

Cowboy Coffee

The first one out of his or her tent is responsible for starting the process. They must fire up the cook stove, fill the ancient gallon plus blue enameled pot with water, and scoop in cups and cups of grounds. I'm usually a coffee snob, but on the river, any brand of coffee tastes great. Those of us who get up later, maybe waiting for the sun to just nudge the edges of the red rimmed canyon wall, will circle around the kitchen. Not starting a fire, chatting about the sounds of the night, what rapids are coming up during the day, any clients or students who are having a rough time. We are all watching the water for any sign that it might have come up or gone down in the desert heat, watching the sky for signs of afternoon rain, and smelling the coffee fumes. The cups in our hands make it clear that we're there for coffee; we're in line. There's always a line. The best part of the process is the spinning. It's not cowboy coffee without a true carnival like spin. Our pot had a strong wire coat hanger looped into the top and twisted firmly through the holes on the coffee pot. When I was the lucky "spinner" I would walk the pot just out of the kitchen, swing it at the end of my arm a couple of times to warm up, and then use the momentum to spin it all the way around, at least three times. Hot coffee and pot swinging in an arc at the end of the arm sideways, upside down, sideways, then right side up again. Now, grounds settled to the bottom, we all fill out cups and the only one who really has to cowboy it eat the grounds out of the bottom of his cup is the person who takes the last bit of coffee.

Jumpin' Cholla

The Sonoran desert of Mexico is full of TeddyBear Cholla, a cactus with long stalks that branch out of a central skinny stalk, most growing straight toward the sky. The stalks are, smaller around than an average person's wrist. At the end of each branch, somewhere around waist height on me, are round green balls of cactus, covered with sharp spines. On the advice of my best friend, who had backpacked there the year before, I had brought needle nosed pliers, solely for the purpose of pulling the barbed spines out of our flesh. The cholla were also called jumping cholla and sort of like a jumping spider in a horror movie, the cute little green balls of cactus seemed, of their own volition, to spring into the soft flesh of our 17-year-old thighs. You didn't really even have to touch the cholla to come away speared, all you had to do was whisper or walk within a 3 or 4 inches. In order to get them out, you had to either brave getting spines in your hands too, or have a buddy with pliers. I was the only one in our group who had pliers, therefore, I was everyone's buddy. The other high school seniors would take turns hiking near me because, since there was no trail, the chances of being cactus-stuck were pretty high as we waddled through the desert with our weighty backpacks. One night, one of the boys in our group made the mistake of backing into one while using the bushes. He made a huge, howling ruckus. Our leader the only semi-adult among us took the pliers and pulled multiple cholla balls out of his bum. At the time I thought it served him right, since he'd been holding his camping expertise over our heads for two weeks so far, egotistical bugger. The rest of us, novices though we might have been, were even more careful about where we aimed our rears and none of us ever topped his record. We have cholla here further down the Arkansas canyon, starting at about Wellsville. Every spring when I see them flower bright pink, I remember how painful those

barbed spines are. Nothin like having a long, thin fishhook embedded in your body to make you realize that all of nature is not necessarily your friend.

Little Yellow Ten Speed Bike

I often rode my bike alone. There was a freedom to riding my little yellow road bike to Cherry Creek to shop, or to a movie, or to meet a friend for lunch at Round the Corner burger restaurant. I don't remember the beginning of this day, but I do remember waking up next to a speed bump in the parking lot of a Sears that no longer exists. There were cars on four sides of me. I don't remember blood, I don't remember if anyone got out of their car to see whether I was OK, and I have no idea how long I was knocked out and lying there on the pavement. I do remember my parents coming to get me from the Wizard's Chest still the best toy store in Denver. They loaded my small, yellow bike into the sliding side door of the van, loaded me into the front seat, and I don't remember anything else about that day. Maybe this is why I have memory problems now? That was only concussion number three.