

A Sierra Meadow Story

By Barney “Scout” Mann

Burning Man is down – face in the dirt. His 6-foot barrel-chested frame is sprawled in the summer sun as if staked out, hidden in a shallow wash. It’s been 40 hours since his last meal – tuna casserole. He clenches an empty Nalgene water bottle. It’s the fourth time this morning he’s dropped unconscious.

The landscape is bleached-bone dry. Arid sedges, alpine grass and worm-eaten deadwood hug the ragged lip of this slash in the meadow. The sky is cloudless, a porcelain blue with the depth and luster hoped for in Ming Dynasty china. It is otherwise an idyllic, southern Sierra day, just before the solstice.

Todd “Burning Man” Galewski is two days north of Kennedy Meadows. Two hours earlier, he left the PCT as it crossed 10,500-foot-high Trail Pass, turning right onto the well-traveled side trail to the Horseshoe Meadow trailhead. He needed to be in the Lone Pine hospital emergency room, and he knew it.

For a thousand yards, the side trail stutter-steps downhill like a halfback for 12 zigzag turns. The last cut, the sharpest, is a hard left. Burning Man missed it, stumbling over a rotted-branch barrier, unwittingly bee-lining down an abandoned track. Nearly a mile later, the path ended in a closed pocket of Horseshoe Meadow. The next meadow east is called Last Chance.

It is late morning. For Burning Man it is later still. His glasses sit akimbo, the flat black rims half on his broad, tanned nose. His mustache and his half-inch, 740-mile PCT beard are sparse. Both are two shades darker than the tan sandy soil on which they press. Burning Man’s lips, usually so ready for a joke, are severely chapped with deep fissures. He is 34 years old.

Burning Man has been hemorrhaging water. The previous night was one of diarrhea and tuna-fouled vomit. His dark clothing – black thin-weight tights thrust from trail shorts and a midnight blue, long-sleeve shirt – are heat sinks under the unrelenting sun. And with the temperature sure to plummet into the 20s come night, his clothing

will be useless. Even worse, he’s just committed a hiker cardinal sin by walking away from his pack. It stands 300 yards away, in the shade of the last foxtail pine, where the faint track ends.

Most any other year, Burning Man’s empty Nalgene would have been inches from running water. But that summer, 2007, was the driest in 30 years. The April snowpack at nearby Bighorn Plateau was a mere 20 inches. Three times that amount barely would have cracked average. Over the past several weeks he’d walked hundreds of miles where the water was brackish at best, none worse than a week earlier in the cattle country of the Spanish Needles.

Perhaps those tainted dregs were the source of the pathogens kick-boxing his gut as he lay there waiting for the sun to fry his brain or the dehydration to kick off a stroke or heart attack.

The cause didn’t matter at that point. Lying there, he was sure to die.

“I’ve worked my butt off for 10 years,” Galewski thought the year before his hike. He was contemplating taking a year off. “I was going to travel around the world, and I was going to start in Cuba, but I wasn’t excited enough about it.”

Then it hit – hike the PCT. “I got really excited.”

Galewski grew up in Wisconsin, the oldest of two in a family in which “outdoors” meant canoeing, bicycling or car camping. He saw no mountains. Wisconsin’s high point isn’t a peak, it’s a 1,951-foot mound generously called Timm’s Hill.

“When I was 2 or 3 years old, whenever I drew myself, I always drew myself with big triangle mountains behind me, a big backpack on my back,” he said.

It mystified his mom. He was already drawing himself on the PCT.

Young Galewski looked up to his grandpa, Stanley Joseph Zlothcha. Stanley was a World War II veteran, and his hobby was

repairing antique pocket watches. “He had these enormous bear paws doing these delicate little things,” Galewski said. “Grandpa was everything.”

One evening, Galewski recounted his grandpa’s World War II stories at dinner. His mother looked at him, incredulous. “When did he tell you that?” she asked. “I never heard my father even mention World War II my entire life.” Galewski and his grandpa were that close.

Stanley died four years before Galewski’s PCT hike. Galewski said he felt his grandpa with him the whole time.

In college, Galewski was a philosophy major, but his first year at University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, his grade point average flat-lined. Yet seven years later, in 1998, he graduated from Marquette University with a 3.96 GPA. “Once I was ready for college, I did all right.”

In backpacking, too, Galewski was a late bloomer. It wasn’t until deep in his 20s, and after a move to Portland, Ore., that he embarked on his first real backpack. He puffs up when he tells of it. He carried everything for his girlfriend. “A six-person tent, a rug. An ungodly amount of stuff.”

Galewski clamped onto the PCT with the tenacity of a Wisconsin badger. But he made it his own. Thru-hiking wasn’t the goal. He was going to hike only in California and take a lot of side trips.

Above: Panoramic view of the closed arm of Horseshoe Meadow where Galewski was found.

Right: Hospital. Burning Man: Hours later after being pumped full of fluids, Galewski resting in hospital emergency room. From the author’s collection, taken by emergency room attendant by request.





The junction in 2007 where Galewski went straight over the small log. The trail actually makes a hard left turn – see sign on the tree.

Just a week before starting, a friend asked if he was coming to the Kick Off weekend. He knew nothing about it, but he found the website, registered and lined up a stay in San Diego with me and my wife, **Sandy “Frodo” Mann**. Galewski was one of 35 we would host that year before we set out on our own thru-hike.

Galewski’s midnight Amtrak train from Portland didn’t arrive until 3 a.m. So he took a cab to our two-story house in a quiet neighborhood. I’d left a note on the front door.

“Todd Galewski: The door is open. A light is on in the living room. Sheets & pillow, etc. on couch. Bathroom is at the top of the stairs. See you in the morning. Scout”

“And I realized real quick, I’m in a whole new world here where you can just walk into somebody’s home,” Galewski said. “Seeing that was like a big welcome hug.”

Galewski quickly got caught up in the excitement of the PCT. He started talking to other hikers, and as he set foot on the trail, he was already second-guessing his California-only plan.

On Friday of Kick Off weekend, Galewski hiked the 20 miles from the border to Lake Morena. His pack base weight was well under 30 pounds, the prideful 60 pounds relegated to the past. No rug this time, but, as he put it: “I still didn’t realize you didn’t need five pairs of underwear.”

That night, as the evening program ended, Galewski tagged along to the notorious Kick Off cabins. “I walked up to the class of 2006’s reunion party and somebody hands me a pint glass of straight gin and I look at him and I go, ‘this will end badly.’ And it did. It was the most embarrassing moment of my life bar none.”

Tagging along was a fellow PCT neophyte, **Ben “Hammer” Gunderson**. Gunderson hailed from Galewski’s neighbor state, Michigan, and the two shared black-framed glasses and short, coffee-colored hair. But Gunderson was inches shorter and 10 years younger.

Gunderson recalls: “Everybody was going to the cabins. Being the duckling that I am, I got right behind, yep, got a couple beers. Everybody’s standing around a big fire pit. Everybody’s drinking beer. Everybody’s got their beanies and their headlamps on, their puffy jackets on, telling stories.”

Gunderson and his brother **Gavin** were thru-hiking. In an online journal Gunderson wrote about he and his big brother: “Men of valor, honor, sex appeal and lightweight gear, we avail ourselves to mother nature’s most harsh conditions and laugh in the face of day hikers. We know no fear and live lives without boundaries, proper hygiene, or flush toilets. And even though we continue to hike, we both agree that hiking is, and will continue to be, quite miserable.” The summer before, their father had died.

At the party, a well-stoked fire pit kept about 20 people warm. That day Galewski had put his legs through their paces, and that night, he proved no slouch with his beer-hoisting arm. His back was square to the fire ring. Gunderson stood next to him on his right, his wingman. The fire pit’s iron walls glowed.

“Everyone’s saying it’s going to change our lives and stuff like that. It was an absolutely spectacular evening,” Galewski said. “Then I took a step backwards and my back heel hit the lip on the fire pit and I just fell right back smack into it.”

Gunderson’s mind raced. “Did that just happen? Did that guy just fall into the fire? His feet were outside the ring, and I remember thinking, ‘Oh my god, his thighs, no protection. No way to push himself up. He was screwed.’ ”

A switch shut on every voice box. Gunderson moved first. Turning full to the pit, he grabbed Galewski and pulled him up. Second degree, third-degree burns. His hiking shirt a ruin. His shoulder would bear a permanent, iron-brand scar. Gunderson’s quick reach saved him from far, far worse. The gin and beer haze that had put Galewski at risk now stood between him and pain.



The meadow edge where Galewski’s pack was located and where he was located.

“The party broke up real quick,” Galewski recalled. “I went back to my tent and managed to knock it over and was just sitting in my tent applying ointments and stuff to my burns just thinking you are the biggest idiot, this is the quickest anybody’s ever gotten knocked off the trail. I just promised myself right there, you’ll never complain about this no matter how much it hurts.”

He never did. The next day he attended essential classes, “with my head down and a hat kind of pulled over my eyes,” while the story spread about the drunk who fell in the fire. Galewski was offered two trail names, “Burning Man” and “Bacon.” He bought a new shirt and then “I ran out of the Kick Off party as fast as I could because I didn’t want anyone to see me.”

He hiked the 23 miles to Mt. Laguna’s Burnt Rancheria campground. **Erin “Teatree” Brown** camped next to him. Teatree, who thru-hiked in 2003, was a petite, bronzed sprite, a button-nosed jokester. Personality bubbles out of her faster than shaken champagne. Brown was the perfect tonic to Galewski’s shame.

“She said, ‘You’re that guy. I heard about you; that’s the best trail name ever.’ And she was really excited about it, and I kind of got over my embarrassment. I said: ‘Fine, I’m Burning Man.’ Then Teatree and I started hiking together.”

At Kennedy Meadows, all are feeling good. Burning Man, my wife and I, and all the PCT class of 2007. After 700 miles, we’ve reached the Sierra jumping-off point. Here, those who’d hiked alone evaluate whom they might like to hike with. Resupply decisions are carefully made. Facing the snow of the high Sierra, a hiker’s choices make a difference. Unlike most, Frodo and I pack light, only two days of food. We have arranged to get picked up at Trail Pass to go to our daughter’s UCLA graduation.

Two nights out from Kennedy Meadows, Frodo and I sleep tentless under the stars. We are only six miles from the Trail Pass

trailhead, where my sister and brother-in-law, **Shelley** and **Nahum Ward-Lev**, will meet us.

Shelley is 50, fine-boned, lithe, a New Mexico school district professional who will always be my “little” sister. Standing next to Shelley, Nahum is tall and lean, and outdoors he has the look of an excited camp counselor, which he once was. He’s a rabbi. Both speak Hebrew.

It was a successful rendezvous, each couple having hiked three miles. The sun was a bare hour over the horizon when we met. Within minutes, at Mulkey Pass, I see a note on the trail. “I am sick. Please check on me. Burning Man.”

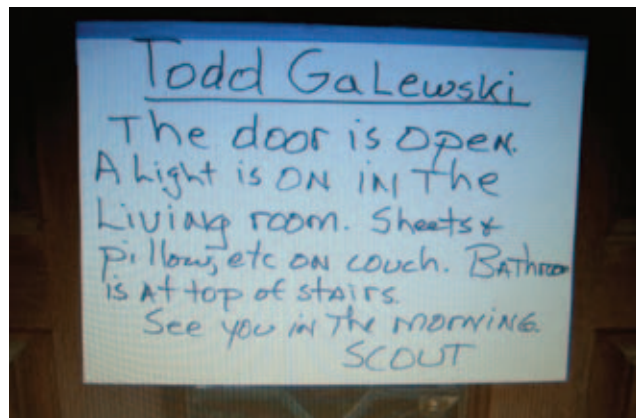
When we find him, Burning Man can barely break camp. He is both grateful and reluctant to accept help. Worried that he won’t come with us, I tell him that the Lone Pine Hospital isn’t that far out of our way. I don’t press the issue when he refuses my offer to take his food-heavy pack.

Burning Man is pasty-faced. His ruddy glow gone, he plods, slow-steps. The mile from Mulkey Pass along the ridge top takes twice the normal time. Yet, around Burning Man, the four of us excitedly chat, nattering on like Sierra chipmunks.

Nahum: “I was still feeling joy and celebration. It was a beautiful day, got to see you and Sandy. I was really excited about that. We’re on the trail. It was a lot of magic.”

At the PCT junction with the Trail Pass trailhead, more joy. “There’s Roni-from-Israel!”

Roni Hall is a trail icon. A Triple Crowner. Thousands of hikers know him through **Scott “Squatch” Herriott’s** series of *Walk* DVDs. Perching over his hiking poles like he’s ready to leap, it isn’t the wild look of this midweight Israeli, or the rumors that he’s a brilliant grad student physicist, or even his thick-accented, impeccable English. It’s that Roni-from-Israel drops memorable, sarcastic one-liners like pine trees shed cones.



The sign on the door of the Mann's home when Galewski arrived at 3 am. Courtesy of Todd Galewski.

“Why should I learn your name?” he says. “You are one of hundreds of hikers.”

“Mah Sh’mi?” I shout to him. For 700 miles I’ve wanted Roni to learn our names.

“Roni,” I told him, “how many other hikers ask you, ‘What’s my name’ in Hebrew?” I introduce Shelley and Nahum and close my eyes and listen as they converse in Hebrew. Eventually, Roni calls out, “Hello, Scout and Frodo.”

The vivid picture remains still in my mind – Burning Man as he turns off the PCT and onto the 2-mile feeder path to the trailhead and the van.

“I’m OK,” he mumbles. But he’s not. Vanity, Pope Gregory said, is one of seven deadly sins. I really want Roni to like me. I’m wrapped in the moment. I own that. And as we stand at the junction chatting, Burning Man walks alone, out of sight.

Nahum: “I got all excited about speaking Hebrew with this Israeli and later I began to feel guilty. Burning Man was the issue that we needed to keep our eye on.”

All the way down the trail, I expect to see Burning Man in the next instant. At the trailhead, I look for him on the bench near the bear boxes. It is near 10 a.m. A veteran Scoutmaster, I slip into that mode. We quickly agree that I’ll hoof it back up trail, Frodo will hit the network of trails around the parking lots. For Shelley and Nahum, one will stay put, while the other scours the stretches of asphalt. My last words are, “Meet back here in an hour.”

“Burning Man. Burning Man,” I shout, climbing, quick-march, back to Trail Pass. I shout every 50 yards, head swiveling side to side, looking for any sign of him or his pack. Did he fall? Stumble off trail?

I near Trail Pass a second time with a sinking feeling. I’ve covered the 2.1 miles in just over 20 minutes. I turn and head back, calling his name every 10 yards, casting my glance farther from the trail.

My map shows three switchbacks. But this upper portion actually mimics a pinball machine with a hiker careening from one banked turn to the next. Eleven hundred yards down, the trail makes a final cut left, but there’s no dirt bank. Instead, there’s an abandoned trail. Where we’d walked, all the early-season pine duff is scuffed clear. Straight ahead, the old path is covered in dark duff and scattered cones. Looking close I can see a disturbance from one set of shoes. But is it an hour, days or weeks old?

I am hyper-aware of the time. This is the day’s pivot point. Everything revolves around this junction.

I think of my wife. In 30 years, Sandy yelled at me once. We were skiing at Bear Valley. I had our two older kids and their friends. Sandy was skiing with our youngest, **Nicky**, who couldn’t yet keep up. We were supposed to meet up at a set time. They waited and worried for an hour at the top of a lift in a cold whipping wind.

“Do you know what time it is?” she shouted, hurt and angry. We didn’t regain equilibrium for days. I’d sooner have a root canal than make her that mad again. If I go down this sidetrack, I will be late. I hesitate for three or four minutes, staring at the first few feet of old trail. The urge to find Burning Man is as strong as my drive to thru-hike. Yet, I hear Sandy’s shout pull at me: “Do you know what time it is?”

I can’t tell you what tipped the scales. Leaving Burning Man on that mountain wasn’t an option. Or maybe I felt a push from an enormous set of hands whose hobby once was antique watch repair.

I set out down the sidetrack at a near jog over exposed roots and rocks and soon I spot his pack. I could have dropped prostrate on the trail. We have him. Nothing else matters.

“Burning Man. Burning Man.” I stand by his pack in the last shaded spot before the expansive meadow. Burning Man lurches erect. Then he stands, rocking slightly, Nalgene bottle still in hand. I reach and steady him and we walk back to his pack. This time I hoist it without asking and I know he’s in bad shape because there is not a whimper of protest. It’s a slow cross-country mile to the van.

At the hospital they flood a vein with three liters of liquid. He is misdiagnosed with altitude sickness. Ten days later, he’s in Lone Pine’s Dow Villa Motel and still not better. He finally gets a round of antibiotics. Sixteen days later he’s back to the trail.

I did not see Burning Man for three years. What conversation takes place when you save someone’s life or when your life is the one saved? I confessed to Burning Man my part in placing him in jeopardy. He told me he’d passed out three times before falling in the meadow.

We hug.

What if I hadn’t gone down that path? I’d never really sat before with the enormity of the day, and I’m overwhelmed.

I cry on his shoulder. 🍷

