

The Instructor  
by T.R. Hendricks

Chapter 1

Everything capable of combustion has an ignition point.

The key to survival is knowing when and how to produce that flame, and then once it's burning, to keep it fed. Even if a fire dwindles down to a few embers, it can always be revived. A single glowing coal can be stoked into a raging inferno.

Derek drills this into his students as much as he does the other survival mantras. The rule of threes. The four priorities. He doesn't like parsing the first three priorities out. They're all critically important. Without shelter you freeze, but the same can be said for fire. What good is water if you can't boil it? You'll either die of thirst by not finding it, or giardia if you do nothing to remove the parasites. Three weeks is a hell of a long time in the survival world, and you can go without food for most of that stretch. Without the others you're in deep shit in short order.

His latest class stands in a loose semi-circle around him as he crouches down and demonstrates the proper construction of a tinder bundle. They're the typical weekend mix. Three guys on a bachelor party. A couple of people on a corporate team building outing. Two seasoned hikers preparing for a multi-month trek across the Appalachian trail. Another small group of overzealous, doomsday prepper types.

"So you have to be able to identify the different types of trees, and from them select a medium wood." As he lectures Derek rubs a piece carved from a nearby cedar between two rocks, grating the material down. "Hardwoods like oak will take too long to ignite. You'll burn through calories that can be better spent elsewhere. Softwoods like pine might seem like a good

option but they're not. True the sap is flammable, but the wood itself is so resinous and full of moisture that it'll take you forever to get a flame to catch."

He takes the piece of wood from between the rocks and holds it up. It resembles a cotton ball that has been stretched thin. "So medium woods are the perfect balance. Cedar trees. Weeping willows. Those are the ones you go for. Then you work it over mechanically until you get it processed to this point. You want it nice and fluffy."

"Light enough to wipe your ass with I reckon!" This comes from Gil, a gangly hayseed with a mess of blonde hair. Since arriving at the class he hadn't shut up. The others give him a look. No shortage of eyes roll. Gil doesn't seem to notice.

Derek plays it off. "Yeah...well, whatever helps you remember." He adds the newly processed tinder to a larger bundle of dried leaves, grass, and shredded bark formed like a bird's nest. He walks the class through the rest of the operation. With a single stroke of his ferro rod a shower of sparks lands on the cedar tinder and slowly the bundle ignites. He places it under a teepee of kindling he had prearranged and when the flames catch, adds larger pieces of fuel.

With his fire going the demonstration is complete. Derek breaks out the groups to begin practicing their own bundles. They all work in unison to exclude Gil, so Derek teams up with the redneck. He bites the inside of his mouth as he watches the man flounder about through the process Derek just painstakingly walked them through, much in the same way he had the night before when Gil was constructing his hasty lean-to shelter. The man was more concerned with chatting than he was getting the skills right.

"And then I told that fat bitch---"

"Wait. Gil. I thought you were just talking about your wife."

The man turns to look at Derek and furrows his eyebrows. “I was. Guess I left that detail out eh, D?”

Derek grinds his teeth. The degradation of the woman aside for a moment, he isn't sure when he started letting this country bumpkin call him “D.” Sheer necessity forces the modicum of customer service he had developed to tolerate the abbreviation. The disparaging remark however, was putting Gil on thin ice, prepaid or not.

“Yeah my old lady is a real pig. Fuckin’ two sixty that bitch is pulling down. Easy.” The man cackles with a laugh as he turns back to his bundle.

One of the women with the corporate group clicks her tongue, while another's mouth drops open. Several of the students look over at Derek. He raises his hand and gives a small nod. They turn back to their bundles with shakes of their heads.

It comes upon him so quickly that for a moment, Derek has trouble wrestling it under control. His teeth clench while a muscle throbs in his jaw. His pulse quickens, his heart thundering in his chest. Derek's exhales forcefully out of his nostrils. He feels his limbs tingling with the onset of a fight or flight blood rush.

With effort he tamps the anger down, slowly unclenching his fists. What remains is a simmering undertone of tension. It was bad enough that after twenty-two years of service he had to scratch a living this way. A military pension only went so far, especially with circumstances being what they were. To look a man in the face and smile, while his ignorance threatens the breadcrumbs Derek is bringing in is more than enough to set him off.

Thankfully, logic takes over. Logic, and the guidance of his counselor at the VA clinic, her words echoing through his mind. *Deep breaths. Remain grounded.* As bad as Gil might be for business, it would be far worse if he broke the man's nose. He couldn't allow the anger that

comes with his PTSD to dictate his actions. Still, Derek sighs. In another time and place he would have called Gil into his office for some wall to wall counseling.

But this isn't the infantry anymore, and while banter like this was common in the barracks, civilian life is something else entirely, and Derek is always just one bad online review from going out of business, something that absolutely cannot happen. That said, he can't let the remarks go without some sort of redress. Derek squats down on his haunches and lowers his voice so only Gil can hear. "Hey partner, I know you're having fun and all, but let's keep that kind of language quiet for the rest of the weekend."

Gil turns his head from his bundle, a broad smile on his face until he sees the look on Derek's. The grin vanishes as the man's eyebrows arch up. His Adam's apple gives a bob as he swallows. "You serious, aintcha D?"

Derek affirms with a nod. "Dead. You're not the only one in this class, and I won't tolerate you ruining it for the others. You speak out like that again and I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Staring at him for a moment, Gil's eyes flick back and forth between his own. Then the man breaks out into another wide smile. "Shit, no problem Boss. Won't hear nothin' like that no more from me." As he finishes speaking Gil slaps at his ferro rod repeatedly.

"Whoa, whoa. Ease up Gil. I told you. You're not peeling a carrot here. One deliberate strike is all it should take."

"Oh yeah. You did. Right." The man makes an exaggerated swipe. As his striker comes off the rod his right hand flies forward, knocking over his teepee of kindling.

“Easy Gil. Remember, slow is smooth. Smooth is fast. Your striker hand should be stationary over the tinder bundle. Pull your rod across the striker towards you, so you’re moving it away from the teepee and avoiding what you just did.”

“I got it Boss, I got it.” Gil sets up his kindling again and immediately goes back to striking his ferro rod as fast as he can.

Derek stands up. “Keep at it. I gotta check on the others.” He doesn’t wait for a reply. Not getting the material is one thing. He never expects people to master this stuff in a weekend. It is his basic class after all. Some of these guys come out and he can tell they’ve never roughed it a day in their life. Nothing but picking up the phone for whatever they need, whether it be takeout or a plumber.

Disregarding everything he teaches. Not listening to a word he just said. That’s another thing altogether. It angers him to no end, but Derek can’t afford to tear into any of his students. If he laid into every attendee that pissed him off he’d be screaming from dawn to dusk.

Instead he steps a few feet away, closes his eyes, and lifts his head to the sky. A light breeze rattles some of the branches above the group. Remembering one of the recent discussions with his counselor, Derek takes a deep, cleansing breath. The scent of the fresh pine lifts to his nose. The remnant of the early morning rain that hit their camp. The richness of the soil.

Ignoring the chatter of his students, he listens to the symphony of the songbirds and buzzing insects. Beyond that, silence. The constant buzz of the Long Island parkways is notably absent in this place.

Derek revels in it. No matter how insane life can get, nature is his sanctuary. His redeemer. The one place he can be himself and forget everything that has happened. That is

happening. That will happen. The dread of all that is waiting for him back home. In this place he can just...be. No one, not even this rube, can take that from him.

The tract of land he conducts his classes on is just north of the city and belongs to his father. A future investment for the retirement cabin he had planned on building, his father was the latest in a long line of Harringtons that fell short of the family dream. The way Derek's post military life was turning out, he wouldn't be achieving the dream either.

He takes the class through the rest of Saturday showing them some basic snares for trapping and then has them improve their shelters before nightfall. The attendees boil stream water on their newly made fires, while Derek passes out rations of beef jerky for dinner. Another point driving the survival process home. You're not going to be comfortable. Or full. This is about staying alive. Nothing more.

In the morning before they hike back out Derek gives them a quick lesson from his advanced class. He shows them primitive fire making techniques using the hand drill and bow drill. The difference between a shower of sparks from a rod and nurturing a single ember into a flame isn't lost on the group. Even the hikers have trouble with it, but after a few hours and his help, everyone has fires going.

Everyone except Gil.

The man is a shitshow. First, he builds his bundle wrong, putting hunks of pine so thick and resinous that they'll never catch. He doesn't work the hand drill consistently. The bow drill too slow. When Derek finally gets an ember into a corrected tinder bundle for him the yokel blows on it like he's trying to put out forty birthday candles. The coal instantly winks out of existence.

It takes three more tries before Derek can get the man to blow gently enough to get his tinder smoking. Gil turns his face to take another breath but fails to keep his hands moving in a figure eight pattern, threatening to extinguish the ember from lack of air. Derek pops in and moves the man's arms for him. When Gil breathes back into the bundle even more smoke pours out. The redneck somehow manages to suck it in like a bong hit and immediately doubles over coughing and choking.

"Alright everyone," says Derek as he stands, stamping out the smoky bundle. "That'll do it for this class. Let's put out the fires and break camp. I want to get you all back to your vehicles in time."

As the group hits the trail Gil lingers behind, still coughing. Derek grabs the man's rucksack. If he doesn't take it now the entire group will lose ground, and he has to get them back in time. He spares a moment to glance at his watch again. 12:15. Forty-five minutes to his promised 1p.m. conclusion. If he can gain some ground they should still make it.

The redneck drones on and on about God knows what as they fall further behind the rest of the group. "One hour, baby. One hour to go. Then it's some pushin' on that hog tonight! Know what I'm sayin' D? You know it baby! Balls deep!" He throws a sideways glance. Gil catches the look and shrugs. "What? Come on D! Ain't no one back here but us. They can't hear me. Besides, can't kick me out when the class is over, amirite?"

Derek focuses on tuning him out, especially since he has to haul the man's bag. Readjusting the shoulder straps, he hefts the ruck onto his upper back and tightens them down without breaking stride. The bag has to weigh forty-five, maybe even fifty pounds. Add to that the ten pounds that he carries in his own bag, now tied to the top of the other man's pack.

*Who knows how much crap this rube packed?* Ninety percent of it is probably unnecessary. The whole point of Derek's class is to learn how to survive without all this gear. Hauling it the last three days defeated the purpose of what the guy signed up for, but hey, Derek wasn't about to tell a paying customer he couldn't bring what he wanted. Of course, now he wished he had. He makes a mental note to update his website with some guidelines on packing before his next class.

When it becomes clear that Gil can't move any faster than a straggle Derek asks the two hikers to take the rest of the class ahead. Ninety minutes later he and the hayseed trudge into the clearing where they left their cars on Friday evening. The rest of the group already has their gear off and stowed in their vehicles. The hikers and corporates talk quietly with one another. The bachelor party laughs and passes a bottle of scotch between them. The preppers congratulate themselves for "accomplishing" the weekend. Derek drops the man's ruck and quickly undoes the straps to free his own bag. Gil collapses to the ground next to his backpack, while trying to catch his breath.

Small victories. In the last half mile Derek had picked up the pace on him, forcing the man's cardio to the point that Gil couldn't talk if he wanted to keep up. That, at least, saved Derek from the inane babbling. He pulls the front of his sweat soaked shirt free from clinging to his chest, mops his face with one hand, and adjusts his ball cap. Ignoring the gasps for air behind him, Derek steps into the center of the clearing.

"Hey folks, if we can gather around one last time," he announces to the group. The participants make their way over and form a semicircle in front of him. Derek starts his conclusion speech even though Gil is still sitting down and hasn't joined the rest of them.

“I want to thank you all again for coming out this weekend. You’ve made remarkable progress in just a few days. Normally I like to get back here a little earlier so that we can do a final review and some Q and A, but unfortunately, we didn’t make the best time today. Which is okay. It happens sometimes. Still, I know a bunch of you had a hard out of one o’clock so I don’t want to hold you any longer. At the same time I don’t want to rob you of the final class, so for the next week if you have any questions or want to do any reviews of the things we covered, feel free to shoot me an email or give me a call. No extra charge.”

The preppers and corporates nod appreciatively while the hikers throw a grimace Gil’s way.

“Just remember your priorities,” Derek continues.

“Shelter, water, fire, food.” The group responds in unison, echoing the mantra a final time. Their collective tone is filled with monotonous exacerbation.

Derek smiles. “Right. You guys got it. But above all else, the number one priority is a positive attitude. No matter the problem. No matter the challenge, keep hold of that and you’ll make it out alive. Thanks again for coming. Make sure you tell your friends and family. If they mention that you referred them, I’ll give them a ten percent discount.”

The group smiles and breaks up. Derek shakes hands with the corporates who then quickly retreat to their vehicles to make their way back to NYC. He circles back to Gil who at this point is at least on his feet and hunched over with his hands on his knees.

Derek places a hand on his back and the man looks up. “You feel alright Gil? You’re not lightheaded or anything, are you?”

Sweat pours down Gil’s face into his blonde mustache and goatee. “Nah. Just ain’t walked so far so fast in a bit. I’ll be fine in a minute.”

Derek nods. “Okay. You gonna be alright to drive back upstate? I don’t want to hear about you passing out behind the wheel and ending up in a ditch on the news tonight.”

Gil smiles in return. “Fit as a fiddle. Yessir,” the man replies and then immediately begins coughing.

“Alright then. Be safe. Thanks for coming.” Derek pats him on the back one more time and walks off. He shakes his head as he approaches the rest of his attendees. Saying his final goodbyes, Derek watches as the cliques get in their respective vehicles. He spins and makes his way back to his pickup, noting the familiar rust around the wheel wells.

*Really need to do something about that. Maybe after the next class.* As he gets closer Derek sees Gil approaching from the corner of his eye. Quickening his pace, he throws his bag into the bed and opens the door to the cab.

“Hey D! D!” Gil yells after him.

Derek sighs. Silently setting a goal to end the conversation as quickly as possible, he turns. Gil ambles over the rest of the way. Despite his waiting, the hayseed makes no effort to close the distance any faster. The thin ice is about to crack.

When Gil is within a few feet he starts speaking in his slow drawl. “I just wanted to apologize for slowin’ you down back there.”

Derek flashes him a smile and waves him off. “No worries Gil. We didn’t get back too late. It happens. Take care now.”

“No, no. I mean it. I feel terrible that you didn’t get to do your final class on account of me.” Behind Gil the last car drives out of the clearing. The bachelor party honks and waves as they speed away. Derek waves back, smiling at the thought of whatever strip club they’re about to frequent. They had privately shared the plans for their anticipated, “stink and drink” with him

over the weekend, bringing back memories of he and his buddies spending their paychecks as young, single, and stupid Marines.

Gil watches the car as it goes further down the gravel path, still talking but eyes fixated on the vehicle. “You see, I ain’t never had to do something like this before. Heck, I guess you can say I was a little in over my head. That damn Bear Grylls makes it look so easy and all and I...” The car disappears from sight as he trails off. “Alright. Enough horseshit.”

Derek snaps his head back to Gil. The last three words came out as if spoken by a completely different person. The drawl vanished. The statement was sharp and exacting. Even as he looks the man over Derek can see Gil change. His posture goes from stooped to standing erect. His gangly frame now seems to ripple with wiry strength. The man’s features tighten from a slack jawed idiot to someone with a hardened disposition. Gil’s eyes alight with a fiery intelligence that hadn’t been present the last three days.

It’s enough to set off internal alarms.