

TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED

Season 6 - Episode 6

Heatstroke in the Superstition Mountains

Torah Kachur:

Colt Johnson is hiking in the desert of southern Arizona – an endless expanse of red, brown, and yellow rocks, punctuated by occasional green bushes.

After a couple hours he turns off onto a side trail, thinking it's the way back to his parked car.

Colt Johnson:

I followed that and then it literally came to like a dead end, like a box canyon, and I wasn't able to keep walking through.

Torah:

He retraces his steps. He tries one direction, then the other. But all the trails look the same. He's lost. The sky is cloudless. The burning sun is overhead. The heat is building.

Colt:

I didn't realize how bad it was. I thought it was just a little bit of heat exhaustion and I could keep going.

Torah:

He drinks the last of his water and curses himself for not bringing more.

Colt:

I fired three shots in the air because I knew that I was starting to really need help.

Torah:

The gunshots echo off the hills and then silence. Without warning, Colt's mind goes blank and his legs buckle. He falls in a heap. When he comes to, he's lying in the dirt beside a cactus, alone and scared.

Colt:

That was the real moment where I was like, Oh crap, I'm in trouble. Like I could theoretically die out here.

Torah:

I'm Torah Kachur. This is *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people, an original podcast by OnStar.

All of our stories feature two people: Strangers who are just going about their day. Then, something happens, and one of them needs help.

We believe that every day when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help, or if you'll be a person that helps someone else.

Today, our story takes place in Arizona, on a very hot, but otherwise completely ordinary, Saturday afternoon.

Colt Johnson is 26 years old.

Colt:

I'm an electrician. Been doing that for about six years here in Idaho. I am married to my beautiful wife. We have two little girls. I'm a country boy. I love being outside, love hiking, hunting, fishing. That's my life. I'm goofy, but I love it.

Torah:

Today that goofy, outdoorsy, Idaho guy is in Arizona. They have family there that they visit at least once a year.

Colt:

I started reading about like the Superstition Mountains and that sort of that sort of area. And so I decided next time we were going to go that I was going to go hiking there.

Torah:

His wife, however, isn't super thrilled about him heading off on his own.

Colt:

She tried talking me into like closer hikes. And I was like, "No, I want to go there." You know, read about it and just got a lot of like legends and folklore about it and stuff.

Torah:

Those old stories run the gamut from prospectors claiming to have found a mother lode of gold in a secret valley to the Apache legend that the mountains guard the entrance to the nether world — literally the gates of hell.

What is verifiably true is that three or four people either go missing or die in the region every year.

Colt:

It's very rugged. A lot of peaks, a lot of spires, very rocky, but it's a gorgeous area.

Torah:

Colt is used to the outdoors — and while hiking in Arizona is new to him, he's come prepared.

Colt:

I had like hiking boots, had a big old sun hat. I brought a small hiking pack that had you know like areas for water, rations, a first aid kit, a little survival kit and like a camping knife.

Torah:

He also has a Glock 20. Back home he relies on it for bear defence when he's out in the bush. He knows it's going to get hot. So, he heads out early.

Colt:

I got up at 4:30 and was out the door at 5. So I was planning on getting there about 6.

Torah:

Starting at sunrise means he should be able to finish before the heat of the day sets in. The trail is called the Boulder Canyon Trail — it's one of thirty hikes in the area. His guidebook describes it as one of the least popular routes.

Colt:

I picked that one because I was like, OK, I won't see anyone. That's awesome.

Torah:

And sure enough — when he arrives at the trailhead, the parking lot is empty. And it's a really cool spot because there's like a little reservoir next to it actually.

So I started going up the trail and it was awesome. It was beautiful. The scenery there is just so different from Idaho. I snapped several pictures, you know, to show the wife later. And yeah, everything was going great.

I came across some ruins which was really cool. It used to be like a miners little settlement thing. So I got there and it was starting to get pretty hot. I was like, Ok now's about time where I figured the loop would be and I'd be able to head back home.

When I went to set off again down the other side of the ruins there's like four or five trails. I picked the most well-worn path. Figuring that was probably the one that would lead me back to the parking lot to the car. And went like another hour, maybe an hour and half down that one and that's when I started noticing that I was I was like almost panting. That that dryness you know was, was sapping the energy from me.

Torah:

Colt had actually passed the turn off for the return loop hours ago, even before he came across the ruins of the mining camp.

Colt:

I was way past where I was supposed to be.

Torah:

He looks around, takes note of important landmarks, and comes up with a plan.

Colt:

I'd ended up on this like dry riverbed basically. And so my thought was, instead of turning around and hiking back, you know, the like six, seven miles now back that way to the car that I would just follow this because I figured it had to end up at that reservoir.

Torah:

He hikes for an hour, then two. The day is getting hotter, and he's run out of water.

Colt:

And at this point, I was starting to notice that like my thinking was slower. I was getting like lightheaded. I was starting to get dizzy.

Torah:

The dry riverbed he's following ends in a box canyon. A dead end with steep rock faces on three sides.

He knows the trail he started his day on runs along the top of the ridge, so he figures getting back to that trail means climbing.

Colt:

I was able to go like two or three minutes and then I had to stop for like 10, you know. So it's starting to get really, really worrisome.

Torah:

It takes an hour, maybe longer, to reach the top. There, he finds the trail.

Colt:

And so I started heading down that and I was I was stumbling, you know.

And so I actually fell a couple times and got all scratched up from it.

Torah:

He's still a long way from his car, and he's fading, so he pulls out his gun.

Colt:

I shot three rounds in the air and then waited for, I don't know, like 10 seconds and shot three more.

Torah:

In wilderness situations, three of anything is considered a call for help.

Three blasts on a whistle, three flashes with a flashlight or a mirror, or in this case, three gunshots.

He holsters his gun, takes a few steps, then collapses.

Colt:

It just seemed like I was wide awake and doing fine, just a little foggy, and then next second I was on the ground. I'd peed my pants and I'd fallen on a cactus.

Torah:

He's lost control of his bladder, and his balance. He's also drifting in and out of consciousness.

Colt crawls under a bush to get a little shade, but he also wants to remain visible in case anyone passes by, so he unfolds a silver thermal blanket. It's a paper-thin sheet of fabric, it basically looks like tinfoil. He hopes it will reflect away some of the heat and also make him easier to see.

Colt:

So I just put rocks on the corners and was kind of holding it up over me.

My wife was pregnant at this time. And I was basically praying that I'd be able to get out of there and be able to like see my daughter and see my family again.

Torah:

Then he passes out.

This is *Tell Me What Happened*, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase how important a human connection is when you need help, whether you're caught in an avalanche, being swept away by a rip current, or lost in the desert.

John Zeto grew up in Florida. He became a fire fighter in the city of Tampa. He got married and raised two kids.

John Zeto:

I was in everything. A fisherman, hunting, diving, water, skiing. There's a lot to do in Florida and it kind of takes a lifetime to figure 'em all out.

Torah:

His kids grew up and started their own lives. He retired from the fire department and went through a divorce. As he reached his late 50's he was figuring out what the next chapter of his life would look like.

He started visiting his son in Arizona. That's when he discovered the desert.

John:

The trails really became an addiction for me. I fell in love with it.

Torah:

Today, John is hiking a trail in a region called the Superstition Mountains.

It's a 13-mile loop.

John:

I really was not thinking this was going to be a long day. I figured I'd be back in the middle of the afternoon.

Torah:

Even so, John's packs everything he needs to stay hydrated for the day.

John:

I took four liters of water in a camelback, a bladder, and I spiked it with electrolytes and then I carried granola bars and then gel packets of electrolytes.

Torah:

It's a beautiful morning, the temperature is in the 80s. The first couple hours of the hike is pretty routine, well, routine and beautiful.

John:

It's spectacular, the winding canyons and valleys that you go through and up and over, a few saddles and then a handful of switchbacks to come through.

Torah:

Eventually, the cool air of the morning gives way to the relentless heat of mid-day.

John:

Well then all of a sudden I hear a gunshot and I'm like, really?

Torah:

Then it happened again.

John:

And now I was like, okay, that's practice shooting. Where's the other one? You don't just practice twice. I wouldn't think.

Torah:

Hunting and target shooting are both prohibited in the area, but a lot of hikers carry a gun for protection from wild animals.

John:

Then I thought about, somebody had possibly had to kill an animal and they shot it and then had to kill it, type thing. All these things are kind of going through my head. Like, Hmmm strange.

Torah:

And then about 30 minutes later, I heard two more and they were exactly the same.

I know what you're thinking. Colt said he fired three shots, and then ten seconds later he fired another three. But John says he only heard two shots and thirty minutes later he heard two more.

So, what really happened? I'm not sure.

John:

I was coming down the backside of a mesa and as I'm coming down off to my right, I could see him and he was about, I was to guess 150, 200 feet off of the trail. And he had found a shrub that was about the tallest in the area for him to get underneath. And what I saw was his back, and he was on his side facing away from me.

Torah:

A stranger in the wilderness, maybe the person who fired the gun? Maybe someone who was shot? He's 200 feet away ... and the person under the bush hasn't moved... John can easily keep walking and mind his own business. But the rest of the scene makes him pause.

John:

There's like empty water bottles, there's stuff out, there's some kind of a silver blanket, he's unwrapped and he's got that trying to get himself some shade.

Torah:

John pulls out his handgun and holds it behind his back. Then slowly, cautiously, walks forward.

John:

When he turned over on his side, even that movement alone was like, oops, this guy is bad. And when he looked at me, he was delirious. And his first words to me was, "I can't believe you're here."

Colt:

He had this big gray hat on his head. And like the sun positioning was shining straight through it. I was like, dude, this is an angel. It's like a mirage or something like I'm dying, you know.

Torah:

John has been out in the heat for half a day already, but he still has three litres of water with him. He tries giving some of it to Colt.

John:

When he stood up or tried to stand up and he had lost all of his bodily functions and all of 'em, He was a mess.

Colt:

I couldn't control my bladder and any liquid that I took in just went right back out.

Torah:

That's a sign that a person's body is shutting down. The next stage is a stroke and that can bring permanent brain damage.

John asks him where he parked, but Colt is barely lucid. He describes the trailhead as being "near some water." John figures he means Canyon Lake Trailhead, and starts doing the math.

If he goes to get help, it will take him at least an hour to get to the parking lot. That's the nearest place with cell coverage. Once there, if he calls for emergency assistance it will take them an hour to arrive, and then another hour or more for them to hike up the trail and find Colt.

That's three hours minimum, probably more. John knows if he leaves an unconscious man alone in the desert for that long, it probably won't be a rescue.

John:

I was not getting off that mountain without that guy. All of a sudden, I had a focus. We're getting off this mountain.

Torah:

He helps Colt to his feet and they start walking.

Colt:

He kept asking me like stuff about my family like my wife's name and where I'm from and stuff like that to make sure that I wasn't completely losing it.

Torah:

John alternates between being supportive and encouraging, and occasionally yelling at him like a drill sergeant. Anything he can do to keep Colt putting one foot in front of the other.

It's now mid-afternoon and the temperature is 113 degrees.

Colt:

I was getting really bad, really worn out, really slow in every way. And I kept having to lean on him more and more as we got down the trail. And towards the end, I was basically on his back. And I'm six five; I'm like 210 pounds.

John:

Yeah. He's a lot bigger than me. And so he draped over my shoulders for pretty much all of it.

Colt:

He's like Superman being able to basically carry me off the mountain.

Torah:

Step by step, they make their way up and down over the hills.

John:

We crested a small plateau, and as soon as we did, I could see the lake. And I asked Colt, I said, do you have a white vehicle? And he just kind of nodded his head and I said, okay, I see now where we're going.

Torah:

It takes three hours to reach Colt's car.

John drives them to the nearest town. There, they find a gas station and buy some cold drinks and a big piece of fudge. They sit in the air-conditioning for about an hour.

They drive to John's car and then Colt drives home, with John following closely behind.

Colt:

And by this time John had called my wife, explained the situation, so when I got home her and my daughter they just rushed to the door and that was that. Was like one of the greatest moments of my life from going from thinking I was gonna die to a few hours later seeing seeing my family again. All thanks to John.

In all honesty with how bad I was feeling, I don't think I would have been able to feel good enough to climb out of there and who knows when they would have found me.

Colt:

It's been a year and a half, and the two men have become good friends. John even visited Idaho for the one-year anniversary of their meeting.

John:

Went to their home and visited them and met his family. And seeing his kids playing, seeing how he interacted with his kids and family, his wife that's when you're like, alright, I was happy to be there.

Torah:

Colt, he's still an outdoorsman, just a more careful one.

Colt:

I still go out on solo hikes. I've definitely padded my like survival kit a little bit more with more food. I always bring more water now than I than I think I need. And I make sure that at least one or two people know exactly where I'm planning on going.

John:

And we have talked where the next time he's in Arizona, I am taking him on that

hike to show him where he was at. We'll just have enough supplies and we won't get lost this time.

Torah:

Colt got in trouble largely because he didn't have enough water.

Tami Hew-Butler tells a story from when she was at the Houston Marathon where people were suffering from the opposite problem.

Tami Hew-Butler:

It was really hot and all these runners were just coming into the medical tent and collapsing and you know we're putting IVs in everybody because we thought everyone was dehydrated. And then lo and behold, four of the runners start to have seizures and they were intubated in the medical tent and they were transported to the hospital and they were in ICU for about a week. The diagnosis came back as hyponatremia. And we're like, what's that? I mean, we had never heard about that.

Torah:

Hyponatremia is a condition where a person has too much water in their system. These marathon runners were drinking a hundred cups of water, and that proved to be very dangerous.

That event drove Tami to do 20 years of research and she is now one of the world's leading experts in hydration.

Tami:

It's interesting how water became kind of like popular because you always hear it. You got to drink, it's hot outside, you got to stay hydrated. And so it's a very contentious topic.

Torah:

Are we still facing the same misunderstandings and danger over, well, over hydrating?

Tami:

You know, I think part of the difficulty is people make a recommendation. They say, everybody needs like, you know, eight glasses of water day. But again, too, there isn't one size fits all. We wouldn't know exactly how much we need at all times, and it varies all the time. And I think that's where a lot of the confusion is.

Torah:

How much is too much?

Tami:

Too much water is more water than your body can actually excrete. So when we talk about how much water do you need, really the question we should be asking is how much water do we lose?

So it depends on like your activity level and your size and the temperature. There isn't one size fits all because we're not always doing the exact same thing in the exact same temperature. And I think some of the individual guidelines are like how much you sweat, how big are you, and then, and how hot is it, and are you actually acclimatized to the heat?

Torah:

Can we just listen to our bodies?

Tami:

So there are actually sensors in our brain that are like sampling your blood constantly. So what it's doing is it's actually sampling the ratio of salt to water. That's what's important to your body. So if it's too salty, you need more water and you get thirsty. If it's too dilute and not as much salty, you pee it all out. So your brain is adjusting this in real time. So when you, you know, you start to run low on water, you don't pee it out because like, okay, I need to conserve it. And then if you're still losing water, particularly your exercise in the heat and you're sweating more, then you'll, and you need water. Then you, then you start to get thirsty and the more that your body needs water, cause your blood is getting saltier, the more thirsty that you get.

Torah:

Yeah, so in our story, Colt lost bodily functions. Is that typical?

Tami:

So two things going on. You have heat stroke, you can't sweat. Your plasma volume or your circulation is going down and your cells are starting to actually shrivel up like raisins.

All of the cells are filled with fluid. And again, to actually try to fill the circulation, the water actually then starts to flow from inside of the cells to outside of the cells into your body.

So all those things are probably happening at the same time when you don't find shade, when you don't cool yourself off and you've run out of water. So I think all of those things actually came into play.

Torah:

What about drinking water before you exercise and making sure you go into something really hydrated? Does that help?

Tami:

Before you start any type of activities, you probably want to top up. so again, to like, and any extra water, particularly if you're not exercising, well, you know, you'll just pee it out. So if you top up, that's good. If you, but if you like really force it down, you're going to pee out a lot and it's probably not going to help you that much because your body's still trying to maintain that osmotic tonicity balance.

Torah:

What about electrolytes? Is water still king?

Tami:

Water is more important when you start to exercise for long periods of time. And again, to what our research shows is if you start to exercise for longer than 17 hours straight, you will probably need some sodium replacement. But you know, if you're only going for an hour or two, you know, you're, you don't really need the salt. Your kidneys can balance that for you.

Torah:

So save your money and drink it right out of the tap. Okay.

Tami:

Pretty much, yeah. And salted food is a thing like, you know, do you eat a decent meal or do you actually eat during the day? You know, you get a lot of the electrolytes and the minerals and even the water within the moisture in foods in your meals. That's where you replace a lot of it. And that's also something that I think is misguided that you need exactly water. You get a lot of moisture from your meals that all counts towards the totals.

Torah:

So I have my, as I joke, emotional support water bottle in front of me right now.

Tami:

Yeah, it's a it's a it's a cultural phenomenon.

Torah:

I don't leave the house without a water bottle now.

Tami:

Right. Neither my students. I think it's become this phenomenon of like I'm healthy, I'm drinking my water, I'm environmentally conscious so I'm going to have that too. And I can personalize it. So, you know, is it a bad thing? No. But do you need it? No.

Torah:

So just drink water when you're thirsty.

Tami:

Yeah, or doesn't even just have to be water. You know, for me, like people like, how much water do you drink? I'm like, I probably drink a pot of coffee, you know, in the morning. And then I, you know, I like soups. like smoothies. like; you know, I probably never drink plain water, but I have enough moisture in my foods here, actually in California desert. You know, we eat a lot of watermelon, you know, we have a lot of vegetables and so all of that counts.

Torah:

Tami, thank you so much. Really appreciate it.

Tami:

You're welcome. Thanks for the opportunity.

Torah:

That's it for this episode of *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people.

We share a new story every other week, but if you are in the mood for another one right now. Scroll back in time to one of our earlier episodes.

On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur. Please be safe out there.

Find more episodes of *Tell Me What Happened* at [OnStar.com/podcast](https://onstar.com/podcast).