

The Eagle & the Sliver

“Damn sliver!” I say while grinding my teeth to bear the pain. Holding the sharp scalpel from our first-aid kit in one hand, I poke deeper and deeper into the small bloody hole in my other hand. “This must have been the pain the eagle was talking about,” I tell myself.

Just hours before, we were riding on horseback through the Yellowstone Park. The soles of our horses’ feet made a hollow sound as the narrow dirt trail wound its way through a curve. Right in the apex of the turn, a large silhouette of a golden eagle startled our horses by rising up from a meadow. Just 45 feet away from the trail, the eagle’s giant wings had easily lifted him into the sky. Sharp yellow eyes followed our moves as our 9-horse trail moved along the side of the meadow. The eagle didn’t fly too far away. After circling directly above our heads, he settled onto a tree branch nearby.

Silently, I thanked the eagle for his presence and his protection. It is no coincidence to me that on the first day of my internship as a wilderness guide, an eagle had soared above our corral. Now on the second-last day of my internship, I see an eagle again. And what an internship this has been. Fulfilling my life-long dream, I worked as a wrangler and wilderness guide in the Yellowstone Park.

I cleared my mind and my intuition told me that the eagle had indeed come to wish me goodbye from my Yellowstone travels this summer. But he also cautioned me that I have one more choice to make. He cautioned me that a future injury was inevitable, but I could chose if the injury happened to myself, and thus spare injury to my horse, or

vice versa. This proposal came out of the blue for me, but I never dared to question the eagle's foresight or proposition. My intuition was quick: of course I'd rather injure myself and spare any pain to my horse.

As I lead our group further down the trail, my mental conversation with the eagle stopped. I tried to open my saddlebags to take a picture of the eagle, but sensed he didn't want me to. Yet, my fingers fumbled helplessly on the zipper, which had dead-halted itself in the black vinyl. Despite my better knowledge, I finally opened the torn zipper and jerked out my camera. I pointed, aimed, and "Shoooooot!" – the trail had turned away from the meadow and hid the eagle from view again. I guess some day I will learn to trust my instincts. If the eagle didn't want me to take his picture, there was no point in trying.

Back in camp, a guest wanted to explore the nearby woods, and I volunteered to go with him. After all, solo hiking in Yellowstone's grizzly territory is very dangerous. On our hike, I carefully lifted myself over a burnt log. I placed my right foot over the log, but as I touched down on the other side, I slipped on a patch of wet grass and lost my balance. Trying to catch my fall, I threw my hands forward to steady myself. A stinging pain spread throughout my right hand. I examined my hand and saw black dirt inside a blood-oozing wound. By the time we were back in camp, the bleeding had stopped entirely.

So here I sit with Bob, our oldest cowboy, who takes a look at my hand.

"You got it?" he asks with his rusty western drawl. His blue eyes pierce mine and I can count every wrinkle on his weather-toughened face. I hadn't known Bob for long, and I still had trouble judging whether his comments were serious or not.

He draws a long silver knife out of its faded tan-leathered sheath and holds it into the campfire. The charcoal logs give off a cracking vibrant heat, and in no time the tip of the knife is gleaming red.

“Here, let me help you with that,” he says. Wryly, his look wanders from my hand and then to his knife. His serious face scares me for a brief second. Of course we are a deep in the Yellowstone backcountry and a day’s ride away from any doctor, but I am not insane enough yet to let this old fellow poke around in my hand with a burning knife.

“No thanks,” I say, still wondering whether he was joking or not. The striped shirt on his broad chest rises and falls as he shrugs his shoulders while putting the knife away again. I watch my horse lift his gray head as he sees an unusual movement in the woods. Despite the pain in my hand, I feel thankful that my horse will be safe at least.

Later that night, the sliver is still in my hand, and Bob and I are sitting around the campfire again. A moonless night covers our camp in solitary darkness, broken only by the yellow and red campfire glow. Bob takes our cups and pours us some Tang and Whiskey. “Tang and Sweetener,” he announces his favorite drink in camp. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Bob holding his cup close to his mouth to take another sip. His eyes stare at the edge of the cup and directly into the campfire. Without looking at me, he blinks his right eye and says “That knife is still hot you know.”