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## Backpacking with Ian, Part 1

As I drove to pick up Ian in my little black Mini Cooper, the song on the radio brought me back five years to when I first met him. I was doing bench presses and had just finished a set. While adding a couple more plates, I noticed Ian standing at the front counter talking to George, the fitness studio's owner, about membership. I didn't normally notice new people; they were constantly coming and going. New guys flowed through the front doors and a couple weeks later, when muscles were sore or phenomenal progress wasn't to be seen, they disappeared, never to be seen again. Ian was different; you couldn't help but notice him. Even five years ago he had a build that was both intimidating and inviting. Tall, six foot two or so. Mocha brown skin, he looked to be mixed race. Short cropped, dark brown hair and a nicely trimmed goatee without the mustache. Even from across the gym, I could see his bright blue eyes against his otherwise dark features. As he smiled and chatted with George, the dimples on his cheeks became evident. I remember thinking he looked kind of like a cross of Mario Lopez and The Rock.

"Got to get back to my workout," I thought to myself. I dropped back down on the bench and pressed out another set of eight. As I lay on the bench for a second afterward, recovering slightly from my work, I could hear George leading Ian around the club, bragging about his equipment, contests he'd won, the view out the large front windows, everything. George had a habit of doing that. Sure, he was well built, but his attitude sucked. And I could tell, just by the way he talked to Ian, he was jealous. And he had a right to be. Ian must have been 210 pounds, solid muscle. I got up and added some more weight and found myself searching the floor of the gym to find the tour group. Not seeing them, I lay back down on the bench and positioned my hands, ready for another set.

Then, from my side, I heard the most beautiful, deep voice, "That's a lot of weight without a spot. Want a hand?" Ian was offering his help.

I looked back and stammered out a "S-Sure." With him standing over my head, I forced out ten reps. Even with the added weight, I wasn't going to embarrass myself by doing less with Ian standing over me. He steadied the weights on the last couple reps. As I got up from the bench, Ian met me around the side and asked if he could work in a couple sets.

"Sure!" I exclaimed, hoping I didn't sound too eager. We pulled the last quarter plates I had just put on (and struggled with) and replaced them with 45s. This was his "warm-up" set. Ian was wearing a loose fitting t-shirt and soccer shorts. But even with his relatively baggy attire, his bulk was unmistakable. As he lay back on the bench, his shorts pulled up around his thighs and revealed the most massive thighs I had ever seen in person. They had to be 28 or 29 inches and solid muscle. I just remember standing there above his head, behind the bar, staring at his quads as he began his warm-up set. Good thing he didn't need any assistance, as my attention was elsewhere.

After pushing out a quick twelve reps, Ian hopped up and proclaimed, "Your turn."

I began pulling one of the 45s off the bar when Ian stopped me, "Leave that on there. You can handle that!" I looked up from the plate and I couldn't resist a little chuckle as I gazed into his face; white teeth exposed in a broad, dimple-cheeked smile.

"If you say so. You're going to be there to save my neck if I can't though, right?"

Ian laughed and held out his hand, "I'm Ian. I'm new here."

"Welcome, I'm Seth." I reached out to take his hand and caught my shirt on the end of the bar. As I stumbled into him, we caught hold of each other at the wrist instead of the hand, I reached up instinctively with my left hand and braced myself by grabbing hold of the back of his extended arm. His 19-inch arms were like solid rock. Recovering from my stumble, I attempted to recover my composure and lay back on the bench red-faced. Ian took his position behind the bar and encouraged me to give it my all. I positioned my hands, focused on the bar and pressed with all my might to dislodge the bar from its resting place. My chest strained and ballooned under the stress as I slowly but steadily lowered the bar to my nipples. In a steady motion, I pushed the bar back toward the ceiling, trying not to be distracted by the beautiful face looking down into my eyes. I repeated this three more times before I felt my arms and chest would give out. Noting my strain, Ian reassured me by placing his hands under the bar, taking a couple pounds on himself as he steadied the bar.

I was ready to reposition the bar back on the rack, but Ian pushed back, "You're not done yet! You can do another rep. Don't stop!" he commanded.

With his help, I managed two more reps. My chest puffed out and my arms burning. I hung my arms out to the sides, stretching my chest and closed my eyes, glorying in the pain. I was brought back to the moment by the sound of another plate being added to the bar. I stood and added another 45 to the other side as Ian took his place on the bench. I was finished; Ian had pushed me to the limit as he was just getting started.

Although I was done with my workout, I stayed and spotted for Ian as he completed his bench press sets. We talked a little about our routines and schedules as I accompanied Ian from exercise to exercise.

"I could really use a good workout partner," he proclaimed. "Do you already have someone you normally work out with?"

"No, my partner moved out of the area six months ago and I haven't picked up a new one yet. If you don't mind mornings, I know I'd be challenged with you as a partner," I suggested.

"That would be great! I like to get in around 5:30 myself. How's that sound?"

"Great! That'll give me time to shower and get ready for work by eight." As we walked to the locker room, we agreed on a schedule of 5:30 Monday through Friday and 7:00 on Saturdays.

I suddenly felt very self-conscious as I started pulling my stuff out of my locker and Ian's ended up being right next to mine. I turned to the side and began stripping off my sweaty clothes with Ian standing right next to me doing the same. Ian just continued the conversation about his usual routine, rambling pleasantly about upper bodywork on Mondays, legs on Tuesdays, and on and on. I had trouble staying with the conversation, distracted as I was by his naked form standing next to me. It was all I could do to keep my eyes above the waistline. While I struggled to keep a towel in front of me without appearing prudish, Ian just stood there completely exposed in front of me.

I can't remember the conversation exactly, I just remember a lot of "Yeahs" and "Uh-huhs" coming out of my mouth; my eyes locked on his piercing blue eyes. Ian grabbed his towel and we headed to the showers. The shower room was one big open area with eight or ten showerheads lining the walls. I took one toward the corner

where I knew it had good water pressure. Ian tried one of the others and was disappointed by the dribble of water that came forth, "What? Did you take the only good shower head in here?"

"Not exactly. There are only a couple that have really good flow. This one and," pointing to the other shower head in the corner where I was standing, "this one."

Ian smiled, walked over to my corner of the shower room, and said, "Then move over Little Man." That was the first time he called me that and it stuck. From then on I was 'Little Man.' Granted, I am shorter than Ian, but I wasn't little. My 185 pounds looked pretty damn good on my five foot eight frame. I was also a few years older than Ian, I guessed about five, but I always had a younger view of myself than reality. I learned later that I was seven years and a day older than him.

By now I had measured myself up against Ian. Even though I was shy, I didn't really have reason to be ashamed. At the time, I had sixteen-inch arms, a 46-inch chest and 29-inch waist. My 24-inch thighs couldn't measure up to Ian's 29 inchers, but on me they looked proportioned. And, where some would say it really matters, I had Ian beat. My seven-inch flaccid cock looked even bigger on my relatively small body. Ian, on the other hand, had what must have been close to a 48-inch chest and 30 inch waist. When he turned his back to me and raised his arms to wash his hair, my jaw dropped as his lats flared, looking like a cobras hood. His body was completely brown, from head to toe, and he had a distinctive tattoo of a lizard or dragon that started just above his waist on the front and wrapped around his beautiful bubble butt and ended on the inside of his thigh. It looked like the claws of the lizard were digging into his flesh, holding on for dear life.

"You like it?" Ian asked as he turned 'round and caught me staring at his tat. "My girlfriend convinced me I needed a tattoo but I didn't want something that was always visible." Damn! He's got a girlfriend.

Struggling to recover from my disappointment --and my embarrassment from being caught staring-- I said, "Yeah, quite a lizard!"

"You too!" he chuckled, nodding at my schlong.

I smiled sheepishly and turned to the side. "Yeah, it's been known to get me into trouble from time to time," I replied as I buried my head under the steady stream of water.

Ian sported a pretty decent sized cock as well, six thick inches or so with an ample foreskin. But on his six-foot frame, it just didn't make the same impact as mine. He did have a beautiful, low-hanging nut sac that just invited you to get on your knees and explore with your nose and mouth. We finished showering and Ian asked about local eating possibilities. I told him there was an outdoor cafe around the corner that I went to nearly every Saturday if he was interested.

As we headed out the front doors of the club, dread came over me. I remembered that Brandy, my old boyfriend, and I had regularly gone to this cafe and I was concerned the wait-staff would assume this was my new beau. "Um, Ian, I need to tell you something."

"Yeah? Why so serious all of a sudden?"

"Well, I'm gay. Don't know how to say it except just to say it. I'm gay." I declared.

"So? I knew that," Ian said matter-of-factly and continued walking.

"What do you mean you knew that?" I protested, catching up to him.

"I could tell. My cousin is gay and, don't get me wrong, you 'butch' gay guys are all the same. You're too cautious. A straight guy looks at another guy and that's it, it's over. Does the comparison thing and moves on, but you guys, you try to look without looking. I don't know how to explain it, it just is. It doesn't bother me, I'm just saying, I could tell. So why did you feel the need to tell me this now?"

"First, I'm just shocked! I'm shocked you just shrug this off so easy -- I mean, it's great, I'm just surprised. And second, I used to go to this place with my old boyfriend and there's a chance the waitress is going to assume you're a new 'friend'. If you catch my meaning."

"Well, I hope we can be friends and sounds like we could have some fun!" he proclaimed.

"What do you mean, 'fun'?"

"Ready to mess with their heads?"

Before I had a chance to respond, we had arrived at the outdoor eating area in front of the restaurant. As we sat down at an open table, I waved at Alice, my usual waitress. She was a lot of fun and gave great service. I tended to be a little picky about what I ate and Alice was always very glad to make adjustments to the menu.

Ian took the seat next to me facing out to the pedestrian zone filled with Saturday shoppers. Alice came bounding up to our table with a shitty ass grin and said, "What can I get you big boys?"

Ian smiled broadly, dimples exposed and exclaimed, "I don't know what my 'Little Man' is going to have but this 'Big Boy' is interested in a big salad with grilled chicken. Do you have anything like that?"

Alice giggled and said, "We sure do. Do you want some kind of dressing on the side?" She assumed correctly that my bodybuilder friend wouldn't want his salad smothered in fat.

"Yeah, do you have some olive oil and balsamic vinegar? And I'll have a sparkling water, if you've got it."

"Sure thing. And you, Little Man? Your usual?" this made Ian smile even more broadly. He seemed to be enjoying my embarrassment.

"Yeah, thanks, Alice. Your tip is in jeopardy," I warned with a smile.

She giggled again and turned and skipped back into the restaurant.

Ian sat back in his chair and turned his face to the sun. He closed his eyes and soaked up the warmth of this beautiful SoCal Spring day. As he slouched back in his chair he spread his legs and brushed his thigh up against mine. We were both wearing short and my first reaction at feeling his bare skin against mine was to pull away, but Ian unexpectedly grabbed my knee and pulled my leg back against his own. Just as I reached down to

remove his hand from my leg, Alice returned with our drinks, two bottles of carbonated water. She smiled again when she noticed us 'holding hands' under the glass table. Without even opening his eyes, Ian grinned as he realized his actions had had the desired effect. Before Ian allowed me to remove his hand from my knee, he gave me a little squeeze on the inside of my thigh.

"So did she enjoy that?" Ian asked.

"You are devious. If you're not careful, you are going to get labeled here."

"Labels don't bother me. I know who and what I am and don't give a rat's ass what others think. Besides, I'd rather be labeled gay than an arrogant prick. That's what most people assume when they see someone my size." Ian sat back up to the table, leaned in and continued, "Are you ashamed of being gay?"

"No, no!" I protested. "I just haven't met very many straight guys so comfortable with it as you."

"Like I said, I know who I am and I'm not threatened by what others might think."

"Man, I could use a dose of that kind of confidence."

"Stick around, it's contagious."

"What's that suppose to mean?" I asked just as our salads came to the table.

"Two large green salads with the works, three grilled chicken breasts on the side for each of you and bottles of olive oil and balsamic vinegar. Any thing else?" Alice set our meals on the table. Without knowing it, Ian had ordered my 'usual'.

"I think we'd both like another bottle of water?" I asked as I looked over at Ian.

Ian nodded his head in agreement as he surveyed the twin salads placed in front of us. "OK, that is funny!" he exclaimed. "I ordered your usual?"

"Looks that way, Big Boy. But don't change the subject. What did you mean by your confidence is contagious?"

"I wasn't always so confident," he confided. "In fact, in high school I was a pretty shy little runt. Well, more accurately, a pretty shy tall, skinny runt. Then my basketball coach suggested I start lifting to improve my game. I got hooked and just kept growing bigger. That was my sophomore year and by my senior year, I was pushing 190 pounds. But my coach was always there and his confidence in me rubbed off and I have just made it my purpose in life to pass that confidence on to others."

"So am I some kind of project?" I asked with not just a little offense in my voice.

"No, not at all. It's not like that at all. Sorry that it came across like that. It's just that, like being around happy people makes me happy, I think being around confident people can make you confident as well. And I guess I'm just saying I hope we hang around each other; I like you."

"You are different, aren't you? I don't think I've ever started a friendship like this before." Looking down at my watch, I added, "It's been three hours or so and I feel like I've known you for months."

We finished our lunch and agreed to meet at the club at 5:30 Monday morning.

It's been five years now. We're bigger, stronger, and closer than ever. I think, in those five years, I could count on one hand the unscheduled days we'd missed from our six-day routine.

As I pulled up to Ian's house, I marveled that this was the first time we had taken more than a day away from the gym together. We had planned this trip for months. I am an outdoor freak; can't get enough of the beach, mountains, and desert. It doesn't matter, just get me outside on a bike, skis or just hiking and I'm happy. Ian on the other hand was happy in the city. Sure, he enjoyed nature, but he was at home in the city. So our 'little' hiking trip was going to be a new experience for him. Other than a weekend ski trip, he had never spent any significant time in the wild. I, on the other hand, was a park ranger at a nearby state park and earned my living outside.

Promptly at 4:30 AM I softly knocked on Ian's door, not wanting to wake Brenda, his live-in girlfriend. Almost before I finished knocking, Ian had the door open, backpack in hand and was headed out the door. He dropped his pack into the back and asked if I minded if he drove.

"No, don't mind at all, you know how much I love driving in the city," I added sarcastically. "Keys are in the ignition." I climbed into the passenger side and we adjusted our seats; mine a little more forward, his a lot further back.

"So, where're we headed?" he asked as he pulled away from the curb.

"North, just go north and when we stop for gas, I'll drive the rest of the way."

"Can you believe we'll have known each other five years next week?" Ian asked.

"I was just thinking about that on the way over here. This sounds funny, but the song that was playing in the gym as we did bench press that first day was playing on the radio as I drove over here."

"Dude! I was listening to the radio this morning while getting ready and that song was playing. That's what made me think about it, too."

"Man, look at you!" Ian said after a time of silence. "I can't believe how much you've grown in these five years. I mean, you weren't small to begin with, but as I think back to those first few months, I'm just so impressed with your progress."

"I have you to thank for most of that!"

"Yeah, maybe, but you really know how to push yourself and get improvement. Look at you," Ian looked down at my bare legs and scanned up my body. "You had thick quads even back then, but now, they must be what? 29 inches?"

"30."

"30 fucking inches of solid muscle, dude! That's the same as mine, and you're six inches shorter than me. And your waist is probably 29 then?"

"Yeah, 29, 29 and a half," I said, smirking with embarrassment from the attention.

"That means your thighs are fucking bigger than your waist. That is so cool. And your upper body has improved just as much. Those 16 inch guns looked great on you five years ago, but now, damn, 18?"

"Almost, just under 18," as I said that I raised my right arm and flexed, pulling back the sleeve of my shirt to get a better view. Looking at my own biceps, I realized for the first time the progress I had made in five years. "You grow so gradually over the years, you really don't notice do you?"

"I've grown some over the years as well," Ian interjected.

"Fishing for compliments, Big Boy?"

"No! Well, maybe a little. I was just thinking about my progress. Like you said, you just don't notice it in yourself all that much because you just live with it everyday. But even still, I haven't seen the gains you have in five years."

"That's because you were already huge. How much bigger do you expect you could get? I mean, if we did the same comparison from back then with you.... Your thighs were already, what? 29 inches back then? And now, probably 30/31? Your chest was massive, and now you have added some great mass. I guess that's where you have shown so much improvement. You are just so much thicker now. Your muscles have matured and filled in. After all, you were just 23 when we first met."

"22. I was 22, remember? I had my birthday two weeks later."

"Oh that's right. You were two weeks shy of 23. That makes a big difference," I teased and slugged him in the shoulder.

We drove and chatted for three hours before needing to stop for gas. We had made it to the foothills of the Sierras and had at least two more hours ahead of us. While Ian topped off the tank, I dropped the top on the car. Even though the sun had been up less than an hour, it was already warm. We traded places and I began the drive into the mountains of California.

After a short stop for breakfast at a roadside diner, we finally reached the trailhead parking lot about 10 AM. There was only one other car in the parking area; a good sign there wouldn't be many others on the trail. Of course, there wouldn't be this time of the year. It was late spring and we were heading out on a Tuesday. The hiking season usually didn't really pick up until late June because of the risk of snow this time of the year at these elevations. We pulled our packs out of the car and I buttoned up the top and hid the keys under a nearby rock.

"In case you end up here without me, the keys are right here," I announced.

"Why don't you just bring them along?"

"I don't mean to alarm you, but if one of us ends up over the side of a cliff, we don't want the keys going with. And if they were to fall out of a pocket or one of the packs along the way, we'd be stuck."

"Very wise, Little Man. So now what do we do?"

"We walk." We pulled on our 75-pound packs and hit the trail. After crossing the road and signing in at the trailhead, we began our journey through a dense, gently upward sloping forest. The trail was wide and well trodden. We walked side-by-side and chatted along the way. Suddenly we were at the edge of the forest and ahead of us was a boulder field leading steeply upward toward our lunchtime goal: a rocky saddle between two sharp peaks.