode smooth out in a second and I saw Ricky’s eyes boil up and the tears pop and I felt my own tears and saw them on the cuff of my shirt. I must have sobbed.

125 “Don’t worry, Dad.” He said. “It’s okay.”

Now there was the wonder of blood on his foot and I pressed until it was just red blood there, and then I went out and brought back a splash of vodka on a rag and we had a laugh about that even as it burned him and I got my kit from the dear old car, our first car, and put the ointment<sup>22</sup> and the crossed bandages on the clean bottom of my son’s foot.

130 “The tennis-blister boy,” Rick said.

“He was twenty-two,” I told him, hoping I had it right. “But it was eighty years ago before there was medicine.”

135 “Oh, that’s a sad story,” Rick said. I watched as worry fled his face along with every expression he’d been working on for days. His face went blank and sleep ascended.

We were in a secret place in Utah in October and we would see more mysteries tomorrow.

(2018)

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<sup>21</sup> byld

<sup>22</sup> salve