

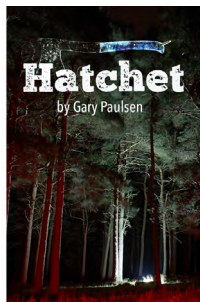
Hatchet

by Gary Paulsen

Before this excerpt:

Brian Robeson is a thirteen-year-old boy who finds himself lost in the Canadian wilderness. His plane crashed into a nearby lake after traveling many miles from its scheduled path. Brian has only his hatchet and his wits to help him survive. He is hungry, afraid, and unprepared for all of the challenges he will encounter in the wilderness.

After 47 days in the wilderness, he is still learning many difficult lessons about survival.



[1] Mistakes.

Small mistakes could turn into disasters, funny little mistakes could snowball so that while you were still smiling at the humor you could find yourself looking at death. In the city if he made a mistake usually there was a way to rectify it, make it all right. If he fell on his bike and sprained a leg he could wait for it to heal; if he forgot something at the store he could find other food in the refrigerator.

Now it was different, and all so quick, all so incredibly quick. If he sprained a leg here he might starve before he could get around again; if he missed while he was hunting or if the fish moved away he might starve. If he got sick, really sick so he couldn't move he might starve.

[2] Mistakes.

Early in the new time he had learned the most important thing, the truly vital knowledge that drives all creatures in the forest—food is all. Food was simply everything. All things in the woods, from insects to fish to bears, were always, always looking for food—it was the great, single driving influence in nature. To eat. All must eat.

[3] But the way he learned it almost killed him. His second new night, stomach full of fish and the fire smoldering in the shelter, he had been sound asleep when something—he thought later it might be smell—had awakened him.

[4] Near the fire, completely unafraid of the smoking coals, completely unafraid of Brian, a skunk was digging where he had buried the eggs. There was some sliver of a moon and in the faint-pearl light he could see the bushy tail, the white stripes down the back, and he had nearly smiled. He did not

know how the skunk had found the eggs, some smell, perhaps some tiny fragment of shell had left a smell, but it looked almost cute, its little head down and its little tail up as it dug and dug, kicking the sand back.

[5] But those were his eggs, not the skunk's, and the half smile had been quickly replaced with fear that he would lose his food and he had grabbed a handful of sand and thrown it at the skunk.

"Get out of here..."

He was going to say more, some silly human words, but in less than half a second the skunk had snapped its rear end up, curved the tail over, and sprayed Brian with a direct shot aimed at his head from less than four feet away.

[6] In the tiny confines of the shelter the effect was devastating. The thick sulfurous rotten odor filled the small room, heavy, ugly, and stinking. The corrosive spray that hit his face seared into his lungs and eyes, blinding him.

[7] He screamed and threw himself sideways, taking the entire wall off the shelter; screamed and clawed out of the shelter and fell-ran to the shore of the lake. Stumbling and tripping, he scrambled into the water and slammed his head back and forth trying to wash his eyes, slashing at the water to clear his eyes.

[8] A hundred funny cartoons he had seen about skunks. Cute cartoons about the smell of skunks, cartoons to laugh at and joke about, but when the spray hit there was nothing funny about it—he was completely blind for almost two hours. A lifetime. He thought that he might be permanently blind, or at least impaired—and that would have been the end. As it was the pain in his eyes lasted for days, bothered him after that for two weeks. The smell in the shelter, in his clothes, and in his hair was still there now, almost a month and a half later.

And he had nearly smiled.

[9] Mistakes.

Food had to be protected. While he was in the lake trying to clear his eyes the skunk went ahead and dug up the rest of the turtle eggs and ate every one. Licked all the shells clean and couldn't have cared less that Brian was thrashing around in the water like a dying carp. The skunk had found food and was taking it and Brian was paying for a lesson.