

Fallow

On guys weekends, the twenty-year deployment, and why “back” is the wrong direction.

BY CHRIS WYATT · 6 MINUTE READ · COLLECTED EDITION 2026

The trip took three weeks to plan and could have been settled in four minutes. Three of us. One weekend in September. A group text with a name none of us will admit to choosing. What slowed it down was not disagreement, because there wasn't any. It was the sheer volume of encumbrance men our age drag behind us like a second skeleton: a move-in date, a closing, a flight out of Detroit and a flight back into it. We are not busy the way we were at thirty. We are encumbered, which is worse, because busy at least implies you picked it.

We settled on Traverse City, the eighteenth, Delta both directions. A rental with more bedrooms than three men require, because at this age nobody shares a room and nobody has to be talked into that.

Here is my prediction for the weekend, offered with total confidence.

We will eat extremely well. One of us will have researched the restaurants with a rigor he does not apply to his own retirement accounts. There will be a winery on Old Mission, and at that winery a man I have known for twenty-five years will say the word “minerality” out loud, in daylight, without irony, and the other two of us will let him have it. We will drink considerably less than we announced. By eleven the house will be quiet. In the morning, before anyone manages a full sentence, someone will check a sleep score and report it unprompted.

This is the part where I am supposed to say that we have gotten lame.

I have said it, in the tone of a man who is only half joking. Somewhere in our forties the three of us became guys who travel several hundred miles to sit near a body of water and discuss our knees.

But lame is the wrong diagnosis, and it took me a while to work out why.

Lame means the appetite died. What actually happened is that the appetite was requisitioned. For twenty years, every unit of discretionary energy any of us had was drafted into service: the job, the mortgage, and the unglamorous logistics of turning small people into large ones. It was the assignment.

We volunteered, and we would take it again. But you cannot run at full deployment for two decades and then act surprised that on your first unclaimed Saturday, the thing you want most in the world is a nap and an excellent sandwich.

Depleted is not lame. Depleted is a receipt.

Which would be fine, except that the deployment is ending. That is the actual subject, and it arrived without ceremony. The kids are leaving on schedule, exactly the way we raised them to. My son is moving into a dorm to learn how buildings stay standing. Soon the thing that has organized every hour of my adult life will quietly stop needing me at that volume. Capacity is coming back, and I have no idea what it is for.

Our fathers had it easier, and I mean that kindly.

A man turning forty-eight in 1988 was near the end of something, and everyone agreed on what the end looked like. A few more years of work, a modest retirement, a short list of hobbies chosen mostly for their low ceilings. Golf. The lawn. A workshop where nothing was ever quite finished. There was a great deal of decline built into that script, but it was a script, and there is real mercy in that. Nobody had to invent the third act. You aged into the part.

We do not get one. We are pushing fifty with thirty-five more years in front of us, most of them good. Our knees are held together with physical therapy and stubbornness, but our hearts are fine and our judgment is the best it has ever been. There is no template for a healthy man with returning capacity and no assignment. What exists instead is a marketing category, and you know exactly what is in it. The convertible. The gravel bike. The tequila brand. The podcast.

Which brings me to the one word I would like to quietly retire.

Back.

The instinct, when the house starts emptying, is to say let's get back to us. I have said it. I meant it warmly. It is still wrong, because "back" points at a man who no longer exists and hands him the keys.

The twenty-six-year-old version of me was excellent company. He was also broke, unserious, and confident in a way that had not yet been tested by anything at all. He would be no help here. He has never sat in a parked car at eleven at night waiting for headlights. He has never had to decide which of two people he loves gets the disappointing answer. He has no idea what it costs to keep a friendship alive across three states with nothing but a group text and a flight. Bringing him back is not a plan. It is a costume.

The better word is fallow.

Michigan is the right place to land on this, since we will drive up through orchards to get there. A fallow field is not a failed field. It is ground that produced hard for a long stretch and is being rested on purpose, and the whole reason you rest it is that you fully intend to plant again. Fallow is not the opposite of farming. It is a phase inside of farming.

It carries one condition. You do not get the old crop back. You choose a new one, based on what the soil is now, which is not what the soil was.

There is also a complication in the word “us” that I have been avoiding. “Us” is these three men. “Us” is also my wife and me. Both of those relationships spent twenty years held up by circumstance rather than intention, and both come back online at the same moment, wanting the same returning bandwidth. Any honest version of this concedes that a guys weekend is not the answer to the question. It is a soil test.

The friendships need one, because here is what nobody warns you about male friendship: it was never maintained by effort. It was maintained by proximity. Dorm floors. First jobs. The decade when our kids were small enough that seeing each other was a byproduct of standing in the same yard on a Saturday. Remove the scaffolding and you find out how much of the building was scaffolding.

So a weekend in September is what remains when circumstance stops doing the work for free. Three grown men, deliberately and slightly awkwardly, booking flights in order to be in a room together. That is not lame. That is the least lame thing on any of our calendars, and none of us would ever say so out loud, which is both the entire problem and most of the charm.

Three is the right number, as it turns out. Six would let a man coast. With three there is no crowd to stand at the edge of and no side conversation to drift into. Every conversation includes you.

So I will go up on the eighteenth with a low bar and one real question.

The bar is simple. Nobody has to prove anything. Nobody has to stay up. If the correct answer to Saturday night turns out to be a fire and three men asleep in chairs by ten forty-five, that is not a failure. That is a preference finally being honored.

The question is harder. When the assignment ends, does the appetite come back, or did it quietly atrophy while we weren't watching? I don't know, and that is not writerly modesty, it is an accurate description of the evidence. You cannot find out by planning. You find out by putting three of us in a house on a bay with nothing scheduled and seeing what we reach for.

My guess is that we reach for each other. Badly at first, out of practice, in the specific dialect of men who would rather insult one another than say anything true. And then somewhere on the second night, when the good bottle is open and everyone has finally stopped checking his phone, one of us says the thing he actually came to say.

That is the crop. That was always the crop.

We just spent twenty years with the field in use.