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Rainbow Family of Living Light

When most of the country was spending its Fourth of July shooting fireworks and eating potato salad, thousands of strangers from all across America were deep inside the Ozark Highlands living and praying for peace. An old Native American prophecy says, "When the earth is ravaged and the animals are dying, a new tribe of people shall come unto the earth from many colors, classes, creeds and who, by their actions and deeds, shall make the earth green again. They will be known as the warriors of the Rainbow." The idea to skip the traditional Fourth of July celebrations to go see these Rainbow people intrigued me and upset my mother. Due to the rumors running rampant about these foreign visitors in our native land, she was hesitant to allow her precious young daughter to embark on this particular endeavor, but I went anyway.

As we, five young adults, began our journey north towards Fallsville, Arkansas, we could not have fathomed what lay in store. Our chosen vehicle was a Jeep with no air conditioning, so we survived the sweltering heat only by craning our necks out the open windows. Once the road turned north at Clarksville, it was evident that civilization was being left behind. The directions called for a ninety-minute drive up a winding scenic two-lane road, with woods thick on either side. The police and the Forest Service have had a long-standing issue with the Rainbow gatherings, so it was not surprising to see dozens of their vehicles pass us on the road. It was a parade of authority, the passengers inside fuming at the fact that these hippies were not breaking

any real laws. Finally, after we rounded the last corner, as far as we could see there were empty parked cars on either side of the road. When our Jeep was parked, we all held our breath as we walked that long mile to an opening in the woods off the side of the road. The entrance into our grand adventure was only a few steps away and almost within our reach.

We had originally anticipated the walk down to the camp known as Montana Mud to be a couple of miles, but we were mistaken. The journey started out on foot, and the 110-degree weather made the walk slow and endless. Soon, however, a green Explorer passed, and the driver immediately stopped and asked if we'd like a ride for as far as he could take us. In the outside world, this situation would seem quite quirky, and we would have taken the couple in the Explorer as sneaky kidnappers. However, in the Rainbow Family, everyone has surprisingly honest intentions. The hospitality we experienced from the people we encountered made them feel like anything but strangers. So we crammed ourselves like a pack of cards into the back of these kind people's car.

Soon we transitioned into the shuttle of doom. The uncirculated air was stale and stank. Panic soon set in as my eyes quickly saw visages of which I had never seen the likes. I picked a seat between my friend Alex and a passed-out Native American woman who smelled strongly of marijuana and unwashed body parts. A beastly German woman stood right above me, sticking her long German armpit hair into my face, strangling my senses. I gagged at the mere thought of her hovering over me. She wore a bright-pink hula-hoop around her waist. Although it was grand, it showed the wear of many circus performances. With her thick accent, she announced that she and her fellow circus performers would be putting on a show later that night. As she talked, I realized that I was losing my nerve. Those initial couple of miles turned into a forty-five minute out-of-body experience that made me question my own sanity.

If panic was setting in because of the shuttle ride, my mind was only warming up for what my eyes beheld when I stepped off the bus into the mix of these unusual people. Oddly enough, I cannot exactly recall the first hour or two that I was there. My friends tell me I was huddled by a tree like a frightened woodland creature with her head tucked between her knees, gasping into consciousness. My sanity was going on strike, my mind refusing to believe what my eyes were seeing, which happened to be the strangest human beings that I'd ever seen in my life. I preferred the hippies dressed in muddy handkerchiefs and tribal beads to the ones that seemed to shed their clothing altogether. The ones following that exciting route were taking a sorry excuse for a bath, right in the middle of the Buffalo River. My mind could not wrap around the idea that people could be utterly comfortable in the nude in a crowd of thousands. When the panic had finally passed, only then could I come to terms with the new environment that I had at first so willingly thrust myself into.

It was obvious to everyone that despite our greatest efforts, we had failed to blend in with our choice of clothing. However, our fashion misfortunes emerged as a good thing because it seemed to draw people in to talk to us. We met the stoners from Jasper, the stoner ex-substitute teacher, the stoner grandparents, the stoners from Chicago, and the hot stoner boy that let us play with his didgeridoo that he had found floating in the river amongst the naked bodies.

We found out that Montana Mud was not the only camp there in the woods. Over a six-mile radius, there were dozens of camps inhabited by fifteen thousand Rainbow Family members. After dark, the crowd migrated towards the banks of the Buffalo to be entertained by a showcase of fire magicians. As one man was twirling fire-lit maces and another was blowing fire out of his mouth, my friend Jacob put into words how I felt when he said, "Happy birthday, America!"

The amount of love and friendship that we received while in the woods with these strangers for a mere five hours was astonishing. To an outsider, greeting someone with an “I love you” might seem odd, but at a Rainbow gathering it was custom and greatly appreciated. These hippies had been misjudged; the rotten few had tainted the reputation of the whole. Their kind demeanor and willingness to help complete strangers was a bittersweet piece of reality. In a world where people find it hard to love family and friends, these people opened up their resources and hearts to people they may see only once. As we lay in the middle of a deserted Highway 21 looking up at the stars, I felt small and insignificant but came to terms with that.